

# Activist Styling: Fashioning Domestic Worker Identities in Indonesia

Mary Austin

## Abstract

This article investigates the use of dress by Indonesia's domestic worker movement as a means of resisting gendered political disregard and legal exclusion. JALA PRT, Indonesia's National Network for Domestic Worker Advocacy, founded in 2004 and spearheaded by feminist activists, supports the development of domestic worker unions. From the outset, it has campaigned for an Indonesian domestic workers law, and, since 2011, for the ratification of ILO Convention 189 (C189) on decent work for domestic workers. Analysing a series of demonstrations staged from 2009 onwards, this article argues that the use of elements of a housemaid's uniform as a costume within a contentious politics of presence has helped keep domestic worker rights on the political agenda, fashioned workers into activists and created a collective history and new identity for Indonesia's domestic workers as members of an emergent domestic worker class.

**Keywords:** Indonesia, PRT, *pembantu*, domestic workers, uniform, costume, ILO Convention 189, JALA PRT, demonstrations, politics of dress

On a humid Friday evening in November 2016, twelve or so women were gathered in a tiny one-bedroom house in a densely packed neighbourhood in south Jakarta. They were domestic workers, often referred to in Indonesia as “household helpers” or *pembantu rumah tangga*, usually shortened to the simpler *pembantu* or “PRT”. For themselves, they preferred the term worker – *pekerja* – to *pembantu*: as workers they could be seen as contributing to Indonesia's economy and claim employment rights. That evening the focus for discussion was the minimum wage.

Already interested in domestic worker demonstrations, I asked some of the attendees about their experiences of joining street action coordinated by the National Network for Domestic Worker Advocacy, JALA PRT. One group member, unknowingly sowing the seeds of this article, spoke of the movement's creative use of costumes and props. As did many other activists I interviewed, she mentioned the red or blue checked cotton napkins or *serbet* that

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PRT protesters and their allies wore tied as headscarves as a visual marker of JALA's political identity. "We feel proud to wear the *serbet*, not embarrassed, it feels like a professional uniform", she said.<sup>1</sup>

One might anticipate embarrassment at putting a *serbet* on one's head. The "kitchen cloth" or *serbet dapur* was, after all, an item used by millions of Indonesians every day for dusting, drying dishes or wiping up spills. However, it was also instantly recognisable, I was told, as the badge of a "helper" because of its regular appearance in a popular TV comedy featuring a male domestic worker often seen with a *serbet* worn over his shoulder or in his pocket.<sup>2</sup> Cheap and easy to hand out to protesters, when combined with an apron and worn during demonstrations, the *serbet* became a conspicuous element of a stereotypical "maid's uniform", catching the public eye. Answering journalists' questions about its use provided an opportunity for Lita Anggraini – JALA's national coordinator since its formation in 2004 – and other spokespersons to explain that the *serbet* is one of the PRT's "tools of the trade", thus highlighting their core message that domestic work stands equal to, and is "as noble as", other occupations (Saragih 2010).

This article tells the hitherto overlooked story of the use of dress and performance to advance claims for the legal protection of domestic workers in Indonesia. In 2008 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) began consulting member states on a possible Domestic Workers Convention. Between 2009 and 2015, buoyed by this decision and the adoption of the convention (C189) in June 2011, JALA and its allies staged a series of demonstrations in Jakarta and other large cities.<sup>3</sup> By examining the politics and changing semiotics of dress as evident in this campaign, I move away from analyses of uniform as a signifier of gendered technologies of servitude (Rudnycky 2004). Instead, I focus on dress as a symbol of resistance and empowerment and as an aspect of identity formation. Worn in the square, street and parliamentary precinct – spaces crucial in the "micro-dynamics" of contentious politics – domestic worker outfits and accoutrements contributed to the production and projection of PRT as "activist citizens" willing to "make a scene" (Isin 2009: 379, Ataç et al. 2016: 536). Based on a discursive analysis of a selection of photographs, associated texts and the comments of participants collected during a larger PhD research project, I argue that the movement's use of "uniform" represented more than

1 Fieldnote, Jakarta, 12 February 2016.

2 Interview with domestic worker union member, Yogyakarta, 24 February 2016.

3 States ratifying C189 must protect the basic rights, and fundamental employment rights, of anyone doing domestic work in "an employment relationship". Such workers should enjoy fair conditions commensurate with those of other workers in relation to contracts, working hours, overtime, rest periods, the minimum wage, social security/maternity benefits, annual leave, health and safety and access to dispute resolution. Special provisions should guarantee workers one day off a week, protect against discrimination, violence or harassment, and enable participation in collective bargaining. Regulations should govern the employment of children and live-in workers, in-kind benefits, registration of employment agencies and repatriation for migrant workers (ILO 2011a). On 14 June 2011, two days before the vote on the Convention, Indonesia's then-president pledged his nation's support (ILO 2011b).

a reshaping of helpers into modern professionals. Rather, by using uniform as costume, the movement created its own version of “style activism” (Tulloch 2019), promoted its agendas and contributed to the creation of a collective history and new identity for Indonesia’s PRT as members of an emerging, transnational, domestic worker class.

In connecting costume and class formation, I draw on Rina Agarwala’s analysis of the emergence of distinct patterns of organisation amongst informal workers – those outside standard employment relationships whose pay and conditions are generally unregulated. Providing cheap, flexible labour, these workers underpin capital accumulation and the reproduction of labour, thus occupying a crucial position in contemporary class structures. Often excluded from strike or collective bargaining mechanisms, members of this class are winning concessions by associating their demands with broader causes such as women’s or human rights (Agarwala 2013: 7–10). By staging non-violent protests or “public dramas” directed towards the state as much as against employers, informal workers also assert their rights as national or global citizens (Chun / Agarwala 2016: 641–44). Similarly, Stefan Rother (2017), discussing migrant domestic worker activism in Hong Kong, identifies a performance element in class formation. Workers there have directed class protests – such as their challenge to salary deductions – towards their home governments, chanting demands in front of consulate offices. Demonstrating alongside migrants from different countries, domestic workers began to envision themselves as members of an “emerging” but distinctly “transnational” class (Rother 2017: 970). Building on these insights, this article asks whether, and how, costume uniforms used as part of public performances and protests inside Indonesia have served as sartorial shorthand, announcing the arrival of a new kind of PRT – a domestic worker with demands.

In what follows, after a short overview of the work of JALA PRT and a brief discussion of uniforms and social status in general in Indonesia, I examine the movement’s use of costume and props as illustrated in a selection of photographs taken at some of the thirty street protests and performances I found evidence of staged between 2009 and 2015.<sup>4</sup> Analysing costume chronologically, I suggest, reveals how demonstrations created a disruptive assemblage of the female domestic worker and offered the PRT new ways of imagining themselves.

