Advocacy for Women migrant workers in Malaysia through an Intersectionality lens

Abstract

Analysing labour migration through the lens of intersectionality provides valuable insights into the complex identities of women migrant workers and the multiple discriminations they struggle with. Intersectionality advocates argue that only through adopting such an approach can women's multiple discriminations be challenged. Drawing on a case study of seven NGOs and one focus group of women migrant workers in a non-western context, Malaysia, we explore how advocacy organisations understand, interpret and adopt an intersectional approach in advancing the rights of its women migrant workers. We show that there are challenges, specific to the local context, which reduces the likelihood of organisations doing so. The Malaysian experience likely has significance for similar advocacy in other Asian countries.

Introduction

Malaysia remains one of the largest importers of labour in Asia. The pursuit of aggressive export-oriented development policies in the 1980s saw burgeoning numbers of migrant workers entering the country to work. The expansion of its middle-class, a rise in educational standards and women's increasing entry into the labour force have triggered further demands for migrant workers (Piper, 2006). Migrants from Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Pakistan, Myanmar, India and Sri Lanka come to work in construction, manufacturing, services, on plantations and in households and carry out low-skilled and low-paid work. They constitute 20-30 percent of Malaysia's workforce today (ILO, 2016a). It is estimated that there are approximately two million legal migrants in Malaysia, while a further two million are irregular and undocumented (Kong, 2017).

Women constitute a significant portion of the migrant workforce. Like their male counterparts, they engage in low-waged, low-skilled work and are a super-exploited workforce. Their status as non-citizens deprive them of many legal rights which citizens enjoy. Additionally, they face gender-related discrimination,

further disadvantaging them. The question of how the multi-layered difficulties faced by this group of marginalised peoples can be remedied, has attracted much attention over the years.

This article uses intersectionality as a lens through which to investigate ways in which advocacy organisations deal with the dimensions of difference among these workers, identify barriers to adopting an intersectionality approach, and understand how these are overcome. Although intersectionality has been utilised to analyse their migration experience in European contexts (e.g. Lutz, et al 2011; Bastia, 2014), its application in non-western contexts is under-researched (Lee and Piper, 2013). Shin (2009), Lee and Piper (2013) and Ogawa (2017) all use the concept to explore how the intersections of identities of women migrant workers in Asia give rise to the discriminations and marginalisation they suffer. It follows that we need to consider intersectional status positions when developing advocacy strategies on behalf of these women. This article does so, using Malaysia as a case study. The country offers a unique site for the application of an intersectionality lens to advance the position of women migrant workers, due to a combination of features which are relevant to their identities. Secondly, its economy has averaged an annual growth of 5.4 percent since 2010 (The World Bank, 2018). Given this optimistic outlook, the country will increase, rather than reduce, its reliance on migrant labour in realising its 2020 vision of becoming a highly developed economy. This makes studies which investigate how the rights of its migrant workforce can be advanced, ever important. Thirdly, as its policies and practices toward migrant labour share similarities with those in other migrant labour-dependent Asian countries (see e.g. Kaur, 2010), findings from this study can inform research on migrant labour advocacy in these countries.

The article proceeds as follows. Part I outlines the migration regime in Malaysia and the lived realities of its women migrant workers. Part II discusses intersectionality theory. Part III explains the method. Part IV presents the findings of interviews with seven non-governmental organisations advocating on behalf of women migrant workers, and a focus group discussion held with a small number of these women. Part V discusses the implication of the findings and concludes.

Part I: Labour migration regime in Malaysia: The lived realities of women migrant workers

Malaysia operates a highly inequitable labour migration system. Migration policies vacillate between ensuring a continual supply of cheap labour and instigating crackdowns on undesirable migrants (Kaur, 2014), leading to criticisms that migration policies are framed as a security concern rather than regarding migrants as major economic contributors (ILO, 2016a: 23; Woo, 2016). The government's approach toward regulating migrants is instrumental; migrant workers are truly only a means to an end (ILO, 2016a: 2). There is a "hierarchy of rights" for migrant workers in Malaysia, depending on their potential economic contributions (Nah, 2012). Unskilled migrants, on the lowest rung, are strictly kept out unless needed. The position of irregular or undocumented migrants is very precarious. Exploited for their labour, they are often rounded up by the authorities and detained in overcrowded facilities, where conditions are poor. Migrant regulation revolves around visa and immigration issues but seldom clarifies the employment rights of migrant workers (Piper, 2006; 364). Even worse, inefficient management of migration has resulted in huge influxes of unskilled migrant workers and their exploitation (Devadason and Chan, 2014; Woo, 2016).

