A Mother that Leaves is a Mother that Loves: Labor Migration as a Neoliberal Process and Migrant Motherhood

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Abstract

In a qualitative study of Filipina migrants living and working in New York City, I argue that neoliberal labor migration policies constrain women’s decision to migrate thereby becoming part of how Filipinas understand their familial obligation as mothers. Even if social narratives of migrant motherhood in the Philippines have publicly shamed women for leaving their families, the social and political processes of globalization has required mothers to configure migration as constitutive of their ascribed maternal duties for their families. This paper explores how Filipina migrants are negotiating the heteronormative and patriarchal logics that dictate “good motherhood” as a non-migrant, domestic woman in the Filipino family. I find that Filipinas negotiate this moral family logic by redeploying their ideas of “traditional” motherhood’s against the conditions of joblessness and poverty in the Philippines. As neoliberal pressures, pull migrant women all over the globe, I argue that neoliberal restructuring coerce Filipinas to compartmentalize their productive (as good workers) and social reproductive (as good mothers) labors in their redefinition of their responsibilities to their families. I analyze this tension while arguing that conditions of dispossession under neoliberal globalization both constrain and allow for malleability in the definitions of transnational or migrant motherhood.

Introduction

Filipinas have accepted that migration is a part of the rubric of their life course and motherhood. However, they are also redefining their understanding of what it means to be a mother through their migration and attending to maternal responsibilities of a different type, from abroad. More importantly, I argue this shift in understanding filial obligation is couched in the longstanding culture and institutionalization of labor export in the Philippines. Through the examination of the narratives of migrant women, I am critical of the seemingly individuated
logic for migration that becomes a trope for the internalized patriarchy in the part of Filipinas leaving to work abroad just because they are being obedient to gendered demands of the family. Instead, through an examination of the political economy of gendered trends of migration, I posit that Filipinas’ redefinition of their transnational motherhood through a critique of labor export is, at once, a coercion and autonomy. Because the sociopolitical and economic conditions of the Philippines have normalized and accepted the performance of Filipino mothering in its transnational form, Filipinas see their decision to leave under a schema of familial obligation and love. Still, this abnormal normalization of pushing women out of their country and away from their families is carefully manicured as a neoliberal project which is negotiated in Filipinas’ understanding of migrant motherhood and the potential shifts in gendered ideologies.

To this end, I begin with the migration story of a migrant mother in this study’s participants. In my visit to Brenda’s home during our interview, I could tell that she was a highly motivated and organized person. As we sat down for our interview in her rented room in Queens, New York City in 2010, I noticed that Brenda’s rented room was clean, her bills were neatly labeled on a file folder rack atop her dresser which was one of the few pieces of furniture in her minimalist room. Her t-shirts on a rack near her made-up bed were folded in a uniform manner and her employee of the month award was hanging on the wall next to a collage frame with pictures of her children in the Philippines. When she began to tell me her migration story, she started with the fact that she worked in a high-ranking executive position in a financial company in the private sector in the Philippines. Beginning with a description of her past career, Brenda presented her life story with pride in the fact that she was a high-powered executive, clearly her past occupation was one of the anchors in her identity formation. Because her long-time employer moved their company to Hong Kong, she decided to explore the option to migrate
because she could not find a position that offered equal pay for the position she held in the past. She was unwilling to compromise her status and also her family’s welfare by taking a position below her pay scale. She wanted to secure a good present and future for her two children, Kenneth and Angelica, who were seven and five years old respectively. Brenda, was convinced that her only option was to migrate and work abroad to maintain her standards: private schools for the children, a car to take them to and from schools and family functions, and a home that was suitable to her idea of a stable household. Brenda’s husband challenged her decision; he could not understand why migration was the only option for their family given that Brenda would surely have to take a job that was not commensurate to the social status of her career in the Philippines. Brenda’s husband made the argument that he had a moderately paying job and if Brenda stayed in the Philippines to find a lesser paying position, they could still attain a middle-class lifestyle, the caveat being their lives would not be in the standards that Brenda aspired to.