4 Materials were collected using the internet search terms *unjuk rasa pekerja rumah tangga* (“demonstration of domestic workers”) and *mogok makan PRT* (“domestic workers’ hunger strike”) as starting points.

## JALA PRT – Empowering domestic workers

The staging of protests has been but one part of what I have described elsewhere as JALA PRT’s “feminist politics of presence” (Austin 2020). JALA first appeared on the political scene in 2004, when activists from domestic worker organisations joined with prominent feminist, women’s and children’s rights NGOs and legal aid foundations to create a loose network. Network members agreed to cooperate to advance domestic workers’ rights. From its beginnings in 1995 in Yogyakarta as a small NGO named Rumpun Tjoet Njak Dien (RTND) after one of Indonesia’s nationalist heroines, and with its roots in the feminist and student activism that mushroomed on university campuses in the late 1980s, JALA activists have analysed the exploitation and abuse of domestic workers in terms of gender injustice, class and the legacies of slavery and feudalism (RTND 2008). Its mission has been remarkably consistent. Determined to bring domestic worker issues into the public domain, activists have sought to establish a presence in neighbourhoods (and more recently in apartment blocks) through fostering domestic worker organisations and unions and running domestic worker schools.

The present coordinator, Lita Anggraini (who was sent by her parents to Gadjah Mada university with the expectation of becoming a diplomat or civil servant but who became a feminist and started working with PRT after hearing details of a case of violent abuse in East Java), was involved in the opening of the first of these schools in Yogyakarta in 2003. At that time, Anggraini was working with RTND. She continued to do so after JALA was established, later moving to Jakarta and setting up domestic worker schools there. Now renamed “Schools of Insight”, JALA’s model of domestic worker education has been lauded by the ILO as an example of best practice (ILO 2018a).

While the curriculum has changed over time, core principles have remained: teaching should build on PRT experiences and promulgate gender equality. Classes aim to enhance PRT life and vocational skills on the one hand, and to build organising, negotiating, campaigning, lobbying and leadership skills on the other, so that PRT can change their conditions and challenge embedded cultures of deference (JALA PRT/ILO-PROMOTE 2017). Indeed, one of my last meetings with Lita Anggraini was at a large expatriate house in South Jakarta one Sunday in late 2016 when she stood in front of almost a hundred newly enrolled members of the Jakarta-based Sapu Lidi domestic workers’ union, explaining employment rights.

Presence in communities was a precursor to presence on the streets. As one organiser put it, “before you get PRT going on demonstrations, first you must educate them about human rights and women’s rights so they understand why there’s going to be a protest or march”.<sup>5</sup> Another explained: “When there’s going

5 Interview with an activist/teacher at domestic worker school, Yogyakarta, 25 February 2016.

to be an *aksi* [demonstration] I choose two or three potential activists to join us [...] it's a big thing [...] if they choose for themselves, that helps us develop them into activists for the future.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, if they joined a local group, individuals were taught to negotiate work contracts and resolve disputes with employers; in extremis, with the help of legal aid organisations in the JALA network, they could take employers to court.

Case-based knowledge provided the evidence JALA needed to make its presence felt in policymaking through advocacy, legal drafting, lobbying and research. Foregrounding workers' voices, activists have used the press, radio, TV, magazine advertising, theatre, social media and, most recently, online seminars to counter stereotypes of PRT as either poorly-educated, submissive but gratefully dependent quasi-kin or as potential thieves prone to sexual promiscuity (Austin 2017). A key strategy has been building alliances, initially with women's rights, human rights and children's rights NGOs and subsequently with unions. As one founding member told me, “the more organisations that can join JALA, the more powerful it can be”.<sup>7</sup>

From 2006 onwards, when Lita Anggraini and Susi Apriyani (then chair of Indonesia's first domestic worker trade union) attended the inaugural international meeting of domestic worker activists in Amsterdam, JALA has maintained a high profile in what is now the International Domestic Workers Federation as well as with the ILO. International pressure, insider contacts, demonstrations and making a lot of noise, I was told, were crucial in getting a hearing from politicians or officials. Once inside meeting rooms, however, it was knowledge accumulated through JALA's politics of presence, most notably that held by Lita Anggraini, who “could always follow up questions with all the data”, that, over time, began to change minds.<sup>8</sup>

Existing studies explain why the movement has failed so far (despite sustained efforts) to achieve its legislative goals and suggest ways forward (Eddyono et al. 2016, Gastaldi et al. 2017, Jordhus-Lier 2017).<sup>9</sup> Such analysis is pertinent. Indeed, at the time of writing, Indonesia's Parliament, the DPR (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* or “Peoples Representative Council”) was still discussing a draft law for the protection of domestic workers, or *Rancangan Undang-Undang Perlindungan PRT* (RUU PPRT). Yet pre-pandemic, there were at least 4.2 million PRT inside Indonesia, and perhaps the same number overseas – a significant share of a global total of some 60 million (ILO 2018b, Peng 2016). COVID-19

6 Interview with an organiser of neighbourhood groups for PRT, Jakarta, 27 July 2015.

7 Interview with the then director of the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice (LBH APIK), Jakarta, 31 July 2015.

8 Interviews with activists from Kalyanamitra, Solidaritas Perempuan and JALA PRT, July 2015.

9 Reasons for failure cited include: patriarchal cultures; the challenge of organising PRT; limited resources; self-interest of politicians, officials, trade unionists and activists dependent on low-paid PRT; size and complexity of the country; suspicion of feminism and Western rights-based activism; fragmentation of women's and unionist politics; Indonesia's parliamentary system and “money politics” and over-reliance on middle-class NGOs.

exposed (again) the precarity and gendered inequalities of paid domestic work: workers have been dismissed, had their hours reduced and been told to take unpaid leave. Others perforce shouldered increased workloads as employers' families spent more time at home. Some have been stigmatised as carriers of the virus (ILO 2020). The majority lack legal entitlements; in ASEAN, for example, in January 2022, only the Philippines had ratified Convention C189. Despite dire circumstances, PRT in Indonesia supported each other and challenged exclusion from emergency measures – testament to the activism, including that examined in this article, that has built class and gender solidarities over time.

## Work uniforms and status in Indonesia

My informant's pride in a "professional uniform" reflects a belief prevalent in Indonesia that work uniforms signal financial security and higher social status. After the Japanese occupation and the Indonesian revolution, when a shortage of textiles led people to resort to making clothes out of sacking, civil service uniforms served as the model par excellence of work dress as a marker of distinction (Schulte Nordtholt 1997). Rapid expansion of the civil service during President Suharto's New Order (1968–1998) meant that tailored khaki jackets with trademark civil service buttons and the blue batik shirts worn by civil servants for formal occasions became familiar sights. These uniforms embodied state-promoted values of modernity, discipline and order, and marked the attainment of middle-class respectability (Moser 2008). Only "full-status" civil servants could wear the blue batik which came with the promise of dependents' allowances, access to loans and patronage, a pension and the possibility of making extra money through various means (Tidey 2012). Furthermore, for much of the New Order, a woman wearing civil service uniform was ascribed professional "status and authority" outside the office as well as within; her family, likewise, gained prestige (Jones 2010: 272, Minza 2014: 123).