Approximately 300, 000 migrant workers work in Malaysia's important electronics sector, of which 80 percent are women (War on Want, 2012; Ramchandani, 2018). The combination of the identities of this group of women (e.g. young, single women, low socio-economic status, foreign citizen) gives rise to specific types of discriminations. Often originating from rural areas where education is not a priority, they do not know their rights under the law. Being young and female, they are vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse by their supervisors (Crinis, 2014). They are also subject to severe movement restrictions, often transported from factory to living quarters to factory, in company-owned buses. If they become disabled (e.g. through workplace injury), they acquire a further identity (disabled). Here, the chances of future income generation are significantly reduced, raising the possibility that they will agree to debt bondage.

Another 300,000-400,000 women migrants work as domestic maids (ILO, 2016b). The combination of their identities (e.g. domestic worker, woman,

foreign citizen) renders them vulnerable to other kinds of injustices. Domestic work is not regarded as "real" work, and reinforces existing ideas that domestic work is a "natural" task for women. These workers are employed under an abusive and highly exploitative system, and denied social status, economic resources and political voice (Joseph, 2013). Domestic workers are often also identified as sexually promiscuous women, husband stealers, and an extension of female employers, contributing to their abuse. Due to the nature of the work, they are less likely to establish connections with other workers or access critical support services. Given their forced hidden-ness, uncovering their abuse becomes problematical (Huling, 2012).

One problem of women migrant workers' identities as poor, foreign, and often irregular peoples, is that they are often prevented from accessing sexual and reproductive health rights (Lasimbang, 2016). Many cannot afford medical services, reducing the chances of early detection of diseases or illnesses. Contracts which prohibit pregnancies continue to be forced on these women. Pregnancies result in cancellation of work permits and repatriation. Fearing that they will lose their jobs, many women endanger their lives by resorting to illegal abortions.

Finally, these women's identities as non-citizens, of a particular nationality or ethnicity, or irregular or undocumented peoples, render them liable to ill-treatment by society. Anti-immigrant sentiment runs deep in Malaysia, with migrant workers being associated with crime, disease and terrorism, and sexual and moral problems (Hamidi, 2016; Loh, 2016; Tunon and Baruah, 2012). The migrant population has been missing from discussions of national identity (Aw, 2016). Worryingly, intolerance and xenophobia have contributed to growing violence against women migrant workers (Zahiid, 2016). Women who are victims of violence are often unable to call the authorities if they have undocumented status.

Nonetheless, women migrant workers have allies. Crinis and Ngoc Tran (2017), for example, describe in rich detail how NGOs and Christian based organisations in Malaysia have reached out to migrant workers (pp87-91). Whilst NGOs have focused on holding the government responsible for its migration policies, church

groups have taken up welfare service provision and creating worker support networks (p81). The latter have enabled migrant workers to reach other workers from the same ethnicity and form their own migrant worker associations to look out for each other and to protect their interests at work (pp92-93). However, it is not clear from the evidence whether these groups take an explicit intersectional approach or focus on multiple sources of discrimination. Their approach appears non-confrontational and does not challenge the power structures that marginalise working migrant women. We explore, in this article, the extent to which the organisations in our study meet women migrant workers' complex intersecting needs.

Part II: Theory

Intersectionality is a feminist theory which recognises that gender-based inequalities intersect with other sources of oppression. The term, initially developed in the West, was coined by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) to capture the experiences of women of colour in the United States, although the concept was, even then, not a novel one (Nash, 2008; p3). Its starting premise is that people possess multiple and layered identities, determined by their history, geographical locations and their social relations. These identities may be based on race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, caste, religion and migration status. These aspects of identity are not "unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather...reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Collins, 2015; p2). Each aspect is linked to the others to create the whole person and his/her experience (McCall, 2005; Valentine, 2007). Further, the effects of multiple identities are not additive or cumulative; rather, they produce substantively distinct experiences.

Proponents of an intersectional approach argue that advocacy along single identity dimensions (gender, or class, or migrant status) is blinkered. Single ground advocacy does not recognise the multiple identities of disadvantaged peoples, and does not reflect a complete picture of their experience. Instead, it is only through understanding the intersection of vulnerable people's multiple identities, and the structures of oppression which result, that advocates can respond fully to their difficulties (Squires, 2008). Matsuda (1991) argues that an

intersectional approach encourages us to ask "other" questions to reveal discriminations which are less visible in order to understand the totality of an individual's experience:

> "When I see something that looks racist, I ask 'where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask 'where is the heterosexism in this'" (p.1189).

Bastia (2014) argues that there is a need for intersectionality to be grounded in, and complemented with, a historical approach which includes an in-depth understanding of the contexts in which women live (p242). Differences such as class, race, or ethnicity, associated in intersectionality studies with gender, have very different meanings and uses in different contexts. Applications of intersectionality thus cannot be transferred from one environment to another, disregarding context-specific meanings (pg246). How social structures interact to create particular injustices and problems for intersectionally disadvantaged peoples in different contexts is an important question (Weldon, 2006: p246), yet there is little basis for understanding what that term means outside of European and US contexts (Townsend-Bell, 2011: p189).

