



SOUTH ASIA RESEARCH CLUSTER SEMINAR

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WOLFSON COLLEGE, Florey Room

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HOUSETALK AND EVERYDAY CONVERSIONS: SOUTH ASIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS' NEWFOUND ISLAMIC PIETIES IN THE GREATER ARABIAN PENINSULAR

Over the past twenty years, tens of thousand of South Asian migrant domestic workers in the Greater Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf region have taken *shehadeh*, the Islamic testament of faith. A widespread phenomenon, these religious conversions have generated a great deal of debate centering on one question: why? Some argue these migrant women convert in order to wrest better remuneration and treatment from their employers. Others point to the efforts of Kuwait's myriad Islamic reform and da'wa movements as leading to their conversions. Based on over two years of ethnographic research on South Asian migrant domestic workers in Kuwait, and research in Nepal and Pakistan, this paper suggests a shift in analytic focus, one emphasizing domestic workers' 'housetalk' or everyday gendered relations and activities within households as generative of their Islamic conversions. Domestic workers experience religious conversion not as a radical break from their previous relationships and religious practices, but as a gradual reworking of them. Their experiences mark the confluence of two realms often assumed to be distinct: the everyday cultivation and ethical formation of religious subjectivities related to these migrant women's engagement with Islam, and the disciplining and reshaping of their comportment and personalities related to their undertaking of affective labour. Their experiences point to the subtle imbrication of political-economic and religious processes without eliding or fetishizing the importance of each to the other. Undergirded by gendered relations and discourses, both these processes are reshaping domestic workers' subjectivities, modes of belonging, and social networks.