Women employed as factory operatives or shop assistants have also valued the distinction uniform can confer. Johannes Nicholaas Warouw (2004) found that young women who had migrated to work in the industrialised area of Tangerang (situated to the west of Jakarta) took pains to appear in public in carefully laundered company outfits and relished doing so. Uniforms befitted their sense of being "official" workers, a cut above the agricultural worker, market trader or homemaker. Combined with blue jeans and fashionable footwear, factory uniforms materialised modernity and signified new-found freedoms. Furthermore, Warouw's informants described themselves as *karyawan*, a designation once reserved for those in the higher echelons of the civil service but used by the end of the New Order to denote educated and skilled employees,

rather than the more common terms for “worker” such as *buruh* or *pekerja*. Suzanne Naafs (2012: 55–56), interviewing sales assistants in West Java, reported that some (though not those brought up in religiously conservative homes) experienced their uniforms as fun: in uniform they could spend time in the lively, modern spaces of the mall without being labelled “naughty” or *nakal*. Additionally, since obtaining a sales job required a high school certificate, uniforms broadcast their wearers’ aspirational membership of the (lower) middle classes – a step up from the position of “servants, babysitters or market traders” – even though sales work was often insecure and poorly paid.

Such pleasure in a uniform stands in stark contrast to the picture presented in ethnographies detailing the experiences of Southeast Asia’s migrant domestic workers. In those descriptions, workers recall feeling humiliated and resentful at being compelled to dress in certain ways. As memorably characterised by Pei-Chia Lan in *Global Cinderellas* – and further explored by Mina Roces in this volume – some of these women exchange “deferential aprons” for more flamboyant outfits on days off as a means of empowerment (Lan 2006: 166–70). Prospective workers have had to follow strict dress codes, wear minimal make-up or cut their hair short as they undergo training corralled in “camps” en route to placements. Such regimes produce a customised, docile, and desexualised product for the marketplace (Killias 2018). While few employers in destination countries require women to wear uniforms around the house, many impose dress and hairstyle codes (Lyons 2005, Williams 2005).

Employment agencies feature images of pristinely clad uniformed workers on their websites. These project “maids” as modern professionals and promote the uniform as a first-line of defence against employers’ fears that “attractive” workers may become pregnant or arouse sexual jealousies in the home (Killias 2018). Workers, on the other hand, may accept rigid controls to keep their jobs or avoid harassment, enduring the stigma of being seen as a servant (Hierofani 2020). Some have seen dressing in uniform as akin to donning armour in a “battle” (*perjuangan*) to survive – part of “a politics of place” in which they perform the role of cheerful and competent subservience (Williams 2005: 411–12). Or, to borrow the phrase used by Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez in relation to domestic work in Europe, women have had to embrace the twin metaphors of “the mop and the smile” even while their bodies were being “inscribed” as inferior (2010: 11–12).

I found little research documenting examples of domestic workers in Indonesia being required to wear a uniform. Indeed, widely held notions of domestic workers as “one of the family” and the propensity of Indonesian families to keep PRT wages low might make the practice unlikely (Noor 2017). In Yogyakarta, a foundation that trained workers in child or elder care from the mid-1990s onwards issued them with uniforms “as guidance to employers” – an indication that uniforms were not commonly worn (Muryanti et al. 2015).

Gina Nasution, researching in Jakarta in 2015, noted a growing presence of uniformed “babysitters” wearing white, nursing-type outfits in airports, shopping, malls and at school gates. Workers were divided about uniforms: some spoke of them with pride, comparing themselves to civil servants, further up the hierarchy than untrained childminders and PRT. Others felt uniforms denoted subservience and marked them in public as working class – still “domestic workers” despite their aspirational goals (Nasution 2020: 67–68).

Uniforms, in these readings, signified transaction and transformation. Susan Hardy and Anthony Corones (2017) suggest a similar duality in the semiotics of the white-aproned uniforms and caps that came to denote the modern, medically trained nurse across the British empire.<sup>10</sup> In return for accepting the dress codes and constraints of the training school and ward, women “purchased respectability and admission to the public sphere” (ibid.: 541). At the same time, uniforms were transformational. Projecting nurses as professional, disciplined, respectable and trustworthy, uniforms shaped the gaze and behaviour of patients and the public. Nursing uniforms were character-forming in an interior sense as well: as they donned their uniforms, nurses practised and internalised new individual and collective identities. Moreover, the shared sartorial resistance to outworn embodied identities which later led to the “shift to scrubs for nursing wear” (ibid.: 545–46) engendered camaraderie, an analysis that illuminates exactly certain aspects of JALA PRT’s use of domestic worker dress.

However, the uniforms that PRT donned for demonstrations in Jakarta were not what they wore to work every day. As protesters they were, to use a distinction drawn by performance scholar Andy Lavender, “costumed”, but not “uniformed” – they used dress to theatricalise their demands and draw attention to the “back story” or “intertextuality” that costumes bring (2019: 9–10). In the following analysis of three stages of JALA’s campaigning, therefore, I consider the language and ideas expressed on placards, in press releases, in interviews and in the use of objects as accoutrements, as well as shifts in the styling of dress.

## **Fashioning a PRT street style: 2009–2011**

On 15 February 2009, 14 February 2010, and again on 14 February 2011, JALA and its allies staged demonstrations to publicise a date they had designated as “National Domestic Workers Day”. Events were held in several cities but those in Jakarta were widely reported and are therefore the focus here. At these protests activists used elements of a “maid’s uniform” to establish a strong

<sup>10</sup> Photographs show Javanese trainee nurses in the Dutch East Indies wearing similar long white aprons over cotton dresses (Hesselink 2015: 149, 161).



visual presence and media-savvy activist street style that positioned PRT as belonging to the family of the nation and as worthy of legal protection, with overseas workers feted as economic heroines. Utilising iconic locations, these events incorporated the positive values inherent in the trope of the uniformed worker and added legitimacy through association with Indonesia's protest traditions.