Operationalising intersectionality remains a challenging task. First, organisations tend to focus advocacy around limited sets of issues or identities. Research from the west, where the concept has strongly influenced social movements, is a starting point. In studying US advocacy groups, Strolovich (2006) argues that the typical political response to challenging discrimination is to organise interest groups around single axes of oppressions (gender *or* race *or* poverty, as opposed to gender *and* race *and* poverty). But doing so also means that "common interests" tend to be those which affect the more privileged members, as are the policy issues addressed by these organisations (p896). In the UK, Rubery and Hebson (2018) urge the integration of a gender perspective in employment relations practice and research. Many of the core challenges of employment relations, such as renewing the organisational base, addressing the growth of precarious work and challenging the marketisation of the employment relationship, are all inextricably linked with gender and gender inequality, not just class (p430). Ignoring the gender dimension will likely lead to missed

opportunities for renewal and further deterioration of employment relations. Marchetti (2014) shows, again in the context of the US, how organisations disproportionately advocate on behalf of some intersectional identities (e.g. class) over others (e.g. gender) even when representing intersectionality marginalised segments of their constituencies. This "identities hierarchy" within advocacy is liable to (re)produce bias in public policy recommendations and implementation (p105, see also p115). At times, rules, procedures or the legal environment may hinder organisations' embrace of intersectionality. Beckwith (2014) describes how the organisational rules of the United Mine Workers of America, shaped by labour law, established who did and did not have political standing within a social movement campaign. These had strongly gendered consequences in a male dominated industry, rendering working-class women invisible as women and excluding female activists' formal voice in its 1989-1990 strike against Pittston Coal Group.

Secondly, intersectional activism must go further than simply looking at organisations' ability to represent the intersecting needs of their members. It is also critical to question their capacity to challenge interlocking systems of power or the social structures which interact to create particular injustices for particular intersectionally disadvantaged peoples (Tungohan, 2016; Weldon, 2006). Many organisations rectify these inequalities through engaging in "rights-based" campaigns. Yet, as Spade (2013) so painstakingly demonstrates, strategies based on "legal equality" or "rights" do not necessarily meet the needs of peoples facing intersectional harm (those harms made invisible when one does not use an intersectionality lens). These strategies do not necessarily challenge the structures which are responsible for the injustices and problems; the strategies take place within these structures, contributing to, and collaborating with them (pp1049-1051).

Thirdly, an important theme in intersectional research is coalition-building which breaks down interlocking structures of oppression. Chun, Lipsitz and Chin (2013) and Tungohan (2016) provide rich accounts of how immigrant women's organisations in the US and Canada linked with e.g. anti-racist, feminist and labour groups to challenge multiple discriminations. Yet, it is not easy to integrate coalition-building with principles of intersectionality. Townsend-Bell (2011) asks

how coalition members decide which "axes of differences" are relevant; that is, which social divisions or categories of difference should underpin their campaigns? As member groups are driven by their own motivations or ideologies, can the coalition deal with such nuanced issues, and is there a risk that certain categories of difference may be missed out altogether (p196)? Meanwhile, relations between social groups are diverse; ranging from one characterised by competition, to alliance, to coalition or network. How can the diverse relations between these groups (and their projects) be resolved – which ones should have hierarchy or hegemony over the others (Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012; pp. 233-234)? Vierloo (2013) points out (citing Adler Hellman, 1987) that alliances between social groups are rooted in the sharing of ideas. The way in which a movement defines a problem, how it came into being, and how it may be resolved, is a crucial element in the formation or obstruction of alliances (p907). But, divergent framing can obstruct and break down alliances (Cooper, 2004).

Finally, intersectional activism requires an understanding of the specific needs of those who experience discrimination. Alberti, Holgate and Tapia (2013) argue that UK unions tended to regard migrants primarily as workers, rather than as *migrant* workers with particular and overlapping forms of oppression. As a result, unions constructed a dichotomy between workplace and migration issues, impeding the effective involvement of diverse and marginalised workers into unions (for a contrasting case, see Tapia, Lee and Filipovitch, 2017, in the US). There is also a distinction between advocacy for, and about, marginalised peoples; the former necessitates the meaningful participation of these peoples, rather than advocates making general assumptions about them (Simpson, 2009: pp10, 18-24). Using intersectionality thus entails valuing a 'bottom-up' approach to research, analysis and planning, where marginalised peoples can articulate how they live their lives.

We now turn to address our research question:

To what extent do advocacy organisations in Malaysia deal with the dimensions of difference among women migrant workers?

Part III: Method

There is no clear methodology for operationalising intersectionality (see McCall, 2005 for discussion). We select an 'intra-categorical' intersectional framework which focuses on the neglected points of intersection of any particular social group, to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups (McCall, 2005: 1774). We seek to understand the extent to which NGOs in Malaysia take account of the multiple identities of its women migrant workers, whose experiences are shaped by a combination of political, social and economic discriminations.

