

The Gender Revolution in the Philippines: Migrant Care Workers and Social Transformations

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Between 2000 and 2001, I spent 18 months in the Philippines to do research on the experiences of the children of migrant workers. There I met a 21-year-old woman Isabelle who casually told me that she has been apart from her mother for most of her life. As she explained,

[When I was seven years old,] my mom went to Malaysia first, for one to two years. Then she went to Saudi Arabia and then from Saudi Arabia, she went straight to the US [United States]. When she went to the [United States], that was the longest –10 years – that we did not see each other at all. She came back and when we saw each other, I was already 21 years old (Isabelle Tirador, Philippines).

Isabelle is a child of a migrant domestic worker, who first worked in Malaysia, then Saudi Arabia, and lastly the United States. Left in the Philippines under the care of her aunt, Isabelle has what we could call a typical and not so much an unusual childhood. In the Philippines, non-governmental organizations claim that there are approximately 9 million children growing up without at least one migrant parent. This figure represents approximately 27 percent of the overall youth population in the Philippines.

Many but not all are children of migrant domestic workers. We know their mothers work in more than 160 countries around the world, cleaning households and caring for the elderly and children in countries in East and West Asia, North America and Western

Europe. In Europe alone, we find large numbers of migrant Filipina domestic workers in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Greece. Due to the demand for migrant domestic workers in richer countries throughout the world, we are witnessing tremendous social transformation in countries such as the Philippines. The migration of women is rupturing the traditional gender division of labor in the family. Migration makes breadwinners out of women not only in the family but also the nation. The labor of women, for instance, generates the two largest sources of foreign currency in the Philippines: electronics manufacturing and international migration. Even the President of the Philippines concedes to the economic dependence of the nation on migrant labor, telling migrant workers to “stay abroad” because as she explains to them, “jobs here [in the Philippines] are difficult to find and we are depending on the people outside the country. If you can find work there, and send money to your relatives here, then perhaps you should stay there.” However, it is not just overseas workers per se but women overseas workers that the nation depends on as a source of foreign currency. In the Philippines, the number of annually deployed women workers has surpassed the number of their male counterparts since 1995. We should thus be mindful that among those who President Arroyo is summoning to “stay abroad” is the mother of Isabelle.

From the perspective of gender relations in the second country, there are two ways we could think about women’s migration. First we could see it as indicative of remarkable gender transformations. It not only leads to the greater income earning power of women and their greater contributions to the household but it also forces the redefinition of mothering. They show us that biological mothers need not be the primary caretakers of children. In other words, we could see women’s migration as a victory for

feminism. The second perspective we could take to is to view women's migration as a tragedy, one that results in the forcible separation of children such as Isabelle from their mothers. This latter view seems to be the dominant perspective in the Philippines, where the public looks at women's migration as a tragedy that leads to the suffering of children. In this view, women's migration comes to represent the status of the Philippines as an economically unstable country. It is assumed that women would not migrate and leave their children behind if they had better labor market options in the Philippines. This view bewails the separation of children from their biological mothers. As such, it inadvertently calls for a return to the nuclear family and upholds the ideology of women's domesticity.

In this lecture, I would like to make sense of why society sees the separation of children and mothers as a tragedy and not so much a victory for feminism. This is why I intentionally began this lecture with the stunning example of Isabelle. I did so not so much to call attention to her plight but instead so I could analyze society's compulsion to view her as a victim. I see the representation and experience of Isabelle as a window to the social lives of migrant domestic workers in their home society. In other words, my lecture is not so much about Isabelle but her mother. My lecture looks at the plight of migrant domestic workers not in the receiving country but in the sending country of migration. It is important that we acknowledge that, like other migrant workers, domestic workers inhabit transnational spheres. As such, the process of their labor migration involves not only their incorporation in the host society but also their negotiation of the social relations they maintain in the home society and the social transformations triggered by migration.

In the Philippines, the public views children such as Isabelle as victims who have

been abandoned by their mothers. The public dismisses women's migration as not just bad for the welfare of children such as Isabelle but dangerous to the sanctity of the family. Interestingly, the public does not disdain migrant fathers like they do migrant mothers. The prevailing view in the Philippines is: if one parent must migrate, then it is better that a father and not a mother does so. The negative view associated with women's migration seems to haunt migrant mothers not only in the Philippines, but also in many other sending countries of domestic workers including Poland and Romania. For example, a recent article in the New York Times describes the outmigration of women as a "national tragedy" that has triggered social upheaval in Romania. The article blames not only the collapse of the Romanian family but also the abandonment and delinquency of children on the migration of women.¹ In this article, the migration of mothers is said to result in severe psychological difficulties among children and even suicide for a sizeable number of them.