JALA had chosen 15 February in commemoration of the death of a fourteen-year-old child domestic worker named Sunarsih in 2001. Working in a household in Surabaya (the provincial capital of East Java), Sunarsih had been subject to sustained abuse: shockingly, the employer, who had a history of violence towards PRT, received a mere two-year prison sentence (Sheppard 2009: 16). PRT in East Java and Yogyakarta had been holding rallies on or around 15 February since 2007, but in 2009 activists seized the opportunity offered by consultations surrounding an ILO convention to demonstrate in the capital. Establishing a pattern of annual remembrances reflected a tradition associated with Marsinah, the young woman factory worker infamously tortured, raped and murdered in East Java in 1993 while taking a leading role in industrial action (Weix 2002). The Marsinah case had become a national scandal; for Lita Anggraini, speaking to assembled journalists, abuse and underpayment of PRT was similarly scandalous – “our problem” she averred – since “so many Indonesian families” employ domestic workers in their homes (Sabarini 2009).

### “We are workers” – National Domestic Workers Day 2009

JALA chose one of Jakarta's most iconic locations, the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout, for the 2009 Domestic Workers Day demonstration. Constructed by President Sukarno when Indonesia hosted the Asian Games in 1962 and used by President Suharto for state-sponsored celebrations, the roundabout had been the site of some of the huge student-led pro-democracy demonstrations of May 1998 that led to Suharto's downfall. With fountains, trees, iconic buildings and the unmistakable “Welcome Monument” as backdrop, the site presented photojournalists the opportunity to catch a quick story and shoot arresting pictures of even small-scale protests (Padawangi 2013: 858). For women's rights activists, the roundabout had additional resonance as the place of the feminist-led “Voice of Concerned Mothers” (*Suara Ibu Peduli*) or SIP demonstration staged in February 1998, the first of the protests presaging the end of authoritarian rule. That demonstration won extensive media coverage and public sympathy through its strategic emphasis on motherhood and the domestic sphere and its deployment of peaceful performative elements such as the reciting of prayers or distribution of flowers and milk powder to motorists and passers-by (Arivia / Subono 2017: 16–19).

National Domestic Workers Day 2009 likewise focused on peaceful performativity. Around one hundred PRT and 200 supporters were reported to



Figure 1: Women from the Women's School in Ciliwung, South Jakarta, lined up at the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout, 15 February 2009 (photo by JALA PRT / Azizh J. P.)



Figure 2: National Domestic Workers Day 2009 (photo by JALA PRT / Azizh J. P.)

have attended (Sabarini 2009). In press releases and interviews Lita Anggraini presented the protesters' demands. They wanted the government to declare 15 February an official holiday for PRT and guarantee domestic workers one day off a week. They wanted Parliament to resume debate on the draft Domestic Workers Bill that JALA had promoted for discussion in 2004. Lastly, they urged the public and employers to view PRT as essential workers entitled to state protection from workplace abuse. During the event, PRT posed for photographs, gave speeches, paraded around the roundabout with giant painted placards and banners, read stories of abuse and performed a play about the life of a PRT. Throughout, PRT handed leaflets to motorists who slowed down to watch the scene.

However, by 2009, some Jakarta residents were inured to the sight of daily demonstrations (Padawangi 2013: 859). Given the logistics of assembling PRT and supporters from across and beyond the capital (some came from Yogyakarta), the protest needed to appear novel and make a splash. Figure 1 shows one way that organisers ensured high visibility. A group of protesters, wearing a politicised maid's uniforms as costumes, stand at the kerbside, their bodies open to public view.

Passers-by, one might imagine, could hardly miss the crimson lettering on the brilliant white aprons. A second photograph, published by the *Tempo* magazine but not reproduced here, indicates that eighteen women made up the line and that the letters spelt out *15 Pebruari Hari PRT* (15 February Domestic Workers Day).<sup>11</sup> "Fashioned as activists" (Roces 2012: 144), all the women wear the apron and some the *serbet* headscarf, itself an eye-catching item that was familiar,

<sup>11</sup> The photograph can be viewed at <https://www.datatempo.co/foto/detail/P1602200900098/unjuk-rasa-jaringan-nasional-advokasi-prt> (accessed 2 May 2022).

yet out of place on the street. Seeing PRT bodies assembled at the roundabout was likely to jolt the senses – domestic workers were not expected, after all, to move much beyond their employers’ backyards, let alone show political agency (Amnesty International 2007: 26, 40).

Yet, apart from their outfits, the women appear quite ordinary. Described as *ibu ibu* (mothers), they were members of a Women’s School established in 2003 in a poor and densely packed neighbourhood on the banks of Jakarta’s polluted River Ciliwung. Few women living there had completed high school and many worked as PRT. A feminist NGO, Kapal Perempuan, whose founder had been a close student friend of Lita Anggraini and was a life-long supporter of JALA, had established the school in 2003 – hence its involvement in this protest.<sup>12</sup> The women’s sparkling outfits metaphorically brought them, and the hitherto hidden bodies of other PRT, to light. Modest napkin-headscarves (or other headgear including the fitted Islamic *jabab*) tied over pulled-back hair and enveloping aprons repudiated any resemblances to “Inem the sexy maid”, eponymous heroine of an ever-popular Indonesian film. Rather, the image is of modest, hardworking but vulnerable women, more akin to housemaids or nurses than traditional PRT, who might wear old clothes to work as a rule. On what seems to have been its first appearance (I found no photographs depicting a maid’s uniform prior to this event), the professionalism of a white uniform was interposed with the heroic, sacrificial red of Indonesia’s flag, emphasising that PRT belong to the family of the nation.

Taken at the same event, the photograph in Figure 2 illustrates how even a single element of the maid’s costume, the *serbet* headscarf, helped PRT visualise themselves and be seen by others as workers and citizens with the right to speak. The speaker in Figure 2 was a longstanding member of Indonesia’s first domestic worker union, travelled from Yogyakarta for the occasion. Her *serbet* signals her PRT status, her possession of the megaphone, legitimacy. Doreen Lee (2016: 82) suggests that *orasi* (“speeches”) constituted the “symbolic and physical centre” of Indonesian protest traditions. If customarily, union leaders monopolised megaphones (Juliawan 2011: 359), here a PRT takes the stand. In terms of public perceptions, a PRT appears as an activist. In terms of workers’ self-regard, she models political participation. Behind her, a group of young male unionists watch on. Their comic painted placards castigate unscrupulous and abusive employers (*majikan*). On stage, speakers pursued the *pekerja* (worker) theme. One exchange went as follows:

Activist: Who calls themselves *pembantu* [“helper”] here?

Crowd: We should stop calling ourselves *pembantu*. We are workers!

12 Yanti Muchtar died aged 53 in November 2015. A feminist activist since the 1980s, she was also a co-founder of another well-known feminist group Solidaritas Perempuan. Both organisations continue to support the domestic workers’ campaign.

The two elements of the maid's uniform used in 2009 – the red and white apron and the *serbet* headscarf – created eye-catching and memorable images of PRT as both vulnerable victims and political activists. The costumes helped secure media coverage: reporters noted the surprisingly large numbers present, the novel use of aprons, *serbet* and kitchen utensils, made reference to Sunarsih, and described motorists showing support. Though there was no overnight success, Indonesia's Parliament restarted work on the Domestic Workers Bill that had lain dormant since 2004 and placed the RUU PPRT on its list of legislation for 2010.

