

**[Article]**

# Facebook Activism among Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses original accounts to identify how an NGO in Singapore has enhanced foreign domestic workers' power 'from the bottom up' using Facebook. Rainie and Wellman's framework of networked individualism is used to analyse how solitary work in an employer's residence can promote online activism. The specific research target is Filipina domestic workers in Singapore who use a Facebook group designed by an NGO to facilitate a social movement for freedom, equality and justice. Data analyzed include follow-up of 126,216 Facebook posts over three years, face-to-face interviews with members of the Facebook group and participant observation of various offline group activities. Evidence suggests that low visibility domestic work actually increases opportunities for domestic workers to connect with fellow workers and the NGO on line. Two examples of changes due to domestic workers' use of Facebook for social activism are also noted. This paper highlights the characteristics of the usage of Facebook: its private rather than public nature. These characteristics lower the psychological costs of domestic work among those who participate in social activism in their own interests.

Keywords: domestic workers, Facebook, online activism

## 1. Introduction

Domestic work in private households is generally performed alone and limited visibility can isolate domestic workers more than other types of workers such as factory or agricultural workers (Arat-Koc 1989: 37). Social media can be vital for sharing information, contacting and mobilizing workers because many employers also restrict domestic worker's mobility and social life (Chin 1997; Ueno 2011). A rich body of literature has focused on live-in foreign domestic workers' vulnerabilities, working conditions, transnational activities, and identities (e.g. Anderson 2000; Constable 1997; Ehrenreich and Hochschild eds. 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Lan 2006; Parreñas 2001; Ueno 2010). This paper builds on such scholarship by examining how Filipina live-in foreign domestic workers in Singapore use an NGO-initiated Facebook group designed to support their freedom, equality and justice.

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Previous research shows social media to be key in labour migration, affecting employment by allowing prospective employers and prospective workers to share information about labour conditions (Ueno 2011). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) enhance migrants communication with home countries (Pearce et al. 2013; Ueno 2011), shape 'transnational habitus' (Nedelcu 2012), influence religious nationalism (Rinnawi 2012), and create long-distance nationalism (Conversi 2012). Regarding online activism, the role of leaders and activists in labor migration movements has been studied (Piper and Uhlin 2004). However, online activism of 'ordinary' migrants deserves more attention. Therefore, this paper pays highlights workers who are not initially politically engaged or active but who eventually join social movements through participating in social media. A particular focus is on how solitary work in the backstage of an employer's residence may promote online activism.

An important concept underlying this paper is online activism, i.e. using internet enabled tools to influence social and/or political change. Generally speaking, online activism provides the merits of lower costs, larger scale, immediacy (Earl and Kimport 2012), and the far reaching effect of recruitment of new members (Crossley 2015). Studies that focus particularly on migrants also connect online activism with low cost (Oiarzabal 2012), potential for less-regulated or censored space (Kissau 2012: 1382), ubiquity, simultaneity and immediacy of interaction over borders (Nedelcu 2012: 1346), absence of required proof of membership (Oiarzabal 2012: 1475) and freedom from limitations of space and distance (Siapera 2005: 502). Above all and particularly for those who are mostly confined to employers' private residences, internet use *enables* activism (Vegh 2003).

This study uses the framework of *networked individualism* by Rainie and Wellman (2012) to describe how physically isolated foreign domestic workers can connect via the internet and use a Facebook group. In networked individualism, a *personal user aspect* makes the individual the autonomous center of internet use. A *multiple user aspect* allows people to interact with many types of people or groups. A *multi-tasking aspect* enables internet users to undertake various leisure and non-leisure activities of varying degrees of importance in their lives. A multi-threaded aspect allows internet users to perform several activities more or less simultaneously. Building on the four intertwined aspects intrinsic to networked individualism, foreign domestic workers might participate more easily in online activism because they can blend that activism with leisure activities. This enjoyable nature of internet use revealed is what previous research has not adequately addressed. Hopefully, the account of women trying to build a new form of social network in their country of employment will complement previous scholarship related to foreign domestic workers that focuses on the destruction of intimate sphere such as 'left behind' children or 'commons' in their countries of origin (Hochschild 2000; Isaksen et al. 2008).

## 2. Structural Factors Affecting Online Activism in Singapore

Social action does not occur in a vacuum. Online activism by domestic workers who use Facebook shows individual and collective endeavours intertwined with structural factors that affect Singapore society and foreign domestic workers employed there.