The goal of my lecture is to make sense of the vilification of migrant mothers in countries such as the Philippines and Romania and to understand the moral compulsion to equate their migration with the abandonment of children. After all, migrant mothers do provide for the children they have 'left behind' with monthly remittances and moreover see to the daily care of their children by other kin. The fact is women are attempting to reconstitute mothering via labor migration, but society seems to resist their efforts and insists on holding them accountable to the ideology of women's domesticity. The outcome is to naturalize mothering at the expense of the social transformations that are

¹ Dan Bifelski, "In Romania, Children Left Behind Suffer the Strains of Migration," *New York Times* (February 14, 2009). See <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/world/europe/15romania.html> [accessed on June 8, 2009].

encouraged by women's labor and migration. In this lecture, what I would like to point out is that the problems of children such as Isabelle are not so much caused by their mother's migration but instead by the resistance against the efforts of migrant mothers to redefine mothering. More specifically, the romanticization of biological mothering along with the refusal of sending societies such as Poland, the Philippines, and Romania to recognize the reconstitution of the gender division of labor in the family that is spurred by women's migration aggravates the emotional difficulties of children.

The Backlash Against Migrant Mothers

Illustrating the ideological belief that women's rightful place is in the home, headlines on May 26, 1995 from two of the largest circulating newspapers in the Philippines read, "Overseas employment a threat to Filipino families" and "Ramos says Pinay OCWs [Overseas Contract Workers] threaten Filipino families." In a speech delivered to the Department of Social Welfare the day prior to the release of these newspaper reports, the president of the Philippines Fidel Ramos had called for initiatives to keep migrant mothers at home. As President Ramos so stated, "We are not against overseas employment of Filipino women. We are against overseas employment at the cost of family solidarity..."² By calling for the return migration of mothers, President Ramos did not necessarily disregard the increasing economic dependency of the Philippines on the foreign remittances of its mostly female migrant workers. However, he did make clear that only single and childless women are those who are morally acceptable to pursue labor migration.

² Agence France Presse. 1995. "Ramos: Overseas Employment a Threat to Filipino Families." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 26 May 11/1.

Agreeing with the President's reprimand of migrant mothers is their vilification in public discourse and the media's pathological depiction of their families. In news print reports, the media often claims that the migration of women would result in the instability of family life and the use of "drugs, gambling and drinking" among children (Fernandez, 1997: 5). Without doubt, sensationalist reports on the well being of children in transnational families fuel the vilification of migrant mothers. Yet, in the course of vilifying migrant mothers, news media reports notably leave fathers free of any responsibility for the care of children. The media presumes as it implies that men are naturally incompetent caregivers of the family. Prevailing public discourse tells us that the migration of women has not reconstituted gender notions of the family. It also tells us that women suffer from a backlash against their efforts to redefine mothering.

Public discourse in the media does not disagree with mainstream views in the community concerning migrant mothers and the welfare of their families. In the course of my research, I found that many individuals feel that fathers and not mothers should be those who should migrate to economically support the family. A focus-group discussion I conducted with members of migrant families, for instance, left me stunned by the litany of depressing responses that participants gave concerning the effects of women's migration to the family. The participants said:

1. They are neglected.
2. Abandoned.
3. No one is there to watch over the children.
4. The attitudes of children change.
5. They swim in vices.

6. The values you like disappear.
7. They take on vices.
8. Men take on mistresses.
9. Like with the children, when you leave, they are still small, and when you come back, they are much older. But they do not recognize you as their real parents. And what they want, you have to follow. They get used to having a parent abroad and they are used to always having money.
10. That's true. That's true.

Interestingly, these negative sentiments were shared to me by members of the families of migrant fathers, who believe that transnational households with migrant men are more conducive to establishing a healthy family life than are the families of migrant women.