In the months before Brenda finalized her decision to migrate, her husband was also laid off because his company moved to another Asian country for cheaper workers. Both could not land stable professional jobs even with their college degrees. They moved their family out of their three-bedroom house into a two-bedroom condo closer to their children’s private school. This was enough financial stress to convince Brenda to migrate for the sake of her children. When Brenda migrated to the United States in 2007, she was twenty-nine years old and she chose to move to New York City because of a contract she attained from a friend. At the time of our interview, Brenda worked as an administrative assistant at a veterinary in Queens for the two years she had lived in New York City. She was a proficient worker gaining the trust of her employer and an award for being an outstanding employee. On the weekends she took part time work as a housekeeper in Manhattan because Brenda saw this as an efficient use of her time off.
from the veterinary office. She did not like to be idle because she understood that her time in the US was finite. Her intention in migrating was always to return to her family, every decision she made put her family in the forefront of her mind. Her definition of motherhood as a migrant included the same discipline and goal setting she used to become an executive in the Philippines: to accrue as much capital to secure a stable financial future for her children. Even if the status of her work was several steps down from her past position, Brenda made sense of what she facetiously called her “career move” as a part of fulfilling her maternal and filial duty. Migration meant she would not be continuing on as a businesswoman but it meant that she could still meet the demands of the lifestyle and class aspirations she had for her family. She felt secure in her decision to migrate. Although leaving her family was difficult, Brenda’s cost and benefit analysis resulted in the fact that her time away from her children would yield much more in return than her sadness.

When I asked Brenda about how she defined her motherhood and how she attended to her obligations as Kenneth and Angelica’s mother, she said, “Through being a provider, yes. But becoming a good mother, I don’t think so (laughed) because I am far away with them. Maybe a good mother in different way like being a provider, but not in a traditional way. Because in traditional way, you should be the one taking care of your kids, even if your working, you should also be able to take care of the kids. But I have to sacrifice that privilege because I have to think of them and their future.” In Brenda’s comment, she tackles the contradiction in the ideas of “good” or “traditional” motherhood and her reality as a migrant mother abroad. The internalized logic of mothers as the main caretaker of their families, even if they have jobs, is the dominant narrative that Brenda contends with in her internal debate of good motherhood. She equates mothers’ proximity to their children and the ability to care for them daily or after work as
normative behavior for mothers. But Brenda also highlights that that type of motherhood is a "privilege", one that she has given up to be the kind of mother that she is today. Brenda has accepted that migration is one way of articulating motherhood because it has presented itself as a viable option to secure her family’s future. Implicit in Brenda’s story and in her comment above is the fact that being far from her children is a type of motherhood, one that she chose and one that was required of her given her circumstances.

I open with Brenda’s story to highlight the logic of many Filipinas who decide to migrate and work abroad to financially support their family. This story may sound familiar as many scholars have explored the rationale for women’s migration and the resulting “transnational motherhood” they perform from afar (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). However, in this article I argue that Brenda’s singular story must be contextualized as a consequence of neoliberal globalization in the Philippines, namely the lack of viable jobs, unlivable wages, rising costs of social services, and what some scholars call that maintenance of the “labor brokerage state”—the aggressive migration management and export system integrated into the Philippine national economy (Guevarra 2009; Rodriguez 2010). Filipinas choose migration as part of their maternal obligation but the choice is severely constrained. Dialectically, even when the option to migrate seems to be the only option, they are choosing this option against popular and cultural gender norms.