The research begun by locating relevant organisations which helped women migrant workers. Two of the authors live in Malaysia and have deep knowledge of the local advocacy context. We focused on NGOs in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, two well-known sites for migrant labour activism.

There is no single organisation in Malaysia dedicated to promoting the rights of women migrant workers. There are however, several organisations who work with these women, as part of their client base. Their work (singly and with each other) is useful in explaining the kind of advocacy which exists on behalf of these women. We contacted a range of women's organisations, trade unions, social justice organisations, religious organisations and pro-migrant workers' organisations. The Malaysian authors have previously conducted research in some of these organisations. Their personal contacts put them in touch with others. We also conducted a web search to maximise opportunities to locate the most appropriate organisations. We selected our participants based on the following criteria:

(i)   their emphasis that women migrant workers were a deserving people
(ii)   their belief that they had a responsibility toward these women
(iii)   their experience working with women migrant workers.

Seven organisations agreed to speak with us regarding their work with women migrant workers (see Table 1, end of this section). We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (face-to-face, skype, telephone) with their senior representatives. These organisations' involvement with women migrant workers varied; some worked extensively with a range of women migrant workers, whilst others had less regular contact with them. However, they all believed that their

advocacy was important as a means of improving these women's positions. Some of these organisations have worked with each other for many years and know each other well. An interview schedule, informed by the relevant literature, was developed to investigate the research question (identified on page 8) in three stages:

1. How do NGOs take into account the different identity dimensions of women migrant workers?

2. What are the barriers to an intersectional approach, in practice, in the Malaysian context?

3. How do NGOs navigate these barriers?

To generate migrants' perspectives, we organised one focus group meeting with 8 women migrant workers, with the help of one of the organisations we interviewed. Whilst women migrant workers include domestic workers, we focused, in this study, on workers from the electronics sector, as we had easier access to them. We invited them to discuss their personal and work lives, and to provide accounts of ways in which NGOs have reached out to them to meet their intersecting needs.

To avoid linguistic barriers precluding a direct translation of what intersectionality meant in the Malaysian context, we clarified its meaning with each of our participants. Some were already familiar with the term and used it confidently. For those who did not, we translated the term into the local language, in terms of multiple identities and disadvantage, provided examples of what it meant and explained what intersectional advocacy might entail.

We focused our investigation on advocacy along three primary identities of women migrant workers; namely, as workers, as women and as migrants. Our questions thus probed participants to tell us the extent to which their advocacy on behalf of these women encompassed all three dimensions; "to what extent do you advocate for these women as women, as migrants and as workers?" We recognise the many other identity dimensions of these women (e.g. nationality, socio-economic backgrounds, religion, ethnicity, documented or undocumented) but resource constraints did not allow us to pursue these lines of investigation.

A total of ten interviews were conducted with NGOs. All NGO interviews were recorded and transcribed and data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006), identifying themes relating to address the research questions. The focus group discussion was not recorded out of respect for the privacy of the women migrant workers who wanted to preclude any possibility of their identities being revealed. Detailed notes were however, taken. All interviews were conducted between February 2017 and July 2017.

Table 1

NGO1X (6 April 2017)	Women's Rights Organisation, championing gender equality, located in Penang
NGO2U (11, April 2017; 6, June 2017)	Trade Union in the electronics sector which works with a large group of migrants, located in Penang
NGO3Y (7, April 2017)	Religious Women's Organisation, promoting gender equality and justice within religion, located in Kuala Lumpur
NGO4Z (23, February 2017)	Human Rights Organisation working with vulnerable peoples, including women migrant workers, located in Kuala Lumpur
NGO5K (11, March 2017)	Social Justice Organisation representing poor and marginalised peoples, located in Kuala Lumpur
NGO6B, (26, May 2017)	Social movement group championing political, economic and social reform; greater governmental accountability, respect for human rights, fairer socio-economic policies, located in Penang
NGO7H (8, June 2017)	Human Rights Organisation, working with migrant and refugee populations, located in Penang

Part IV: Findings

1. To what extent do NGOs take into account the different identity dimensions of women migrant workers (*as women, as migrants and as workers*)?

Almost all of the participants recognised the multiple discriminations against women migrant workers, because of their multi-identities. Intersectionality was not a foreign concept of many of them. Three NGOs (NGO1X, NGO4Z, NGO6B) regarded intersectionality as crucial to their work. The representative from NGO1X remarked:

> "I think all women's groups use intersectionality. It's a very common phrase now for all women's groups...We all do intersectionality approach, all the time in our work"

However, there were variations in participants' understandings and interpretation of intersectionality in their activism in general, and specifically in relation to women migrant workers. NGO1X regarded understanding intersectionality as being able to address *heterogeneity* among their client groups:

> "Intersectionality just basically means that a person does not exist in a single dimension...so a victim of violence when she comes to us, she maybe poverty ridden, beaten, she may not have a place to stay, maybe experiencing violence, or she may not have a legal work permit, but she has turned up at our doorstep..."