The Discourse of Abandonment

The negative view of migrant mothers in the public adversely affects the experiences of children such as Isabelle. What I found is that it not only absolves fathers of the responsibility to care for their children but it also makes it difficult for children to recognize the unorthodox ways that they receive care in light of their mother's migration. If one were to talk to children of migrant mothers, one would easily assume that they have received no care at all. They often describe their situation as one of "abandonment." One however has to read between the lines. A closer look at their situation will show that children are not abandoned and left without adequate care upon the migration of mothers. Instead what they often mean by abandonment is not the absence of day-to-day maternal care but the denial of physical intimacy from their biological mothers. Generally, children uphold biological-based views on mothering. In so doing, they believe that it is

impossible for mothers to provide care from a distance. Moreover, they assume that the work of extended kin, even including those who they call “mom,” could not adequately substitute for the nurturing acts of a biological mother.

Children often describe the care that their migrant mothers provide from a distance as “never enough.” Likewise, they insist that the care extended by other relatives could never match what they assume would just be naturally better care that their mother would have provided if she had not migrated. We see this situation in the case of Roan Leyritana, a 17-year-old son of a migrant domestic worker who has been working in the Middle East for more than 11 years. Roan grew up in a close-knit family. His aunt took an active role in his parenting – walking him to school everyday, meeting with his teachers regularly, helping him with his homework every night, and spending much quality time with him while his mother toiled as a domestic worker in Kuwait. Yet, Roan describes the care that he received from his aunt as “not enough,” even though his mother also visited him quite frequently in the Philippines. This is because Roan believes that the carework of his mother would have naturally exceeded the quality of care that his aunt could possibly provide him. Although he has yet to experience the same intensive caring acts from his mother as that which he has received from his aunt, Roan assumes that the act of walking him to school, helping him with his homework, cooking him breakfast and so on would just naturally be better performed by his mother. Roan exclaims: “What is right is for [my mother] to be by my side... The love that I received from a father and mother was not enough. I received a lot of love from my aunts and my grandmother, but that was it.”

Similarly, the affection of fathers is believed not to be interchangeable with those of mothers. For instance, a young college student Phoebe Latorre states:

I do not know if I could identify the love of my parents when I was growing up.

We should have grown up with her [i.e., the mother]. Then, she would have been the one taking care of us, of our needs.

And your father? Doesn't he live with you? Did he take care of your needs?

Sort of, but surely the way a mom takes care of you is different from the way a father does. Isn't that right?

Children often assume that the gender division of labor between mothers and fathers is natural. Fathers discipline and mothers nurture. Fathers provide financial stability and mothers ensure emotional stability. Not surprisingly, Phoebe thinks she would have had a more stable upbringing if her mother had stayed at home. This is regardless of the fact that her mother left behind an alcoholic and jobless husband to work as a domestic worker in Hong Kong; calls frequently enough to know the weekly routine of her children; and has financially supported all of her children through school.

The ideology of women's domesticity haunts the families of migrant mothers and burden women as they struggle in other countries. Mothers may economically provide for their children but not to the extent that it would free them, even if only partially, of the responsibility to nurture the family. Expressing the shortfalls of distance mothering, Marinel Clemente asserts the inadequacy of care that she received from her mother, when she states:

My mother's love was not enough. I would have wanted her next to me, so that I could feel her love. I feel it, but only a little bit. I know she loves me because she is working hard over there. She is working hard so that we could have everything we want and everything we need. Even when she is sick, she continues to work... But still, I want her to be with me here everyday. It's because since I was small it was only my grandparents showing me love. She was not here.

Children recognize the economic contributions of their mothers but they do not accept it to the extent that it would free mothers of the responsibility of nurturing their children in proximity.

Children are not likely to accept a reconstituted form of mothering, one that redefines mothering to be that of a good provider, because they tend to hold onto staunch moral beliefs regarding the family, holding in high regard the conventional nuclear family. Theresa Bascara, a daughter of a domestic worker in Hong Kong, for example describes:

...you cannot say it is a family if your mother and father are not there with you. It's like it's not a whole family if your father and mother are not here, if they are far. A family, I can say, is only whole if your father is the one working and your mother is only staying at home. It is OK if your mother is working too, but somewhere close to you, not somewhere far away.

Sentiments such as those held by Theresa illustrate the ideological stronghold of the conventional nuclear family among children of migrant mothers. This ideology is inculcated to them not only by the media and the state as we saw with the comments by

President Fidel Ramos but also by religious institutions, which I noted in the community where I did research rarely ever address the plight of transnational migrant families in their weekly services, as well as in schools, which in the state mandated Family Values course do not acknowledge the presence of transnational migrant families. Consequently, many children of migrant mothers grow up believing there are being raised in the wrong kind of family. Not surprisingly, the children of migrant mothers tend to describe their families as “broken,” which is a term often used in Philippine public discourse to refer to the ‘deficiencies’ in non-nuclear households. Yet, I wish to point out that families tend to be “broken” not because children have been abandoned in the process of women’s migration but because the migration of mothers threatens the organization of gender in society.

