

Negotiating Public and Private Space within the Nation State: Domestic Workers in Three Indonesian Cities

Ratna Saptari

Leiden University/International Institute of Social History

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the dis/articulation between the narratives of domestic workers in Yogya, Bandung and Medan and the politics of citizenship as women's organizations are becoming increasingly vocal in advocating the working conditions and rights of domestic workers. It explores how the dynamics of ethnicity, class and gender have (re)defined these articulations. Since paid domestic work is mostly conducted in the home, scholars have viewed the relation between the public and the private sphere of the home usually in one of two ways: on the one hand 'the domestic' is seen as a mirror of the structures existing in the larger society; on the other, it is seen as a relatively isolated world cut off from the dynamics of the larger society.

It is within this context that I would like to examine the link between the public and the domestic: how do workers perceive these different spheres, and how do they negotiate through the different spaces? how do we situate workers' narratives with that of activists? Closely connected to these questions are issues of the nature of work itself: how are work and wages in the domestic sphere negotiated and redefined in different cultural and political settings? Or are these relevant questions at all - would work relations within the domestic sphere generate or reflect their own dynamics? This research is based on interviews conducted with the help of research assistants between 2004 and 2005 in Yogya, Bandung and Medan.