### 2.1 Singapore Government Restrictions

Under the authoritarian People's Action Party, the Singapore government has long restrained activities of NGOs and trade unions (Piper 2006). Freedom of speech is restricted through methods such as requiring a permit for public assembly or public procession in some events (Public Order Act, Chapter 257A). The Trade Unions Act (Chapter 333) restricts foreign workers from being officers in a union without prior written approval from the Minister. While online activism does not necessarily entail unionization or public activity such as marching in the streets, authorities in Singapore can monitor online activities. Since 2013, popular online news sites must follow the same regulatory framework as traditional media (Peace 2013). However, online activities are generally assumed to be less regulated and less monitored than traditional media (Kissau 2012: 1382).

### 2.2 Lack of Legal Protection

Precarious status and working conditions force domestic workers in Singapore to build and expand online relationships. For instance, Singapore has no minimum wage and foreign domestic workers are further disadvantaged by lacking coverage under the Employment Act (Chapter 91) that mandates basic working conditions. Usually, foreign domestic workers have unreasonably long working hours and must reside with employers. Since January 2013, new work permit holders must receive a day off each week, but employers can reduce or eliminate time-off if domestic workers receive monetary compensation.<sup>1)</sup> Since domestic workers are required to reside in their employers' private residences, they are generally put under watchful eyes of the employers 24/7 and this would create the perception of the domestic workers being subservient (Ueno 2009).

### 2.3 Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Typically, foreign domestic workers in Singapore are confined to employers' residences and have limited face-to-face interactions with outsiders, so mobile phones and the internet are the primary mode of social interaction (Ueno 2013). One example of the internet's importance for foreign domestic workers in Singapore is the cyber placement agency Anisya. With the advent of Anisya in 2012, foreign domestic workers in Singapore can pay a comparatively inexpensive Singapore 50 dollars (US\$40) to post profiles on the website. In contrast, traditional placement agencies charge as much as two months salary to find a new employer. Moreover, traditional

agencies reinforce submissiveness by forcing domestic workers to provide unattractive photos that may resemble mug shots and by demanding that profiles be based on standardized CV templates. Unlike traditional agencies, Anisya allows foreign domestic workers to improve their image and acquire new assertiveness through display of attractive photographs and personalized CVs. By September 2015, over 15,000 domestic workers in Singapore had enrolled with Anisya.<sup>2)</sup>

## 2.4 English Language Use

A significant structural factor affecting Filipina foreign domestic workers in Singapore is widespread use of English language. Until April 2012, Singapore's Ministry of Manpower used English language testing to screen potential foreign domestic workers and unsuccessful candidates were returned to home countries. Although such language testing has been abolished, employers prefer workers with English language ability. Consequently, for the overwhelming majority of Filipina domestic workers who can communicate in English, this linguistic capital facilitates participation in online social media and dealings with government or NGOs.

## 3. Study Background

### 3.1 STAR

The NGO identified in this paper by the pseudonym STAR was launched in 2004 in Singapore. Since its foundation, STAR has provided hotlines and shelters for those who have problems with employers or agencies. STAR also started services such as skill improvement classes that are taught mainly by volunteer domestic workers and the NGO organized numerous meetings and workshops for workers.

The Singapore government monitors NGOs concerned with human rights, judging from the fact that when STAR's website announced an upcoming event, police demanded prior authorization before that event. In that particular case, the STAR website could not be used for interaction and mobilization and was limited to informing workers and potential donors about the NGO's existence. STAR's founder had experience in negotiating with Singapore Ministry of Manpower. Therefore, to circumvent political limits on human rights NGOs, the founder created two Facebook groups in 2011: one for Filipina foreign domestic workers (identified here as ANGELICA) and another for Indonesian foreign domestic workers (identified here as KARINA). The groups were separated because workers from those countries were subject to varying laws, employment agency practices and immigration policies.