Absentee Fathers: Men Reject Child Care

The ideological stronghold of the nuclear family also hurts the welfare of the children of migrant mothers because it facilitates the rejection of care work by the fathers left behind in the Philippines. I found that in spite of the greater economic contributions of migrant women to the family, fathers do not increase the amount of their household responsibilities. Instead they leave it to other women – daughters, domestic workers, aunts, and grandmothers – to do the care work left behind by their wives upon migration. This situation is reminiscent of the “stalled revolution” identified by Arlie Hochschild (1989) in the 1980s among dual income earning couples in the United States. Men back then likewise did not increase their housework despite women’s greater economic contributions to the household.

We should look at the rejection of housework by men back then and today as not only a stall but also a form of protest. By rejecting women's work, fathers left behind in the Philippines do their share of gender boundary work in the family: they resist the redistribution of labor forced by women's greater economic contributions to household income and thereby help keep the conventional gender division of labor intact. However, fathers left behind do not completely turn their back on the needs of their children. Some men do care. For instance, some working class men have found themselves having to do housework as they are without resources to hire other women. In contrast, middle class men often hire domestic workers. Yet, regardless of class, if men do housework, they do not do that much. The women left behind – eldest daughters, aunts, grandmothers, and domestic workers – still do more care work than fathers.

Men's rejection of housework hurts the women in the family. Female extended kin resent the burden of care they feel obligated to perform as women. Meanwhile the education of eldest daughters often suffers due to their greater responsibilities for housework. This for instance had been the case with the earlier cited Isabelle who complained that her studies suffered since the migration of her mother. Yet, the absence of fathers is not invisible to children, including Isabelle who complained, "It's annoying. I cannot help but feel resentful... It's because my father is here but he does not care. He does not support us, especially when it comes to school." Isabelle also notes that her mother actually does a great deal more care work than does her father. As she describes: "...my mother is the one far away but she is the one who is close. It's because I think that my father is there physically but he does not care. He does not get involved with us. My mother, even if she is outside the country minds our business." However, not all children

recognize the care work of migrant mothers. More often than not they still blame their mothers for the inadequacy of their care rather than their physically present but emotionally absent fathers.

By insisting on the minimal work of men, I do not mean to imply that the institutional rearrangement of the household has not forced some men to take on certain aspects of women's work. For example, one father Lurenzo Lacuesta had to quit his job as a security guard in Manila and found himself a stay at home father upon the sudden death of his mother. Upon her death, he was suddenly saddled with the care of his 11-year-old son. The situation of Lurenzo suggests that women's migration makes the reconstitution of the gender division of labor in the family unavoidable. Yet, interestingly, Lurenzo does not think of the care he does for his son as women's work, but instead considers the work he does to be an extension of his previous duties in the military. Describing the cooking and cleaning he now must do at home, Lurenzo states: "This is just the skills I learned during my military training as a soldier. I was trained to do this work as a soldier." We can imagine that Lurenzo as a soldier can only perform domestic chores without the emotional labor of affection. This surely limits the extent of care work that his 11-year-old son and 17-year-old daughter receive in lieu of the absence of their migrant mother. It also indicates to us men's resistance against any sort of gender transformation in the family.

As suggested by the case of Lurenzo, men cannot always avoid female gendered care work. These are usually mundane tasks we often overlook but carry with them in their performance far-reaching gender implications. They include grocery shopping, attending meetings at school, and doing various activities in public with their children,

such as walking them to school. These activities underscore and make visible the absence of mothers from the country. Although men seem to resist the changes forced by the institutional rearrangement of their households, they have sometimes found themselves with no other choice but to adjust accordingly to their new household arrangement. This fact leaves us with a glimmer of hope that transformations in gender ideologies could eventually follow suit in the transnational families of migrant mothers.

Conclusion

Let me now conclude my discussion by stating that what we are seeing in the Philippines is a “gender revolt,” in other words a resistance against the reconstitution of the gender division of labor in the family that is led by the migration of women. This resistance adversely affects the welfare of children. It results in feelings of neglect among children simply because they do not receive care conventionally. The care provided by mothers from a distance and those given by extended female kin up close are constructed as “not enough.” Moreover, this resistance facilitates men’s rejection of care work, which in turn aggravates the difficulties that children do face when their mothers migrate.