### PRT as national heroine – a Love Napkin and Domestic Workers Day 2010

In 2010, National Domestic Workers Day was held in Proclamation Park in central Jakarta, the site of Indonesia's declaration of independence from the Dutch in August 1945. The location lent itself to a new leitmotif – that of the PRT as a national heroine, on a par with migrant domestic workers feted by governments as economic heroes for sending valuable remittances home. Protesters added to their existing claims the demand that the government support an ILO convention, and once again around 300 people attended, of whom perhaps 100 were PRT or returned migrant domestic workers (Saherman 2010).

This time the day had a degree of official blessing, however. Organised and sponsored by the ILO in conjunction with a new coalition of NGOs and unions (with JALA at its core) that included the influential group Migrant Care, proceedings were opened by the deputy minister for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (if not by the Minister herself, as billed). Well-known actor and rising politician Reike Diah Pitaloka attended in her role of goodwill ambassador for Indonesia's migrant workers. Prior to the opening, supporters had assembled at the National Monument, Monas, and marched to the park. The programme included prayers, speeches by officials and workers, the parading of a giant four-metre-tall cut-out PRT doll, and, as the highpoint of the event, the sewing together of 1000 napkins gathered from across the archipelago into a *Serbet Cinta*, or Love Napkin PRT. Linking the Love Napkin with the date of the protest (Valentine's Day), Lita Anggraini expressed hope that the performance would evince "love and concern" and build "solidarity and appreciation" with and for PRT (Kompas 2010). Finally, lunches were provided, after which some PRT travelled to the Hotel Indonesia roundabout to unfurl the *Serbet Cinta* there (ILO 2010).

Figure 3 shows the uniform outfits provided for some 50 of the PRT attending. Each has a neat tied-back hairstyle and a *serbet* headscarf, almost all wear an official white PRT T-shirt, and a few sport a colourful apron in orange – the signature shade adopted by JALA for its logo, website and publicity materials.



Figure 3: National Domestic Workers Day, 14 February 2010 (photo by Herman Saherman)



Figure 4: Sewing the giant napkin together, 14 February 2010 (photo by Herman Saherman)

Gathered as a homogenous group, the PRT resembled the millions of female factory workers already acknowledged as vital members of the nation's workforce. Lined up in front of the monumental statues of the nation's founding fathers, Sukarno and Hatta, the PRT appear as a disciplined army ready to do the nation's bidding. Indeed, the banner propped against the plaque bearing the words of Indonesia's Declaration of Independence depicts a multi-armed PRT brandishing household tools, evoking stock images of the brave young Indonesian warriors, armed only with sharpened bamboo sticks, who were enlisted to fight against the Dutch between 1945 and 1949.

Such images were likely to have been familiar to all present (Strassler 2006: 58). The style of those revolutionary heroes, including the way they tied red and white bandanas around their heads to show their allegiance, had been adopted by the student protesters of the 1990s, armed only with "provocative words and appearance" (Lee 2016: 91–94). Indeed, the speaker holding the microphone in Figure 3 has tied her *serbet* bandana style, her stance echoing that on the banner beside her. Her presence embodied JALA's claims that promises of equality and social justice for all made in 1945 have yet to be fulfilled for Indonesia's PRT.

As in 2009, red lettering played a role. The finished "Love Napkin", a section of which is shown in Figure 4, was covered with huge red capitals spelling out the movement's demands. Like the bandanas, the blood-red writing situated PRT as heirs to the "political and chromatic redness" of protests staged at the beginning of Reformasi (Lee 2016: 86–87). The colour emphasised the PRT as citizens, entitled to the state's protection under the red and white of Indonesia's flag. Used on an apron, comic placard or giant "Love Napkin", red lettering broadcast contentious messages in intriguing ways.

In their white T-shirts and spotless headscarves, the PRT at the 2010 protest also resembled overseas migrant workers often depicted in uniform on agency websites (Killias 2018). Yet these demo T-shirts bore the ILO wreath, not logos of "maid supply" companies. Participating in what performance scholar Rachel Hann describes as "a subversive event of dressing" the protesters were conducting "a conscious act of appearance" (2017:12). Standing in line or stitching the giant *serbet*, domestic workers at the 2010 protest aligned themselves with a global campaign of domestic worker resistance and empowerment while simultaneously framing their claims in terms of Indonesia's hallowed nationalist imaginaries.

### Washing lines, laundry baskets and irons – National Domestic Workers Day 2011

On 14 February 2011, a wet and grey Monday, JALA returned to the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout for National Domestic Workers Day. It was a weekday: numbers were down in comparison with previous years. Photographs on JALA's

Flickr account indicate that perhaps 40 to 50 attended.<sup>13</sup> The demonstration was organised by a new network, the Action Committee for Domestic Workers (*Komite Aksi Pekerja Rumah Tangga*), formed when one of Indonesia's largest trade union confederations agreed to lend support.<sup>14</sup> With additional resources, the staging of the event, dubbed the "100 Washing Lines" protest, was impressive. Five-foot-tall wooden drying racks hung with 100 items of clothing printed with yellow and black slogans were spaced out around the roundabout. A huge orange banner demanded a domestic worker law and ratification of ILO C189. Slogans reminded employers that they could only look smart at work and politicians that they could only "represent the people" because PRT kept their clothes clean.

Figure 5 shows the costume uniform used in 2011. Worn by the dozen or so women whose role it was to mime the washing, drying and ironing of their employers' laundry during the demonstration, and by some of the trade union supporters (mostly men) who manhandled the props, the styling was more subversive than before. Black T-shirts were topped with identical white aprons edged in blue and adorned with pin-on badges featuring a tiny orange T-shirt proclaiming "*PRT=pekerja*" (worker). The aprons were printed with loud black and yellow slogans demanding "*Wudjukan UU PRT!*" (Pass the Domestic Workers Bill!). The exclamation mark and colouring conveyed urgency. The PRT had white-painted faces; some wore the *serbet* headscarf as well. White faces and washing lines are part of Indonesia's performance and protest traditions, conjuring the clown servants (*punawakan*) of Javanese theatre regarded in post-Suharto Indonesia as embodying the "honesty and [...] wisdom" of the common man (Pausacker 2004: 219). *Punawakan* had permission, appropriated here by the PRT Action Committee, to criticise their betters in the interests of the common good.