### 3.2 ANGELICA

This study is based on data from the Filipino group ANGELICA, which is more active than KARINA in terms of membership and postings. New members of this Facebook group must have

administrative approval to join. Except for the starting period of three months before ANGELICA became popular, only registered members able to read, write, and 'like'. Initially, domestic workers already connected to STAR were asked to invite friends to join an online movement for 'freedom, equality, and justice'. ANGELICA membership increased to 300 within the first week after the group began on December 29, 2011, and membership soared to 10,000 by September 21, 2012 and to 20,438 by January 31, 2015. Members were asked to post in English to avoid circulating misinformation about government policies, laws and regulations. Pseudonyms were allowed, making members feel safer. ANGELICA began to include current and former Filipina domestic workers, STAR staff members, *pro bono* lawyers and non-domestic worker volunteers, including the first author of the present paper.

#### 4. Data Collection

Fieldwork with STAR began in 2004, when ANGELICA's founder introduced the first author of this paper as a researcher and friend to the Facebook group members. That author joined the group on February 23, 2012 and on March 31, 2013 posted a research plan that guaranteed anonymity and asked for permission to use data. Any member who objected was invited to come forward with concerns and questions. However, the research plan was unchallenged, receiving 109 'likes' and 8 comments such as "GO, GO, GO, SISTERS". From December 29, 2011 to January 31, 2015, 126,216 posts were collected, including articles, comments, 'likes', pictures, and videos. Content analysis was based on verbatim postings that sometimes have grammatical errors and syntax peculiar to internet chat style and the style of English used by many Filipinas.

From March 2012 to January 2015, face-to-face interviews were conducted with STAR staff who administer the Facebook group and with about 100 domestic workers who participated in events and gatherings announced by ANGELICA. Participant observation focused on how domestic workers use mobile phones, tablets, and PCs and how those workers got interested in STAR activities. The main author of this paper was also able to interact with and observe some domestic workers at work.

#### 5. Data

##### 5.1 Use of Facebook

Most domestic workers interviewed are online practically all the time. Expatriate employers in particular tend to give domestic workers pin numbers to access Wi-Fi at home. Other domestic workers may find pin numbers while housecleaning, buy prepaid internet access or use password-free internet connections from neighbours. Workers often access Facebook during solitary, behind-the-scene household work such as cleaning toilets, closets or backyards, so they can react quickly to new ANGELICA posts. Figure 1 shows that ANGELICA posts are made

throughout the day and especially from early morning till late night. The fewest posts are from 02:00 to 04:30, but some domestic workers are constantly online, allowing quick responses to urgent enquiries.

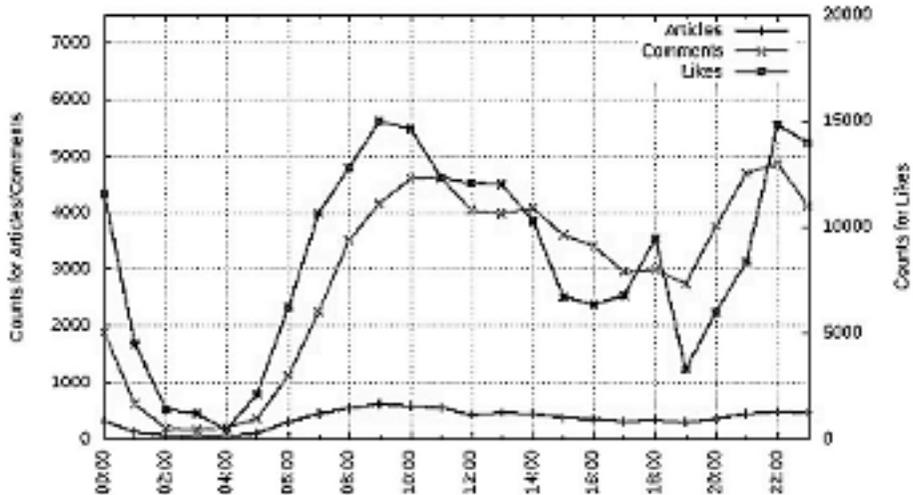


Figure1: The Number of Posting (articles, comments, likes) in Filipina FB group (ANGELICA)

ANGELICA members check posts not only while doing household chores but also while checking other sites or playing games. Especially after daily work is completed, members engage in various online activities as they view posts from ANGELICA. For example, the domestic worker Ranny enjoys multitasking as she spends much time on online dating and marriage sites. Jennifer plays online games while looking for future employment through the cyber placement agency Anisya. Almost every day, Agnes spends much time updating her own Facebook page or contacting friends and family members in the Philippines via Skype.