Despite the social stigma that follows migrant mothers who are portrayed as abandoning their domestic duties by going abroad, I argue that the continued institutionalization of gendered labor export in the Philippines has come to change the ideas and narratives of motherhood for Filipinas. Moreover, while economic underdevelopment via liberalization and deregulation continues to drive Filipino agricultural and manufacturing industries into the hands of foreign
investors and multinational corporations, Filipino men and women continue to suffer under contractual and precarious work. Many lose their contingent jobs in unstable industries in six months or less. As the costs of their children’s education, healthcare and prices of basic goods skyrocket, the Philippine state continues to rely on migrant workers and their monthly remittances to keep the national economy afloat (Rodriguez 1996). Many Filipinos are accepting that labor migration is the only avenue to sustain their families’ future. And as the global market’s demand in gendered, domestic labor increases, Filipinas have answered that call in droves. Thus, migration has been integrated into the life course of Filipinas as their filial obligation to their children, parents, siblings and extended families. Although the necessity to migrate has been etched into the social imagination and the day-to-day realities of Filipino families, the gender ideologies of work in the family are slow to change due to patriarchal norms and Catholic ideas of motherhood and womanhood. Still, in contention with patriarchal logics and normative gender ideologies constraining their roles in the family, Filipinas are leaving the country and interpreting their separation from their family in the name of “good motherhood”—both in the ascribed definition of womanhood and also the new meaning they are making with their decisions to leave.

Even from afar, Filipina migrants still fulfill their gendered duties to their families following a patriarchal and heteronormative logic wherein women are innately responsible for familial uplift. Their decisions to migrate to support their family are often made alongside their families, communities and kin networks. In the absence of sustainable livelihood in the Philippines, Filipinas decide to migrate, some begrudgingly, because of the lack of alternatives to support their families. Although some Filipinas see migration as a form of economic independence from the fetters of poverty and want, they also see labor migration as the only
avenue to a better future for their families. Scholars have established that migration does not always ensure agency or independence from gendered familial obligations (Pessar 1999; Barber 2000). However, in my analysis, Filipina migration is not solely a reinforcement of patriarchal logics as they accept going abroad as part of their gender roles. I argue that migrant women do not only understand their migration as a decision of independence, rather that migration is also a redefinition of how they understand their own motherhood through their ability to provide for their families. The complex ways in which they make meaning of their migration and ideas of motherhood points to their critique of a larger and broader structure that constrained their decisions to leave their families. To this end, my research question for this article is: how do Filipina migrant women make meaning of their roles as mothers in contrast to the political and economic systems that produces migration as part of their motherhood?

Methods: Centering Migrant Women’s Stories

This paper draws from my larger research project on Filipino transnational families where I interviewed Filipino/a migrants working as domestic workers in New York City and their respective families living in the Metro-Manila area in the Philippines. I examine 50 narratives of migrant mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters conducted regarding care work in their transnational families from 2008 to 2014. In this same time period, I traveled to the Philippines three times for a total of eight months to collect the family histories and experiences of a little over a fifth of the migrant women included in this study totaling eleven family constellations and 30 children, husbands, parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, and friends living in the Philippines. It is important to note that my longitudinal methodology and repeated visits to the same families for over five years allow me to provide evidence of migrant women’s changing definitions of their motherhood from their initial reasoning for migration to their maintenance of their identities.
as mothers from afar. For this study, I focus on excerpts from migrant women’s longitudinal narratives collected periodically over six years and ethnographic field notes I collected over time and across two sites throughout the duration of the project.

I draw from the analytical framework of transnational family scholars who propose that investigating the microsociological experience of members of transnational families must include an interrogation of the larger structural forces that lead people to migrate (Baldassar and Merla 2013). Loretta Baldassar argues, “The processes of transnational caregiving are negotiated at the intersection of the individual choice within what might be called the micro patterns of kinship and obligation as well as within the more formal structures and infrastructures (or absence of them) of relevant services, technologies, and resources at macro-state and meso-community levels” (Baldassar 2014, 270). This analytical perspective is key to examining the redefinition of motherhood for Filipina migrants as their processes of making meaning out of their relationships is always negotiated under the political and economic contexts of the Philippines. Lastly, I retain the Tagalog (or Filipino, the national language of the Philippines) in this article to preserve the voices of the migrant mothers who lent their stories to my scholarship because I understand that how someone explains themselves is as important as how I am interpreting their story (DeVault 1999).