Others saw intersectionality as meaning *inclusiveness*. NGO3Y, a religious women's organisation, explained that adopting intersectionality meant that it did not differentiate between women of different religions when seeking justice under religious laws. In providing an example of a non-Muslim husband converting to Islam, what rights would the non-Muslim wife, who did not choose to convert, have? NGO3Y said "this is the intersection that we see; we not just dealing with Muslim women, when we talk about Islam, when we talk about injustice…justice has to be for all Muslim and non-Muslim women."

NGO5K, an organisation representing poor and marginalised peoples, did not use the word intersectionality when describing its work but intersectionality, in terms of inclusivity, was part of its advocacy. Thus, its work included campaigning for the rights of both local and migrant workers:

> "[Intersectionality] is a new terminology for me...But I think indirectly, we are already implementing that because when we analyse the issue, we analyse from different perspectives, who they are, how we want to work with them…who are the other partners who can come together to help in this particular case, it's the nature of our target people, and how we can provide a better service, so when you look at so many angles"

Some participants did not recognise the concept at all. NGO2U, a trade union, was an organisation who had daily contact with women migrant workers. Yet, it was not at all familiar with intersectionality, *asking "is that intersex?"* It perceived women migrant workers strictly as workers and its involvement with them in their other identity dimensions, (especially gender) was very limited.

> "we only handle the case related with the employment act, e.g. wages, safety and abuse, other than that [referring to pregnancies], we consider it as personal problem and will not interfere…. we cannot force these women not to have affairs with local people…it is their freedom and choice…we don't get involved, except taking the necessary steps when these women are deported by the employer"

2. What are the barriers to intersectional approach in practice in the Malaysian context?

Despite many participants being familiar with the concept of intersectionality, and their emphasis that their approaches were intersectional, it quickly became apparent that in *practice*, this was not always the case. Despite these organisations' commitment to supporting women migrant workers, they could not always include these women in their advocacy (inclusivity), or work with their intersecting oppressions (heterogeneity). Three major interrelated barriers to advocacy based on the intersectionality of worker, gender and migrant status, were cited. These were resource issues, political and legal context, and (in)visibility constraints.

a) Resource Issues

Many participants mentioned resources as a barrier to tackling multiple discriminations (heterogeneity), or when including working migrant women in their advocacy work (inclusivity). The response of NGO7H, a refugee organisation, was typical:

> "[we do] a lot of building with the community, but we would love to do that also with migrant workers, but we don't have the resources. We don't have the people and we don't have the capacity"

i)   Specialisation

Limited resources resulted in participants having to specialise and prioritise. Participants talked about having to focus their work on specific groups of migrant workers. Specialisation is reinforced by funding mechanisms which acted as a constraint to adopting intersectionality. NGO4Z, an organisation which works daily with women migrant workers, found it difficult to expand its advocacy to include women migrant domestic workers:

> "It depends on the donors. This is a challenge – what exactly your donor or funder is giving you the money for…sometimes when we talk to other organisations, can we include domestic workers in this project? And their answer is, 'we have to think about it'. We have to go back to the donor to check if we can include these people"

ii) Prioritisation of local women over migrants

NGO3Y was also explicit about specialisation, on this occasion, in relation to local, rather than migrant, women.

> "No migrant workers [amongst our clientele], because we don't do that outreach. We have to keep our work focus on Islamic family law…that is the niche that we have and that is the capacity that we have. Given the challenge in advocacy, we are not able to do everything"

But this participant acknowledged that this lack of outreach resulted in the exclusion of Muslim women migrant workers (a significant proportion, given the numbers of women migrant workers from Indonesia). In fact, we identified a

preference on the part of most of the participants to prioritise local people's issues, in the resource limited contexts. NGO4Z felt this very acutely, when trying to advance their cause.

> "… NGOs want to solely focus on local issues. They still see that nothing is effective in terms of women's issues in Malaysia – lack of women's participation in Parliament, in terms of labour and employment still low number, women are not sitting in the top management… people are still struggling with these issues…see these as an urgent need to be addressed, rather than migrant women who come here…who get pregnant…who get sacked…who get raped… whose employers do not pay wages…doesn't seem very important! Because they are not Malaysians! That kind of a perspective is not there…"

Despite being concerned about women migrant workers' vulnerability to abuse and exploitation in the workplace, NGO5K acknowledged that

> "When you talk about foreign workers, we are not the right one to talk with. Because we do very little work with migrant workers. Our focus still, is to the local workers."

b) Legal and political barriers

Inequalities embedded in the political-legal context in Malaysia are a major factor restricting NGOs' capacity to tackle the multiple oppressions faced by women migrant workers. Some of the participants talked about "legal prejudice" against the migrant workforce which meant that they were not able to help them. For example, NGO7H clarified that the legal system did not make it worthwhile for migrants to complain.