## 5.2 Identity Kit Development

Facebook profiles of members have become a strong reason for ANGELICA's success. Those profiles may also function as a tool for domestic workers to present themselves via creating a unique 'identity kit' (Goffman 1961: 20). One of the outstanding challenges facing many domestic workers in Asia is that they may be divested of the usual identity kit in order to provide an identity front, publicly displayed image of themselves (Ueno 2011).

Domestic workers in our study report that Facebook is indispensable for presenting themselves. With six year of experience in Singapore, the Filipina domestic worker Nancy can serve as a typical example of how workers develop interest in social media and create an online persona that can be valuable in activism. At first, Nancy hesitated to make a Facebook profile, but friends encouraged her by comments such as "Try, try. You got a nice phone, and you don't use

Facebook, it's for what?" Soon after, Nancy and close friends created attractive Facebook profile pages. Nancy values her profile page so much that she complained about pictures of her uploaded by others. For Nancy and some of her friends, holidays are often used for taking pictures to make themselves more attractive on Facebook. Such pictures helped Nancy become 'friends' with several hundred Facebook users within a few months. Even workers living in Singapore for a long time return to previously visited tourist spots in order to update photographs and attract 'friend requests'. Joan, an ANGELICA administrator working in Singapore for six years, has more than 800 pictures of herself, friends, boyfriend and family, with over 3,000 Facebook friends and about 500 pending friend requests. She often changes her profile pictures and controls her identity kit by using her impressive English language ability. For many domestic workers like Nancy and Joan, Facebook profiles became an essential part of their identity kits, making the ANGELICA site more attractive to recruit new members.

### 5.3 Content Categories

ANGELICA spreads information that provides a basis for awareness and mobilization, informing members about training, fundraising, social events, and meetings. Members frequently post links to online newspaper or magazine articles about accidents, crimes, policy changes and maltreatment by employers or domestic workers. Rummage sales are organized by asking employers and friends to contribute new or used goods to sell. When a member needs financial support for a problem such as health treatment, a moderator may initiate fund raising. In an outstanding example of ANGELICA fund raising, a Halloween party raised money to send a delegation to the World Social Forum on Migration in the Philippines.

Religious posts in ANGELICA may have colorful pictures, spiritual messages or poetry and usually promote Catholic or Protestant beliefs. Apparently, members upload those posts to comfort themselves, to comfort other domestic workers who experience unfortunate events or to respond to what they feel to be their spiritual calling. Such posting may represent solidarity for some group members, but others may feel that such posts compromise the true purpose of ANGELICA. As one domestic worker cautioned: "I want u to know also that we don't use the page for our religious affiliations ... we use this page for inquiries, discussions, and all about our work and related matters." In an interview, that worker added "I try to balance the page by not letting the religious posts overwhelm the others".

Members post slogans and information relating to protecting human rights in order to raise awareness about unfair conditions of foreign domestic workers. Some posts are general messages, but others target specific initiatives of STAR or other NGO groups and individuals and may include motivational phrases such as 'more power' or 'Philippine pride'. ANGELICA also functions as a virtual bulletin board containing information ranging from locating a cheap dentist to searching for missing domestic workers on behalf of family members. There is job information, especially about employment opportunities with expatriate families or 'good' local

Singaporean families who are likely to provide higher wages and Sunday holidays.

#### 5.4 Internal Monitoring by Members and Moderators

A central aim of ANGELICA is to provide a useful platform for social activism. Given the political environment of Singapore, monitoring posts is an important element for providing such a platform. ANGELICA has good reason to limit use of language other than English, for as one domestic worker moderator said in an interview, “Here in Singapore, we cannot afford to make any mistake. It’s better sister [founder] check our posts”. Such statements show caution about giving the government any reason to interfere in ideas contained in the posts. The chief moderator accesses Facebook frequently and says, “I have to monitor them; otherwise, it might become rumor monger. Wrong information and inappropriate interpretation may spread quickly through members”. Internal monitoring is designed to make the group an effective networking and mobilizing tool.

Opinions about ANGELICA use are often posted and rules about appropriate language and tone are frequently discussed. English is regarded as a cosmopolitan language for Filipinas (Faier 2007: 153). Tagalog posts prompt concern about the need to use English, with moderators warning that repeated Tagalog posting may nullify ANGELICA membership. Uncertainty about English expression seems to be reflected in frequent use of emoticons, onomatopoeia, and photographs to convey ideas and feelings, giving a less formal and more personal nature to the Facebook group. Informal and choppy English sentences are the norm in the group, helping members to post more easily (Law 2003).