**Literature review: Gender, Migration and Filipina Motherhood**

The sociology of gender and migration has shifted from the scholars critiquing the superficial moves of “adding in gender” into migration studies without using gender as an analytic to understand the accelerating feminization of migration (Pessar 1999). Beginning critiques of what scholars termed the “equilibrium model”—suggesting push and pull factors (Lee 1966) produce a rational actor to make rational decisions to migrate—pointed out that the
model was gender-blind assuming all migrants are rational. The model failed to account for different logics and types of migration streams, for example, the uptick in migration of middle-class migrants to developed destinations like the US. On the other hand, a structuralist model to make sense of gendered migration highlighted inequalities in the world-system that depended on gender and gendered schemas in the global labor process (i.e. the overrepresentation of women in sweatshop labor or high rates of women migrants working in domestic industries) to rake in profit for the elite capitalist class (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild 2008; Ball and Piper 2002). These efforts to bring gender out of the shadows in the discussion of migration and work have yielded sophisticated and complex theories that have determined that migration is a gendered process (Fouron and Schiller 2001). Performance of gender, gendered division of labor, and definitions of gender both relationally and spatiality have all become key parts in understanding the gendered process in which people choose to migrate, and equally as important, the experience of migration.

Since the context of reception often matters as much as the context of departure for migrant women and their abilities to shape the culture of their families when they are absent, scholars have turned to studying migration from the place of migrants’ destinations. Migrant women’s control over their remittances or their ability to leverage communication from their family members are all contingent on culture of reciprocity fostered within families and kin networks (Mckay 2007). They’re willingness to continue to stay abroad and work towards attaining family goals (i.e. the purchase of a home, completion of education) reflect a shift in the gender ideologies that might determine a woman’s decision to continue to work abroad and her sustained absence in her family (Tacoli 1999). Racial and ethnic discrimination and precarious labor markets in destination countries also constrain a migrant women’s ability to contribute to
her family’s stability. Furthermore, static immigration laws, especially in the U.S. (Ngai 2005), produce a stateless quality in migrant women’s lives who are undocumented. Because of the criminalization of their undocumented status, migrant women do not consider visiting their home in fear of being unable to return to continue working and they are also silenced in their destination locations because of the lack of legal recourse when their rights are infringed (i.e. exploitation, sexual and gendered violence in the workplace). These sociopolitical factors influence the reasons why migrant women stay in countries like the U.S. and structure the conditions under which they live.

The burgeoning literature on women’s global migration has explored micro, macro and meso levels of decision-making and the consequences therein. However, absent in the literature is an examination of migrant women’s internalization and understanding of these systems as part of their meaning- making processes of their migrant motherhood. The Philippine case is particularly interesting because of the longstanding and rich corpus of research examining the lives of Filipina women and their families living under migration and separation from all over the diaspora (Stasiulis and Bakan 2005; Pratt 2012; Constable 2014; Ball and Piper 2002; Asis, Huang, and Yeoh 2004; Yeoh et al. 2009; Parrenas 2005; Francisco and Rodriguez 2014). I am poised to analyze the longstanding policies of labor export in the Philippines wherein migration has become sedimented in the social, cultural and political realities of Filipinos. Following the lead of institutional ethnography (Smith 1989)—a methodology that prioritizes the voices of those in the throes of macro forces to understand the very mechanics of such systems—I center the narratives of Filipina migrants today to examine the how they link global dynamics like labor export and a labor brokerage state in their microsociological meanings of migrancy and motherhood.
In the 1960’s, with the growing unemployment in the Philippines caused by the full throttle neoliberalization of the country, the dictator Ferdinand Marcos instituted a labor export policy that aimed to encourage migration and migrant remittance to balance out the teetering national economy. This policy alongside increasing conditions of privatization, deregulation and liberalization marked the beginning of institutionalized management and regulation of an “ideal migrant subject” (Rodriguez and Schwenken 2013). Earning currency that was much more powerful than the peso was much more attractive to both Filipinos and Filipinas as stable jobs became less and less available in the Philippines. Additionally, rising costs of basic goods because of liberalized trade policies coupled with privatized social services like healthcare and education made even basic family needs difficult to maintain. The global demand for domestic workers beckoned Filipinas to answer the call to work abroad.