The performance was enlivened by colourful props – pink and blue laundry baskets, flowery ironing boards, orange irons, washtubs and scrubbing brushes. Along with *serbet* and aprons, these caught the attention of passers-by and motorists, but this time it was the pantomime element and pointed messaging that the media commented upon. Indeed, the PRT who participated won admiration for continuing their performance despite the drizzle (see, for example Detik News 2011). The 2011 protest helped engineer change. The parliamentary committee tasked with progressing the bill had halted work (for reasons unknown) in the middle of 2010 (Eddyono 2016: 80). The Washing Lines protest, a citizen's lawsuit<sup>15</sup> and further protests during 2011 pushed Parliament

13 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/124653589@N03/14015889128/in/photostream/> (accessed 27 February 2022).

14 Interview with vice-president of the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI), Jakarta, 16 February 2016.

15 On 5 April 2011, 152 activists filed a lawsuit accusing the president, vice president and senior ministers of failing to protect the rights of domestic workers. JALA used the hearings to gain further publicity. The Central Jakarta Court rejected the lawsuit but recommended that Parliament press ahead with legislation (Eddyono 2016).



Figure 5: National Domestic Workers Day 2011, Jakarta (photo by JALA PRT)



Figure 6: The Love Napkin for domestic workers about to be raised onto the gates of Parliament, 22 November 2012 (photo by Sutradini / beritagar.id)

to establish a joint working group and produce the *naskah akademis*, the academic paper required to support any bill.<sup>16</sup> However, by early December 2011, it became clear that the DPR planned to postpone further debate. Only lobbying and a three-day protest, during which Lita Anggraini (wearing *serbet* and apron) and others chained themselves to the gates of Parliament, got the bill reinstated (da Costa 2015).

Self-interest was at play in the delaying tactics of the DPR: politicians were well known to employ “five or more” PRT in their homes even as lobby groups such as employers’ organisations claimed that the country could not afford to pay PRT the demanded minimum wage.<sup>17</sup> Parliamentarians and policy makers opposed legislation on doctrinal grounds. They saw PRT as “family members” and loyal servants, linking domestic service with traditions of service in royal palaces, a belief in the value of *gotong royong* (understood broadly as mutual assistance) and a tradition of *negneger*, a system in which children or young adults from poorer rural villages stayed with richer relatives in cities, doing domestic chores in return for their keep and, sometimes, an education. Politicians also wanted to keep the domestic sphere private (Eddyono et al. 2016: 114).

<sup>16</sup> Activists and academics could provide material for these papers which detailed the rationale for bills and set out the main issues a law needed to address. At this stage discussions were based on the draft that JALA submitted to Parliament in 2004, which precluded child labour, limited a working day to 7 or 8 hours (before overtime), gave PRT one day off a week, 12 days of holiday, maternity and menstruation leave, health insurance and the right to join unions and political parties. Standard pay should relate to regional minimum wage levels and reflect specialisations such as nanny or cook.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with activist; interview with member of DPR, Jakarta, 3 August 2015; interview with ILO official, Jakarta, 9 July 2015; interviews with union officials, Jakarta, 15 and 16 February 2016.



## 100% Workers and a giant toilet for Parliament – politics and protests 2012–2015

Faced with intransigence, JALA sought new allies. As the ILO expected mainstream labour unions to support ratification of Convention C189, two further union confederations, along with a group of NGOs opposing child labour and a prominent migrant workers' union, joined the Action Committee, renaming it the “Action Committee for the Protection of Domestic Workers and Migrant Workers” or KAPPRT-BM (*Komite Aksi Perlindungan Pekerja Rumah Tangga-Buruh Migran*).<sup>18</sup> Mounting a succession of protests from 2012 onwards, KAPPRT-BM showcased and schooled PRT as worker-activists, with some protests planned well in advance, such as one held outside the Presidential Palace on 18 December 2012, International Migrants Day, or another at the manpower ministry on 16 June 2014 marking International Domestic Workers Day. Others were in response to delays in the progress of the RUU PPRT through Parliament. Claims were directed to politicians, increasingly portrayed in protests as obstructionist and quite likely corrupt. The use of costumes and props, likewise, became more adversarial.

Two demonstrations, the “100% Workers Protest” and the “Giant Toilet and Broom Protest” illustrate how costume and props were used at this stage. Figure 6, a photograph taken at the first of these events, staged outside Parliament on 22 November 2012, illustrates how organisers used costumes to maximise the aesthetic and political potential of the chosen location. The wording on the improvised apron of the PRT shown in the picture reads as follows:

*Dibalik* (behind): *Pakaian bersih* (clean clothes), *Makanan tersaji* (prepared meals), *Rumah rapi & bersih* (clean and tidy house), *Anak terawat* (well-cared for children), *Halaman bersih* (clean yard).

Underneath these words, an arrow pointed to the acronym “PRT”.

The image captures a moment when a costumed PRT ran towards the high metal gates of the DPR. Five male trade unionists, two wearing *serbet* headscarves, are silhouetted atop the railings while protesters below raise the Love Napkin (the one created in 2010), its red-scrawled messages re-inscribed. In a theatrically contentious manner, PRT claimed “ownership” of the DPR as the “House of the People”, a familiar refrain in post-1998 labour protests (Juliawan 2011). Red is the dominant hue, as it was during Reformasi (the period leading up to and following the end of the New Order) when the “Sukarno red” of Indonesia’s flag and the colours of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle stirred “leftist and populist sympathies” (Lee 2016: 14). Then, students had climbed the gates of the University of Indonesia’s campus and later, in their thousands, occupied parliament for five days. Now, PRT supporters stormed

18 Interview, head of Trade Union Research Centre, Jakarta, 16 February 2016.

the gates of parliament symbolically, thus positioning PRT as heirs to that pro-democracy movement.

As shown in Figure 6, the aprons used at the 100% Workers protest were made of paper, not fabric as in earlier protests. With cut-out necklines and without strings, the aprons hung freely over the protesters' bodies. A second snapshot taken the same day (not shown for reasons of space) depicts at least ten PRT wearing these aprons over jeans and T-shirts, their bodies metaphorically freed, one might argue, from apron strings tying them to domestic duties. As some workers told me, husbands and employers could forbid them from going on marches, leading them to resort to subterfuge. Others reported that initially reluctant family members had started to take pride in their political involvement and new identities.

Covered in inscriptions, paper aprons turned the bodies of the protesters into billboards. Some read "*PRT 100% Pekerja*" (PRT 100% workers). Others urged the president and members of Parliament to ratify ILO convention C189. The message on the back of the demonstrator in Figure 6 picks up a popular political catchword – *bersih*, meaning "clean". It reminds politicians that behind their clean clothes, tasty meals, clean and tidy houses, well-groomed children and swept yards stands a PRT lacking legal protection. With a genealogy dating back to anti-colonial nationalism, slogans handwritten in capitals conveyed authenticity (Strassler 2020: 175, 179). Paired with a napkin headscarf, the apron still signified "maid", but, as some PRT raised clenched fists for the press, the colour, style, gesture and rhetoric co-produced a character-forming visual imaginary of the PRT as empowered worker-activist.