> "a migrant worker complains that she is not receiving wages, but she is arrested because she has no documents, they are firstly victims, then they are made criminals, how can you have redress when you are criminalised?"

NGO2U explained that the government would not allow migrants to form their own union, immediately also limiting ways in which unions can help migrants:

> "We are trying hard to set up a migrant workers' union, but this has been rejected by the government. Malaysia has not ratified ILO Convention 97 which recognises freedom of association. Once it has been ratified, then it is all open for grabs"

Even where there were laws offering protection to workers, these were often not implemented or enforced in relation to migrants. NGO5K explained that non-enforcement of the law by the government created a confidence among employers that migrants did not matter "The employers are so keen to take the migrant workers because they can pay low". Here, the fact of non-enforcement reinforced a view that migrants were undeserving of protection and directly impacted on NGOs' work to defend the rights of these women.

c) Mutual invisibility of women migrant workers and NGOs

The intersecting oppressions facing women migrant workers were sometimes invisible to NGOs. At the same time, NGOs were themselves, invisible to women migrant workers. This mutual invisibility undermines opportunities for advocacy based around intersectionality, to take account of these women's multi and intersecting identities.

Participants relayed difficulty in establishing relationships with women migrant workers. Few women approached them. This was explained in terms of these women's lack of awareness of their rights, or of what help could be available (NGO6B), but also because of the isolation, fear and lack of trust on the part of women migrant workers. NGO5K explained:

> "it is not easy to organise the women migrant workers…they are very scared to go and join and listen to anyone. Second thing, being a migrant worker, you don't want to do anything aggressive because you are scared of the immigration, police, authorities. The third thing, they feel they don't have any support here. So, you must get the trust first…because not everybody is comfortable to talk to you, so you must create that trust first, then only they will open up to you…"

The focus group participants confirmed these difficulties from their own perspectives. It was clear that the NGOs were also invisible to the women. One worker explained that in her ten years working in Malaysia's electronic sector, she had never heard of any particular NGO; although she was familiar with the concept of one. This was reiterated by the other women. Some said they would

not know how to get in touch with NGOs and others doubted that they would have the time to liaise with NGOs, given their workday (7.05 am to 6.55 pm).

While there was some synergy between the perspectives of the NGOs and the women migrant workers, there was also some divergence. The focus group participants did not articulate intersectional needs, but primarily identified themselves as workers. For example, they saw sexual harassment purely as a workplace, rather than a gender-related issue:

> "I am abused not as a woman, but as a worker"

Even when they discussed sexual and reproductive health problems, for example, period pains, they did not elaborate on this as a women's issue, they couched these as work-based problems. On period pains, one participant remarked:

> "I dare not go to the toilet or sit down to rest or get medical certificate to excuse myself from work, I must continue to work otherwise I am penalised".

On unwanted pregnancies another said:

> "I would be violating the contract if I got pregnant and I will need to compensate my employer"

These women's daily regime revolved around meeting targets on the production line. They came to view their identities narrowly; that of workers, but not of women or migrants, minimising the significance of other identity dimensions and their sense of what was just and fair. Finally, they spoke of the desire to take charge of their own lives, irrespective of the fact that no organisation helped them. They saw the potential for freedom, agency and empowerment through the friendships which they had built:

> "I am a big sister to others"

> "we are a family who takes care of everyone"

This was a highly select group of women migrant workers who may not represent the experiences of all women migrant workers in Malaysia. Future more in-depth and wide-ranging research exploring the experiences, expectations and needs of

diverse groups of women migrant worker in Malaysia (and other developing country contexts) may provide useful understandings for NGOs who seek to support them. Nevertheless, the findings illustrate how the inaccessibility and invisibility of these women to NGOs reduced opportunities for NGOs to understand their needs and requirements, which are essential for advocacy grounded in intersectionality.

3. How do NGOs navigate these barriers? Doing intersectionality in a Malaysian context

If individually, participants could not meet the multi-needs of women migrant workers, how did they overcome this? The most common strategies for dealing with interrelating discriminations affecting these women were through referrals and coalitions. Most of the participants were comfortable and confident working with each other, to help women migrant workers.

Referrals

A practice of referrals enabled NGOs to address clients' multiple intersecting issues while focusing limited resources on areas where they can help. Many participants explained that they often referred these women elsewhere.

For example, C, who was involved in two NGOs (NGO1X, NGO6B) explained

> "with NGO6B, if someone calls the office and says that a migrant a worker was raped, then a reference is made to NGO1X if it is a sexual assault case and if there are labour issues to NGO4Z which looks at the labour issues... we always work together, and we will always refer cases..."