Some ANGELICA posts concern moral codes, particularly racial stereotypes. Comments such as “[P]lease no racist remarks” and “[L]et’s not criticize races here” appear when members touch on racial stereotypes of employers and domestic workers. Public identification of specific shops and agencies is interrupted by members who know the risk of defamation. In one case, news that a Filipina died in an employment agency toilet prompted 87 comments and controversy about whether or not the agency could be named in ANGELICA. Eventually, the chief moderator posted, “Let us close this topic until we get an update on the facts of the case”.

Many posts consider self-discipline, with members intervening in disruptions that threaten group harmony. Regarding a post like “I just don’t really understand why we Filipinas like to have argument here!!!!”, members analyzed antagonism towards each other and inability to admit mistakes. Some members wondered if the cause of discord was ego or pride and others attributed disagreements to improper upbringing. Some members reminded that comments should be gentle and based on love. Joan, an ANGELICA moderator, mentioned in our interview that “our women joke a lot… but sometimes they quarrel. They get excited. Then I have to say ‘that’s enough, peace’”. Disagreement often ends with the word “peace” or a smiley emoticon.

### 5.5 Work-related Consultations, Urgent Matters, and Rescue

Posts that refer to problems with working conditions in employer' residences or agencies are essential for ANGELICA's social activism. Sharing individual experiences, information and strategies allow members to build the sense of solidarity that forms the bedrock for online activism. The ANGELICA Facebook community stressed personal experiences, with workers posting narratives about employers or agencies, friends and relatives. Typically, posting might start with "Good morning ANGELICAs, I just wanna seek an advice for this problem of mine". Many problems and questions often relate to immigration, MOM (Ministry of Manpower), or POEA (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration in the Philippines). Commonly used words include 'employer' (16,626 posts), 'agency' (7,169 posts), 'agent' (2,289 posts), 'MOM' (4,756 posts), 'embassy' (3,447 posts), 'work permit' (1,643 posts), 'POEA' (1,276 posts) and 'immigration' (488 posts). Narratives about individual experiences may elicit comments such as "[I]t happened to me" or "[T]his scenario was familiar to me two weeks ago". Members who share such experiences show that their situation is far from unique and strengthen emotional bonds. Topics commonly discussed include delay or non-payment of salary, long working hours, lack of sleep, lack of food, heavy chores demanded by employers and forced haircuts. Members provide useful information about how to deal with employers and agencies on specific matters such as running away from an employer, running to the police or complaining to MOM. Posts prompt comments like "[D]on't let them treat u that way sis! If u think u are being abuse, u better stand for what is right, come what may, being quiet cannot do anything good for u! Speak up does not mean ur being arrogant". If there is no consensus about treating a particular problem, there may be comments like "Listen to your own heart and calling ... don't listen to what others says to you ... coz after all you are the one who will be facing the problem, pray to God and ask his guidance".

Some members use ANGELICA for urgent matters related to maltreatment, repatriation or other legal issues. Members ask questions like "When this happened?" and "But you are happy with employer now?" Sometimes, a post appears without specific content, as when one member posted, "I need ur help, please help me". 14 responses appeared within three hours of the initial posting, such as "Yeah how we can help if u dont say what help u need". Some members tried to guess about the problem, which prompted the comment, "Hahaha ... all the commentators here are on panic ... how about the one who make this post??? I hope she's ok". The flow of comments exemplifies the high speed with which members face seemingly urgent problems. Another member reported being hit by a car while crossing the street. After many comments and replies, the unfortunate woman received extensive offers of assistance, including emotional support: "[E]verything will be alright" and "[A]sk the police if the place has a camera" and material support: "[W]hich block and unit XX in Regency are you staying? My friend XXX, who is a volunteer in STAR Nightingale, can visit you".