In 2013, after public consultations and a study visit to South Africa and Argentina, the relevant committee of the DPR proposed its own version of the Bill for Parliament as a whole to consider. Although JALA PRT and KAPPRT-BM believed that this new version contained only 60% of their original proposals – compromising on matters such as wages, working hours, social security and child domestic work – they pushed for its passage while continuing to lobby for changes (JALA PRT 2015). Even this scaled down Bill, however, was not assured.

When I bade farewell to Lita Anggraini in September 2014, after a period of fieldwork, she told me to look out for news of a protest that would be "spectacular". Since the revised Bill had not been passed before the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2014, activists planned to present new and returning members of Parliament with a symbolic gift or *kado* on the day of the Parliament's inauguration to ensure that PRT claims were not forgotten. First a giant polystyrene toilet and broom were paraded along the highway by a group of unionists from KAPPRT-BM followed by domestic workers and activists, and then around 50 protesters gathered at the gates of Parliament for speeches and photographs. Judging from the photographs, PRT themselves, half hidden



Figure 7: Greeting the new Parliament with a giant toilet, 1 October 2014 (photo by JALA PRT)

behind the large red banner, were few in number; the focus was on the symbolism – and media appeal – of the giant toilet and broom. The phrase “Stop Slavery Towards PRT” (*Stop perbudakan thd PRT*) inscribed on the toilet was contentious, as was the wording of Anggraini’s press release, which explained:

The giant toilet symbolizes the need for the DPR to throw out any dirt such as corruption, collusion or nepotism (KKN), bribery, slavery, abuse of authority, as well as extortion that may be performed by members of the House. The giant broom is a tool for parliament to clean up all its obligations. (Wulandari 2014: 1)

Chief amongst the obligations of newly elected parliamentarians (referred to as the “*DPR Baru*” on the banner in Figure 7), from JALA’s perspective, was to pass the long-promised RUU PPRT. To return to Agarwala’s analysis of class formation amongst informal workers, here the movement associates its claims with the wider cause of anti-corruption, tapping into populist disappointment with post-1998 politics. The giant toilet and broom point to the self-interest and corruption of politicians; dirt in the system was blocking the PRT bill. Trade union flags and the large red banner carrying the names of JALA’s three partner union confederations conveyed the message that PRT were accepted members of Indonesia’s organised labour movement, marking another transition point in the emergence of an Indonesian domestic worker class.

Spectacle was achieved; the giant toilet, broom and array of pots, pans and brushes foregrounded in Figure 7 garnered plentiful press coverage. Costumes had changed again. Few, apart from the female orator, wear improvised aprons. Instead a contentious tone is set by *serbet* headscarves tied bandana- or commando-style and the red and white banner, a tone adopted by a reporter who described Lita Anggraini as “field coordinator” or *koordinator lapangan*, a term that had

been part of the “militarized taxonomy” of Reformasi (Hiz 2014, Lee 2016: 75). While in earlier demonstrations the costume uniforms had been gendered female, here male figures wearing the *serbet* are also foregrounded. The *serbet* has become a synecdochal sign for a maid’s uniform – and, in turn, for the movement as a whole.

## Hunger strikes: 2014 and 2015

A few weeks later, on 24 November 2014, five women – Lek Jumiye, Sargini, Haryati and Ririn Sulastri, established PRT organisers from Yogyakarta, together with Lita Anggraini – chained themselves to the gates of Indonesia’s Parliament in Jakarta and began a hunger strike. This was an act of desperation, fuelled by feelings of betrayal. On 1 May 2014, at the beginning of his successful presidential election campaign, Joko Widodo, then Governor of Jakarta, had met with PRT activists and seemingly promised his support.<sup>19</sup> Other parliamentary candidates also made pledges. Yet by mid-November 2014, there was no sign of ministerial or parliamentary engagement. Parliamentary business was at a standstill. This political vacuum created an opportunity for PRT to press their case. The situation was urgent. The strikers said they would continue fasting until they had a statement from Parliament that the 2013 Bill would be on the priority list for discussion in 2015, debated during 2015 and passed by the end of the parliamentary term. They also demanded that Indonesia ratify C189.

The strike was supported by 45 women’s and civil society organisations affiliated with JALA PRT and seven others, including three overseas groups. There were plans to stage “cultural and public speeches, photo exhibitions, film screenings, monologues, poetry readings, discussions and musical performances” while the strike was in progress (IDWFED 2014). During the strike, other PRT and activists stood by in support while the hunger strikers posed for photographs and made speeches. Friends from legal aid associations and others with good connections in Parliament lobbied behind the scenes to win a hearing with the National Legislative Committee.

Class-inflected politics shaped pre-event publicity. Co-curated by JALA, KAPPRT-BM and the Urban Poor Consortium (UPC), circulars set a tone of enraged militancy. One flyer portrayed the profile of a dynamic woman set against a red background, shouting into a black megaphone. Another featured a bright orange apron embellished with a spoon and fork arranged hammer-and-sickle style. The logo of the Urban Poor Consortium and that of its Jakarta offshoot, the Urban Poor Network, were printed on publicity materials. These logos linked JALA’s demands with a vision of the urban poor (including domestic

19 Interview with Lita Anggraini, 27 August 2014.



Figure 8: Domestic Workers on Hunger Strike Demonstration urging the deliberation of the Domestic Workers Law (photo by Hukumonline, Cr. 17)

workers) as a “coherent group or class” with rights to the city and the potential to challenge clientelist politics (Wilson 2019: 105).

Nonetheless, clamouring aprons and motifs were downplayed in the way the strikers wore their “housemaids’ uniforms” (Figure 8). Orange aprons did feature, half hidden under improvised white ones. While Figure 8 shows the hunger strikers collapsed, exhausted, against the railings, other photographs show them standing with clenched fists raised, chained to the gates like the early suffragettes, wielding the megaphone or standing in line with other similarly clad supporters.<sup>20</sup> The militant tone was offset, however, by neat *serbet* headscarves, in two cases worn over white hijabs, material evidence that pious and feminist agency can coexist (Rinaldo 2013: 195). Posing for photographers, the strikers smiled, rehearsed speeches nervously, stood stoically in the rain and, as shown in Figure 8, leaned, exhausted, against the gates of the DPR. Framed by snapshots of PRT victims of abuse pegged up like washing, this political dramaturgy brought to mind the fellow-workers for whom the privations of the hunger strike were being endured.