NGO1X emphasised that it did not abandon clients (including women migrant workers) after referring them, but that it would do its best to see that all of the needs of the clients were met as far as possible. In emphasising referrals as an effective way through which the multi-needs of women migrant workers (*as women, as migrants and as workers*) can be met, NGO3Y remarked:

> "We have to learn how to work with each other and cooperate and basically tap on the expertise that we have. So…if there was a migrant workers issues that came to us, definitely we would have to

directed her to NGO4Z and would call NGO4Z to say 'I am referring a client to you'"

Coalition building: Working together or apart

Participants also talked about coalitions, which have more potential to shift focus onto the whole person. Coalitions were crucial to their work, something every participant was explicit about. Like referrals, participants viewed coalitions as an effective solution, which compensated for their individual inability to address the multi-discriminations suffered by women migrant workers.

NGO3Y described coalitions as enabling it to endorse work with women migrant workers without directly working with these women themselves. The coalitions however, tended to be "loose" with different NGOs taking the lead on different issues, including those faced by women migrant workers.

> "we are part of coalition, *Joint Action Group*, which started during the 1980's to talk about how to enact the domestic violence bill. So, it's kind of decided already, in the sense of which group takes the lead in which kind of issues, but when it comes to the endorsement of statement, then we have an understanding that we support one another…"

Nevertheless, hurdles to strong coalition building soon became apparent. For example, relations within coalitions tended to be informal, with no expectation on members to commit to particular causes:

> "we do so according to our capacity. There is no force in doing such thing, it is very fluid. We work each other, long enough to know and understand, if you don't have the capacity, then it is alright" NGO3Y

Meanwhile, NGO7H was vocal about NGOs' general unwillingness to put the collective above themselves:

> "…in Malaysia, it is actually quite hard to keep people working together... It is mainly due to different politics, different egos, different ideas and territories...every single group I have been involved, we looked for collective campaigns and strategies...but there is always something that stops others from putting higher, the collective... it is very hard to get

people involved in a campaign, in the end, they wouldn't agree with a lot of things."

Finally, NGO4Z commented on how long it would take intersectionality to become embedded in local thinking, with implications for effective coalition building:

"Introducing the theory of intersectionality at this point in time, is a biggest challenge. People still do not have the kind of perspective yet!"

Part V: Discussion and Conclusion

The principal contribution of this article has been to extend research on intersectionality in NGO advocacy to an Asian context. We investigated the utility of intersectionality as a strategy for NGOs to advance the position of women migrant workers in Malaysia. Here, gender intersects with other identities (migrant, worker) in a non-western context, where the legal, political and social context is anti-migrant (Weldon, 2006). The subsequent unique set of experiences for women creates a specific set of challenges for advocates.

Intersectionality in the Malaysian context, is understood and interpreted in different ways. The barriers and challenges hindering individual organisations from adopting intersectionality led to them developing specific mechanisms to address women migrant workers' intersecting needs. There are limitations to our study, however, confining investigation to one specific Asian country, and to one specific group of women migrant workers. Future research on domestic migrant workers and women migrant workers in other Asian countries, for example, would increase our understanding of how advocates address the multi-needs of women in other contexts.

Our findings make the following contributions to research on women migrant worker advocacy, at least, for Malaysia:

First, they showed that despite being familiar with the concept of intersectionality, and despite their commitment to helping women migrant workers, their individual advocacy did not address these women's identity

dimensions simultaneously (gender, migrant, worker). That these workers had intersecting needs was acknowledged by all participants. Yet, participants faced many legal, political and social barriers, which meant that they either excluded women migrant workers as a client group or could only partially meet intersectional needs (Strolovich, 2006; Alberti et al, 2013; Rubery and Hebson, 2018). The barriers made it very difficult for NGOs to ask the "other" questions required for an intersectional approach (Matsuda, 1991); for example, to address both migrant status as a source of disadvantage and also gender discrimination. Findings also showed that some identity dimensions were so powerful that they minimised the effect of other identities (being a worker was much more powerful than being a foreign national or a woman). This was particularly so with the union respondent and the women themselves, who did not view their situations from an intersectional perspective. The weak labour law framework (due to poor enforcement of laws) suppressed advocacy around certain identities of these women migrant workers (i.e. as workers), because it legitimised the exploitation of these women as workers and reinforced beliefs that it was acceptable for empowers to abuse them (c.f. Beckwith, 2014). Meanwhile, the priority given to addressing the oppressions facing local women resulted in an "identities hierarchy" within advocacy (Marchetti, 2014) with migrant status being the least likely to be addressed by many of the NGOs. These partly explain the slow progress to improve the rights of women migrant workers in Malaysia.