Efficient networking is central to online activism and that networking often involves do-

mestic workers who are not members of ANGELICA. Networking may begin with a comment such as “Good evening, I just want to know how to help my friend”. Posts frequently concern situations in which employers suddenly cancel a work permit and take the worker to the airport against her will. In one post, a member’s friend was on the way to airport with her salary not fully paid. Within minutes, members responded with comments like “[C] all STAR”. Some posts included STAR’s help desk address and advice on how to talk to the immigration officer at the airport if she was already at the airport. Some reports concern individuals who are strangers:

Good morning. I just want to ask if you heard about the domestic helper who live here at X whom abused by the employer? ambulance here the other day that is Monday night about 6:30pm. we saw the ambulance took someone away covered the head but because we are a bit far, we didn’t manage to see the face. My mam found out only this morning at the security guard that is a helper abused by the employer. (Posted August 29, 2012)

This post received a response almost immediately “[O]h my goodness, XX please ask more details about the dw [domestic worker]. hope shes ok, but i bet if they covered her face means shes gone, but still hoping that shes ok”, “OMG … another one again? … what kind of people are they!!!”, “[W]hat nationality the dw sis”, and “[H]ow they treat well the helper to here. they’re not a slave. we are a human being … that’s why most of the helper working here deep inside are not happy about the employer …” The outstanding speed of communication via ANGELICA is proven as tragic incidents involving domestic workers are reported online even before reports in local newspapers. ANGELICA’s fast and relatively unhindered channelling of information often surpasses other means of communication.

Some posts require immediate attention by the chief moderator because she knows the issues thoroughly. However, members may try to solve problems by themselves or send supportive messages such as “Oh my goodness” or “[O]h dear, not again”. Since some domestic workers work at night, someone is always available to respond quickly to urgent posts, making ANGELICA a *de facto* 24-hour hotline and peer-support center.

### 5.6 Mobilizing Domestic Workers via Facebook: Two cases

The digital and non-digital world overlaps in labour activism (Arora 2012; Sassen 2002). Examples of how the digital and non-digital world are connected to ANGELICA activism can be seen in relation to two cases, one concerning window safety and another concerning violation of The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration’s regulations. Figure 2 shows articles, comments, and ‘likes’ posted. Starting in May 2012, these two issues resulted in a peak number of posts that gained ANGELICA a reputation for labour activism in its first year of operation.

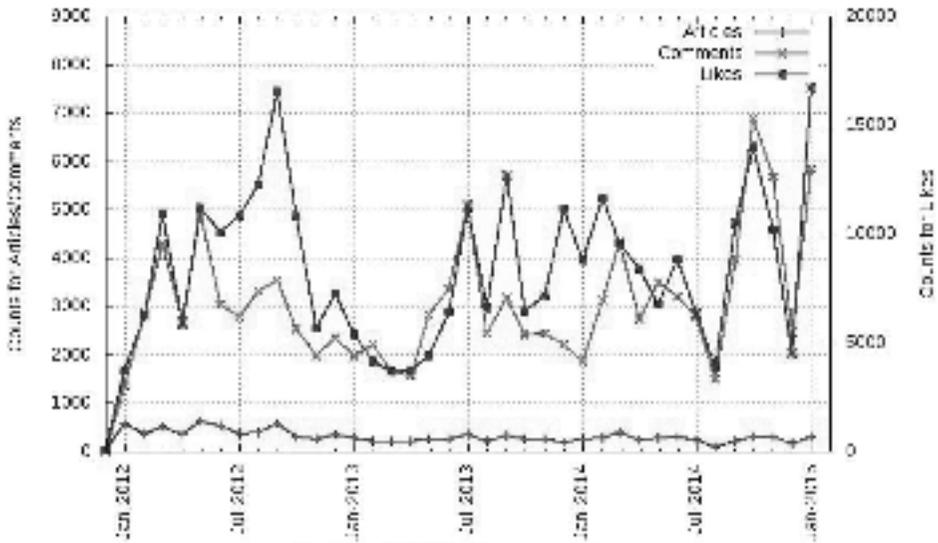


Figure2: The Number of Posting (articles, comments, likes) in Filipina FB grup (ANGELICA)

Case One - Since the 1990s, reports of domestic workers falling to their deaths from high-rise residential buildings have been carried by local Singapore newspapers and Human Rights Watch (2005) pointed to the situation as a sign of insufficient government protection for domestic workers. The founder of STAR's ANGELICA and KARINA Facebook groups started an on-line movement to ban exterior window cleaning and hanging laundry on bamboo sticks:

Dear all if you see any DW cleaning windows on a high rise building please take a picture and send to me ... XXXX@gmail.com – also include the location of the building so that we will send all these pics to MOM. 'One Life lost is too many - Stop killing us.' (Posted February 24, 2012)