We should recognize that the family is not a static institution. As Judith Stacey notes, we are now in the age of the postmodern family in which economic realities can no longer sustain a dominant household structure but instead has ushered the formation of multiple household forms including single-parent, dual wage earning, conventional nuclear, and I would add to this transnational migrant households. Children do not necessarily receive optimal care in conventional nuclear households. However, the notion that biological mothers should nurture their children somehow retains its ideological stronghold. We see this in various sending countries of migrant careworkers, not only the

Philippines but also like I noted earlier Poland and Romania. We see the same situation in Sri Lanka, where as it is the case in the Philippines, a common solution posed to the problems of children in transnational families is to call for the return migration of mothers. As recently as 2007, for instance, the Cabinet of Sri Lanka, in acknowledging the emotional difficulties that children of migrant mothers confront, passed legislation that prohibited mothers with children below five years of age from working overseas.³ The government of Sri Lanka never implemented this law but neither did the government renounce it. Yet, as I tried to describe in this talk, a solution that upholds the ideological belief that biological mothers are the most suitable caregivers of children only aggravates the problems of the children of migrant mothers; without question, it makes it even more difficult for children to adjust to their new family form – the transnational family – spurred on them by the process of economic globalization.

But why is there a gender revolution against women's emancipation? Is it only because any drastic social transformation poses a threat to society? I believe that countries like Sri Lanka and the Philippines retain the ideology of women's domesticity because it is in the vested interest of their economies for them to do so. Despite the push for women to work outside the home, it is to the interest of these nations to keep the ideology of women's domesticity intact because it supplies them with a labor pool to fill the demand for women's low wage labor by more developed nations in the global economy.

³ Additionally, mothers with children who are five years of age or above can only migrate if they can prove they have secured alternative arrangements for childcare. See Daily News. 15 March (2007). "Welfare system for migrant women workers' young children favoured." <http://www.dailynews.lk/2007/03/15/Fin03.asp>. [Cited on June 8, 2009.]

The retention of gender does not occur in a vacuum but takes shape in the context of economic globalization. In the Philippines, for instance, the jobs in demand for women to fill – for example, domestic work and assembly line manufacturing work – retain the assumption of women’s national aptitude for caring and nurturing. Second, the ideology of women’s domesticity – as it justifies the wage gap and sex segregation in the labor market – ensures the low wage of women. In so doing, it secures foreign currency for the Philippines. It does so by not only driving women out of the local economy to seek the higher wages of migrant domestic work but it also retains the low wages of women and thereby attracts foreign manufacturing companies in search of locales that can offer the lowest overhead costs in the global economy. The low wages of Filipino women is in fact the mainstay of the attractiveness of the Philippine labor force in the global economy.

If the global economy demands the retention of the ideology of women’s domesticity in the Philippines, then we should be mindful that its retention is not only spurred by traditional values and culture. In other words, we should not dismiss the Philippines and Sri Lanka as more patriarchal than countries with more developed economies. Fueling and dictating the retention of the ideology of domesticity in these countries are the foreign influences of more developed nations in search of docile workers in factories and maternal figures to care for children and elderly in their homes. In other words, it is our demand for nannies in richer countries that is equally accountable for the retention of the ideology of women’s domesticity in countries such as the Philippines.

If it is not just our demand for nannies but also our need for the maternal figure of the nanny that is responsible for the challenges of transnational life that are confronted by

nannies and their children, we are left with the question of how we could help ease their emotional difficulties. Perhaps richer nations should earmark development aid towards the welfare of children such as Isabelle. Programs that would promote the recognition of transnational families in schools, churches and the community would without doubt normalize the experience of children such as Isabelle. Dismantling the ideology of women's domesticity would likewise encourage them to accept the unconventional ways they receive care. But more significantly perhaps receiving countries should make the option of family reunification available to migrant workers and their children. Notably, a call for the return migration of mothers for the sake of family reunification could send the wrong message to women to stay at home. This would undoubtedly threaten the gender advancements they have made in the process of migration. However, we should be aware that the choice for Isabelle to live in close proximity of her mother is a human right that is denied to her and most other children of migrant workers in countries as far flung as the Netherlands and Taiwan. As an alternative means of family reunification, we should perhaps then consider the solution of family reunification in the host society, instead of return migration, as this option will allow migrant mothers to better balance their work and family life. Family reunification in the host society would recognize not only the right of our migrant nannies to a family life but also their right to work outside the home.