Lita Anggraini dressed differently. Her black T-shirt and beige trousers drew the eye less than the orange and white costumes of the PRT. Just as Annie Kenney, a factory worker in the mills of Lancashire from the age of ten, brought

<sup>20</sup> Suffragettes fought for votes for women in the UK between 2006 and 2014. Known for their mass rallies, fashionable attire, trademark colours of purple, white and green and their motto “Deeds not words”, they smashed shop windows and set fires. In London, they chained themselves to the railings outside Parliament, outside the Prime Minister’s residence and at government offices. Many were imprisoned for their militancy and went on hunger strike when the authorities refused them the status of political prisoner.

authenticity to suffragette claims to represent all women when she wore her clogs and shawl (Jenkins 2019: 480–85), so did restricting the “maid’s costume” to those who worked as PRT helped to characterise this protest as the workers’ own.

As such, the hunger strike holds a special place in the movement’s collective history. In 2017, the ILO published a collection of stories written by domestic workers. One of the strikers, Lek Jumiye (2017), contributed a piece entitled “The Hunger Strike and the Spirit of our Struggle” (*Mogok Makan dan Nadi Perjuangan Kami*). In it she conveys the material and affective dimensions of the strike – stinging morning air, intense humidity, heavy rain, long hours standing until sunset, fear of a fracas with police who tried to clear them from the site at nightfall and the buzz of mosquitoes that stopped them sleeping. She spoke of spirituality – prayers and lighting of candles – and the solidarity shown by fellow activists trying to communicate with MPs to get them a hearing. Spurred by the sight of the hunger strikers, a quite different group of labour protesters, there to demand increases in the minimum wage, collected donations to help pay their expenses. For Jumiye, the hunger strike was not just the routine “oration, carrying protest equipment, posters and banners” she was used to. Deeply internalised, it constituted “one act in a life drama [...] a thing never imagined” and something “we loved to live” (Jumiye 2017: 147–51).

Finally, towards the end of the second day, the strikers won a hearing with the National Legislative Body. They sat in the committee chamber in costume, secured promises of support, and called off their action, celebrating a significant victory when, on 19 January 2015, the Minister of Manpower issued a “Regulation on the Protection of Domestic Workers” (*Permenaker* No. 2 / Tahun 2015). While it did not meet all of JALA’s demands and was not legally binding, this was a step up from silenced invisibility.

The celebrations were short-lived. The Domestic Workers Bill was not on the list of priority legislation announced in February 2015. At this, activists launched a second hunger strike. Lita Anggraini began the strike on 16 February. She fasted during the day until 24 March when she and other JALA supporters won a hearing with members of the parliamentary committee responsible for the bill, who promised to promote it. Each day volunteers joined Lita, fasting for 24 hours in turn. At one point, Lita was hospitalised. Throughout the strike, JALA staged rallies at different venues, in the capital and in cities such as Semarang, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Makassar and Mataram. However, despite widespread support the bill was shelved again. In May 2015, JALA reviewed its strategy. Looking to the long term, it decided to focus on increasing the numbers and strengthening the leadership in PRT-led organisations and unions across the archipelago, building towards a domestic workers confederation, so as to have more heft (Gastaldi 2017). Nevertheless, procrastination by Parliament has continued up until today. PRT still stage street protests and join larger

events such as May Day marches or the Women’s March organised in Indonesia since 2017 – JALA being one of the groups behind that venture.

As illustrated in Figure 9, a photograph taken on 3 March 2018 at the second Jakarta Women’s March, a red or black T-shirt or sweatshirt carrying the slogan “PRT=Pekerja Rumah Tangga” (PRT = Domestic Worker) has become the go-to dress for domestic workers joining demonstrations in Jakarta. With its memorable message, the T-shirt, paired by younger women with jeans, is as much a personal and collective identity marker as a political billboard. Striking on its own, it is easily dressed up, as in Figure 9, where marchers have appropriated the woven bamboo hats familiar in rural Java but out of place in the megacity. The colourway reprises connections with protest traditions and ensures that the presence of PRT will not be missed. On social media and in publicity materials, however, JALA still uses its brand identity orange. The *serbet*, likewise, remains a key symbol, marking the movement as unique.

In dressing up, carrying pots and pans, and waving the winnowing baskets painted to carry letters making up the word *pekerja* (worker) that have been used in Yogyakarta and Jakarta on PRT demonstrations for at least ten years, the women joining this 2018 march ally themselves with history. Wearing their outfits with pride, and some with evident joy, their appearance illustrates how housemaids’ uniform-costumes have evolved into a fun, fashionable, feminist and transnational PRT activist street style.



Figure 9: JALA PRT members at the Women’s March in Jakarta in 2018 (photo by Kate Walton)

## Conclusion

This article has shown how the politics of domestic work in Indonesia have been conducted, in part, by using costume. Photographs do not tell us precisely what impact costumes had on participants or the public. Nor do they provide a full picture of events. But, I have argued, they have revealed how, in a climate of heightened “public visibility”, a subversive “housemaid’s uniform” helped secure Indonesia’s domestic workers a presence in the contested public sphere (Strassler 2020: 15–16). From this discursive space, JALA and its allies projected PRT as worthy citizens and modern professionals and kept their demands on the political agenda. The “feminine specificity” (Parkins 1997: 45) of aprons, headscarves, mops and brooms accentuated the vulnerabilities of PRT bodies while, paradoxically, showcasing an unexpected capacity for resistance.

If initially the apron and *serbet* drew attention to domestic workers’ vulnerability and accentuated the novelty of seeing PRT in a mock uniform at protests, aprons increasingly became billboards, and *serbet* served as markers of allegiance to a wider political and labour movement. Red, used on the Love Napkin, on aprons, on banners and finally for PRT T shirts, has retained its importance, linking PRT with Indonesia’s protest traditions, and, it may be, with women’s rights activists elsewhere who have taken up the red and white costumes of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. As more PRT join unions and go on marches, the printed T shirt and *serbet*, decked out with accoutrements, suffice to signal to the Jakarta public that PRT are involved. Outside the capital, as new PRT unions emerge, the *serbet* and apron, or some form of uniform top, also feature. In Semarang, East Java, on 14 December 2021, for example, PRT reinterpreted aspects of an established domestic worker street style by wearing orange over-shirts with the *serbet* to stand with their feet chained together holding placards demanding that the RUU PPRT be passed.

Archived photographs of protests continue to circulate. On 18 January 2022, for example, a nationwide broadcaster focusing on news and sports screened a programme discussing domestic workers’ dashed hopes for a domestic worker law. The programme opened with a montage that used a series of stills taken at demonstrations perhaps forgotten by viewers, with the *serbet* headscarves, aprons and printed T shirts performing their work of persuasion again (see Metro TV 2022)

Despite COVID-19, JALA PRT persuaded the DPR to include a draft domestic workers law on its list of legislation in 2021 and 2022. When, eventually, PRT and their allies celebrate its passage – and, in 2024, mark JALA’s twentieth anniversary – it seems likely that the *serbet* will feature again, completing its journey from everyday work-tool to symbol of solidarity and flag of victory.



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