In total, 326 posts in ANGELICA included the word 'window'. One post said "Dear Friends, Indonesia cry again" (May 18, 2012) and included a link to a newspaper article about the death Indonesian domestic worker by falling. There were 74 responses such as "Darn! Come on fellows ... lets work fast as we can". The moderator drafted a template petition letter and urged members of both Facebook groups to "Support our call to BAN the cleaning of window exteriors and hanging laundry on bamboo sticks from high-rise residences". Powerful example of online activism occurred when more than 1,000 domestic workers came out in support with their passport name and work permit number and STAR sent those petition letters to MOM. Strongly supported by the Indonesian embassy, this petition presumably led to MOM's press release on June 4, 2012 stating that "employers of FDWs (Foreign Domestic Workers) shall not allow their

FDWs to clean the exterior of windows unless strict safety conditions are in place”. MOM notified all employers and employment agencies of the new rule and advises that violations could incur a penalty of S\$10,000 and/or 12 months in jail. MOM also stipulated that “the public can take photographs of unsafe work practices and send them to MOM”. ANGELICA members kept taking and posting pictures of domestic workers cleaning windows dangerously. At the same time, the group collected more petition letters aimed at totally banning dangerous activities.

Case Two - A striking example of Facebook activism for ANGELICA occurred in relation to settling claims of malpractice against Philippine employment agencies that violate POEA regulations prohibiting placement fees for overseas domestic workers. Under a POEA regulation (Governing board resolution no. 6 series of 2006)<sup>3)</sup>, a domestic worker who goes abroad pays no agency fee in the Philippines. While Singapore allows agencies in Singapore to charge foreign domestic workers up to two month’s salary on a two year contract, Filipina domestic workers in Singapore during early 2012 paid placement fees equal to between five and seven months of salary. From ANGELICA’s inception, the NGO founder/Facebook group moderator repeatedly posted protests about placement fee abuse, sparking a furious outburst on ANGELICA against agencies in the Philippines that violate POEA standards. The founder posted a statement from the Assistant Labor Attaché of the Philippines stating that “the POEA contract is only enforceable in one country (the Philippines)” (February 20, 2012), resulting in comments from members such as “Poea is a bullshit organization”, “help 30% … corrupt 70% …”, and “I think we need to share this issue to the public & media in the Philippines, so that they will know how our Labor Attache works. We pay for their salaries through our remittances and taxes, but they cannot help us, they are like puppet of those sucks employment agencies”. 163 comments were posted in a nine day period.

The SOHO organization in Manila established by STAR’s founder to help returnees reintegrate lodged compensation claims in June 2012. Upon returning to Manila, several Filipina domestic workers brought their cases to POEA for compensation. In July 2012, POEA ordered agencies in the Philippines to compensate domestic workers for unpaid salaries. By the end of August 2012, compensation had reached over 1 million pesos and by the end of January 2015, compensation for 224 cases reached 6,948,864 pesos. Compensation for individual domestic workers through SOHO support in Manila was posted as a victory brought about by ANGELICA’s online activism. The NGO founder commented on the victory, “Of course, I can’t do it without them”, emphasizing that successful lobbying occurred because thousands of Filipina domestic workers supported STAR through the ANGELICA Facebook group.

Symbolic of successful social activism via STAR’s Facebook accounts, eight domestic workers recruited from the two Facebook groups (ANGELICA and KARINA) joined six members of STAR staff and volunteers at the World Social Forum on Migration held in Quezon City, Philippines in December 2012. Participants spoke at several sessions, chanted slogans for domestic

workers rights and sang and danced on stage. Although few domestic workers attended this activity, such offline collective action reflected political awareness gained through Facebook participation and the support by Facebook members who participated in fundraising for the advocacy trip.

