Migrant domestic work is the dirty little secret of many developed countries.

With aging populations, changing family structures and their own well-educated women increasingly joining the labor force, wealthy countries have transformed part of what used to be the invisible unpaid work of housewives into invisible paid work for women from poorer nations. Instead of making systematic provisions for the profound changes that have taken place in everyday life and reorganizing their public services accordingly, these countries have come to rely on an influx of women from poorer countries to cook, clean and take care of their children, ill and elderly.

Just a few examples: migrant women leave Poland, Rumania or Ukraine to care for the elderly in Germany or Italy, or they travel from Ecuador or Peru to clean houses in Spain. Migrants move to California from Mexico to become nannies and maids or from Jamaica to work as personal attendants in New York. And they leave the Philippines to do just about every imaginable domestic task just about everywhere on the globe.

Many Filipinos speak fluent English because the Philippines used to be a colony of the United States, and there is a pronounced lack of good jobs in the Philippines for people with higher
education. One outcome of this is that Filipinos are one of the most internationally mobile nationalities, with huge groups of the estimated 11 million so-called Overseas Filipinos in places as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Japan and Australia. Filipina women are engaged in domestic work to the extent that in Israel, for example, the word “Filipina” has become a generic term for a live-in helper of an elderly person, a fact I learned from an Israeli colleague at a recent conference, who after listening to my paper about domestic workers in Germany reported that his “mother is being cared for by a lovely Filipina from Moldova”.

With domestic work routinely trivialized and domestic workers usually working alone, these women are as hard to make out in the societies that benefit from their labor as their services are indispensable. Occasionally, one may glimpse a Filipina nanny in jeans pushing a baby carriage and carrying the bags of her Saudi tourist employer, swathed from head to toe in a dark cloak–like garment, on one of the more expensive shopping streets of Munich or Rome, but by and large domestic workers’ isolation and invisibility are the reason that, in most places, they are notoriously difficult to identify, let alone organize politically.

And then there is Hong Kong.

It is hard to tell the exact number of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, but according to one source they make up approximately 3% of the population, and there is no doubt that an overwhelming majority of them are women. According to the Hong Kong SAR Government Information Centre, in 2005 there were 223,394 foreign domestic helpers in the city, 53% from the Philippines, 43% from Indonesia and 2% from Thailand.

Another Wikipedia link about ‘Filipinos in Hong Kong’ (retrieved on 2009-02-02) says there are “on average around 140,000 Filipinos in Hong Kong, of whom most work as foreign domestic helpers. They usually live in their employer's residence and perform various household duties such as cooking, cleaning, and child-minding”.

The private home is the labor market for these women, and like most other workers, they, too, are eager to get away from their workplace during their time off - but where to? In Italy, where live-in working arrangements of domestic workers are also widespread, sometimes a group of foreign domestic workers will rent a room or a small apartment together in order to have a private space for their days off. But given the exorbitant rents and these women’s

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1 November 2006, as quoted in the Wikipedia link on ‘Foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong’, retrieved on 2009-02-02
modest wages, renting a room of one’s own does not seem to be a viable alternative in Hong Kong. So perhaps it is not surprising that Hong Kong’s domestic workers have turned the public arena into their own private space. After all, where else would they have to go?

It is quite a spectacle. On Sundays and on holidays, many of these women spend their day off in the Hong Kong business district and turn the area around the luxurious Mandarin Oriental Hotel into their own living room. I had the opportunity to witness this extraordinary sight at Christmas of 2008 where one could see the amahs, as they are known in Hong Kong, doing the various things women tend to do when they have time off without their men and children.

The women eat and drink, and they play bingo and cards.
They sleep, listen to music and read books.

They peruse articles about rock stars or the help wanted ads in one of the free newspapers that are distributed here.

They socialize in groups, or they talk and laugh with one special friend.

They give each other manicures, pedicures and try out new hairdos or makeup.
They chat on their cell phones and send text messages, and because there are so many of them the local phone companies have signs posted competing for their business.  

With cardboards boxes demarcating their own private space, many of the women create “a room of their own” for one day only on the streets and overpasses of the business district, and they carefully take off their shoes before entering each others’ “rooms” so as not get them dirty. The next morning, the “rooms” will have vanished, but this is what the area looks like on Sundays.
Some stroll around to window shop or pose for pictures in front of the luxury shops that line the streets around Central station, and some queue to send remittances to their loved ones at the facilities in the nearby Worldwide House that is abuzz with amahs.

Yet others try to make a little extra money by selling snacks or drinks or offering manicures to tourists who happen to be passing by, too.

Some pack bags and bundles full of toys and presents to send to their families back home, and again, the various companies that can take on this task compete for their services here.
Amazingly, the whole neighborhood is full of hundreds if not thousands of amahs. They are everywhere, while their employers are nowhere to be seen. On their days of rest, the foreign domestic workers of Hong Kong simply take over the area around Statue Square as their home away from home, and they are impossible to overlook. Nor do they want to be overlooked, for some of them have founded a union.

![Image of amahs holding signs for a union]

Just by spending their days off as they do (where else in the world could one find so many women regularly gathering in public?), the amahs of Hong Kong advise us in their own fashion of the need to redefine the boundaries of the public and the private in many areas, from the households that employ foreign domestic workers to the political discourses in the communities that can no longer do without their services.