It is important to consider the structures which constrain what NGOs can, in practice achieve, in a developing country context. The lack of resources, donor requirements as to how funds can be spent and difficulties in overcoming political and legal barriers frustrated many participants, yet all had a direct impact on the extent to which they could integrate intersectionality in their advocacy. This limited the scope of what they could achieve for women migrant workers. They are survivalist organisations, a stark contrast to the more well-resourced and more autonomous counterparts in the west (Farouk, 2011, Farouk and Husin, 2015). Thus, whilst it is important for intersectionally-minded advocates to challenge the wider structures which create particular injustices and problems for women migrant workers (Tungohan, 2016), it is equally important to understand that

these same structures often simultaneously constrict the actions and choices of these advocates.

Secondly, we saw how individual participants compensated for their limited ability to address these women's multi-needs through referrals and working in coalitions. Whilst there was a measure of success with referrals meeting the intersecting needs of women migrant workers, some issues emerged from the interviews which cast doubt on the ability of existing coalitions to do so. Intersectional activism is about organisations' capacity to challenge interlocking systems of power which are responsible for the injustices experienced by marginalised peoples (Spade, 2013; Tungohan, 2016). Yet, the loose nature of coalitions and the strong territorial attitudes among individual NGOs made it difficult to be certain that existing coalitions can, in fact, do so. In a coalition where "there is no force in doing such thing…if you don't have the capacity, then it is alright" (NGO3Y) how would "axes of differences" i.e. the social divisions or categories of difference which underpin its campaign, be chosen and acted upon and how would this impact on women migrant workers (Townsend-Bell, 2011)? Where NGOs are strongly territorial and where "there is always something that stops others from putting higher, the collective" (NGO7H), how can agreement among NGOs be reached, or differences resolved (Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012)? If NGOs work in silo, each with its own views about the priority to be given to women migrant workers, how can a coherent framing of the intersecting discriminations faced by these women take place (Cooper, 2004; Vierloo, 2013)? The divergent framings of what "justice" meant for women migrant workers by NGO2U is a case in point. Its narrow view of women migrant workers' identities i.e. only as workers, presents challenges to coalition building which can advance the intersecting needs of these women. If coalitions can break down interlocking structures of power which oppress women migrant workers, then it is likely that the frail nature of coalitions demonstrated in this article explains why there has been limited progress over the years.

Thirdly, intersectionality implicitly requires advocates to understand the lived realities of women migrant workers. Here, women migrant workers themselves are the most reliable and most valuable sources of information. The feminist literature argues that strategies to mobilise for change need to be informed by

marginalised peoples themselves, for it is they who understand their situation most fully and can develop the most effective solutions (e.g. Kabeer, 1994). There is a compelling case to allow women migrant workers to articulate their problems and to include them in developing solutions to tackle the multi-discriminations which constrain their lives (Simpson, 2009). But as evident from our findings, if NGOs seldom encountered women migrant workers, can they understand the different discriminations which these women faced? Without an adequate understanding of interrelating discriminations and the ways these impact on women migrant workers, how can inter-NGO collaborations address these discriminations? Women migrant workers may see themselves as actors, but if they are unaware of their multi-identities, how would they be able to challenge multiple discriminations? This calls into question whether intersectionality can truly be practiced in circumstances where there is a disconnect between large groups of marginalised peoples and advocates in hostile and non-supportive contexts.

These findings affirm that intersectional advocacy, as a concept, has not yet taken root in Malaysia. There are small signs of change recently, however, which holds promise for advocacy for women migrant workers. In relation to the labour movement, inclusive popular democratising movements have strengthened in recent years, providing a favourable context for greater emphasis on non-ethnic political action by trade unions (Croucher and Miles, 2016). In relation to women's rights movements, campaigns against gender-based violence have found universal support across ethnic (and by effect, language) and religious divides; given that all women were potential victims of violence (Izharuddin, 2013). There is also now a clear recognition that gender injustice is intersectional in nature, linked as it is to wider cultural and political-economic practices, such as work, employment, family life, national identity and sexuality (Elias, 2015).

There are challenges to operationalising intersectionality in the west. In developing countries, such as Malaysia, where migration regulation is super-exploitative and the rule of law weak, where many NGOs are under resourced, where there is a disconnect between advocates and women migrant workers, and where few organisations and women view themselves from an intersectional perspective, difficulties are magnified. Additionally, intersectionality as a

concept, is still unfamiliar to many. These difficulties are not easily overcome, leading advocates to look for alternative ways to compensate for their individual inability to meet women migrant worker's multi-needs. Notably they recognise the value of relying on each other and working together to respond as fully as possible to these women's multiple needs, even if these strategies are imperfect. Intersectional advocacy in such constrained contexts, mirrored in many other Asian countries, may not fully conform to general expectations of intersectionality in the west. But it is how advocates, circumvented by factors beyond their control, attempt to meet the intersectional needs of their clients. A point which invites reflection is that whilst intersectional advocacy strives to challenge the structures which perpetuate injustice, it simultaneously, is a product of them. How this tension plays out determines outcomes for those who advocates seek to defend. In contexts such as Malaysia, the odds appear to be against their success.

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