## 6. Conclusion

Domestic work tends to be performed 'back stage', not 'front stage' (Goffman 1959). Our data shows that solitary and unseen work such as cleaning the bathroom is precisely the sort of labor that allows domestic workers to engage in online social activism on an every day basis. The online activism reported in this paper may be better understood through reference to the four aspects of networked individualism identified by Rainie and Wellman (2012). Regarding *personal user aspect* of network individualism, data shows that foreign domestic workers acquire internet access for personal use rather than for work or Facebook online activism and those workers use internet connected devices at their own convenience and to develop their own interests. Those individual internet users can post to the Facebook group and deal with the posts even during working hours and respond quickly when necessary. This personal user aspect refers to domestic workers in various locations who function more as an associate of internet activist group rather than being embedded in the group. Regarding *multiple user aspect*, members can engage in social activism as they maintain and expand social ties with family, and friends and groups including NGOs that also connect with other online social circles. *The multitasking aspect* refers to members posting or reading the Facebook group website while being engaged with other Facebook pages or conversing via other communication platform such as Skype. Domestic workers may shift from using the Facebook group site to other online activities, such as checking news or blogs on various sites, playing games, searching for future husbands or boyfriends and look for future employers via the website of a cyber placement agency. Regarding *the multithreaded aspect*, those domestic workers can combine personal entertainment and pursuit of social activism in activities that occur more or less simultaneously. An example of multithreaded aspect is that some members replied to posts by sending 'likes' or comments, by switching 'from reader to writer' (Burn 2010). The way ANGELICA members can move quickly back and forth from serious topics to casual chat is reminiscent of a report that a woman can be 'a five minute activist who navigates between participating in an e-tactic and checking Facebook' (Earl and Kimport 2011: 184).

Evidence in this paper suggests that the personal user aspect of the internet, reflected in the private nature of Facebook, lowers psychological barrier for individual domestic workers who participate in online activism. Individuals who use Facebook often perceive their communication to be private and informal, providing them with enjoyment opportunities. At the same time, in using Facebook, especially ANGELICA designed for social activism, online users may have trouble keeping private matters from becoming public (Earl and Kimport 2012: 108). In fact, ANGELICA gained success through not specifically targeting human right, even though the primary aim of

ANGELICA was to involve members in a social movement for freedom, equality and justice. ANGELICA members are often unconcerned with the initial aim of ANGELICA. There are posts about a hair salon with special discount for domestic workers, tragic events unintentionally or otherwise presented as in an entertaining media show. Apparently, access to a broad range of topics and entertainment value caused ANGELICA to gain popularity as an everyday tool for many domestic workers in Singapore. Obviously, labour activism requires motivated workers. People who are politically active offline and who have higher education and economic power tend to make use of new possibilities online (Smith et al 2009). Our study suggests that foreign workers with various levels of education, lower economic means and more physically confined might not be assertive offline, but can regularly raise their voices online. In fact, online, it's not the socioeconomic index of a person but valuable information that one can provide that determines one's status in the online community (Chambers 2006). Few if any interviewees started using Facebook with clear intention of participating in a social movement and most of them did not define themselves as social activists.

In the case of ANGELICA, online activism fosters offline mobilization of workers that probably would not occur without the momentum created by the Facebook group. Such online and offline activities were combined, allowing members to connect online via ANGELICA and offline via meetings, events, day trips and skill development classes organized by STAR. Extensive research on online donating and recruitment has pointed to illusory aspect of Facebook activism (Lewis et al. 2014). However, our study points to the strength of Facebook activism. ANGELICA allows domestic workers to form an online community, access information, provide mutual support and raise political awareness. Single post on a topic can stimulate numerous comments that become collective expression. Filipina domestic workers use ANGELICA to affirm collective identity, creating 'virtual togetherness' (Bakardjieva 2003), a new sense of 'we-ness' (Earl and Kimport 2011: 205), and 'simultaneous connections' (Oiarzabal 2012). To an important extent, STAR and domestic workers using ANGELICA can circumvent Singapore government censorship via internal monitoring. Thus, online communication has created a sense of camaraderie that bring about positive change in lives and working conditions for ANGELICA members and other domestic workers. Facebook and other social media have become vital in the lives of domestic workers in Singapore. Ubiquitous ICTs allow individual domestic workers to connect on a daily basis with many people who may be geographically distant, facilitating unprecedented information exchange. Thanks to such modern technology, ANGELICA provides a model that could be indispensable for mobilizing more disenfranchised foreign workers in Singapore or in other countries.

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## Notes

- 1) Rest days and well-being for foreign domestic worker  
<https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/employers-guide/rest-days-and-well-being> (accessed February 1, 2019)
- 2) Several interviews with the founder of ANISYA were conducted. Also see their homepage.  
<https://www.anisya.com/> (accessed February 1, 2019)
- 3) Governing board resolution no. 6 series of 2006  
<http://poea.gov.ph/GBR/2006/gbr2006.html> (accessed February 1, 2019)

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