The increase in Filipina migration in the mid-1980’s sparked much debate over the shifting role of women in the family as breadwinners instead of the “ilaw ng tahanan” or the ever-present light of the home and domesticity in the Philippines (Asis, Huang, and Yeoh 2004). The alarm that Filipina migration sounded was loud, given the patriarchal and staunchly catholic culture in the Philippines. Culturally the gender roles of the family have worked to fortify a Catholic order that works under the feudal patriarchal logic. The underdeveloped country that relies on agricultural industry still operates under a holdover of the Spanish colonial, hacienda system, equating peasants as landlord’s property and women as men’s property. This feudal patriarchal logic has seeped from rural areas to semi-developed urban centers, following Filipinas’ roles in their families. Although feudal patriarchy manifests differently from the countryside to the cities, the gendered ideologies of women in the family stays the same. Filipinas are often expected to be subservient and obedient to elders, and mostly men. They are
supposed to be the main caretakers of the family, even if they must work, the duties of caretaking for elders, children and spouses are largely their domain.

Compared to men’s migration, the social stigma incurred by women leaving their families for the same reasons was quite different. Women’s migration has been depicted as controversial because those who step in for migrant mothers may not be able to attend biological mother’s work in the same way (Bonizzoni and Boccagni 2014). Their absence proved that not only that gendered roles in the family were shifting but also that options to sustain the family were becoming more and more limited. Women’s migration in the Philippines disturbed the cultural logic of the Filipino family, it threatened those invested in the feudal patriarchal ideology of the country. For mothers leaving their families, the guilt in separating from their family was one layer of emotional labor they contended with. Additionally the layer of social stigma against them became another obstacle they faced as they left the country and stayed abroad (Parrenas 2005; Avila 2008; Ducu 2013).

The ideas of “good motherhood” stems from the feudal patriarchal logic and Catholicism have constrained Filipinas while they lived in the country and it does not escape them as they migrated away from the Philippines (Tadiar 1997). Guilt about the “correct” performance of motherhood often limited Filipinas’ ability to shift their roles in the families, usually they were sequestered in the domestic roles. Even if migration allowed for Filipinas to exercise independence in leaving the home and asserting a provider position in the home, the patriarchal logics in the family recapitulated Filipina migration into the fold of motherhood. This cultural logic has also changed the rhetoric in the Philippine labor export policy. After almost 40 years since Marcos’ implementation of the policy, subsequent administrations have institutionalized the management and regulation of migrants for export (Rodriguez 2010). They have also captured
the gendered sense of responsibility of Filipinas to their families and capitalized on the global labor demand for domestic work. In institutionalized practices and activities such as Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars and recruiting material, the family becomes a fulcrum in which agencies enlist and remind Filipinas who are about to go abroad what their sacrifice is for (Guevarra 2009). Coupled with the lack of sustainable livelihood in the Philippines, this aggressive and sophisticated system of labor export becomes a way in which Filipina migration is normalized not only as an acceptable form of motherhood but presumed avenue of good motherhood. Many Filipinas who leave behind their families interpret their migration as a part of their maternal or filial duty (Constable 2014). Still, although migration and working abroad has shifted in familial gender roles, the complexity of how Filipinas negotiate the gendered ideologies of “good motherhood” and how they make sense of migration as part of their life course has yet to be examined.

Discussion

*Motherhood Under a Neoliberal State*

In what scholars have called the “labor brokerage state” (Robyn Magalit Rodriguez 2010; Guevarra 2009), the Philippine state has shown that migration can be a lucrative industry as long as it is maintained and groomed. The longstanding institutionalization of migration is part of the rubric of Philippine economy as migrants continue to send back upwards of $21 billion in remittances. Because the Philippines has taken on a neoliberal agenda in their development strategy, in one part, it relies on globalizing the national economy depending on foreign direct investments and service, consumer and tourist industries rather than strategizing on long-term development of agricultural and manufacturing capacity of the country. The second part of this strategy counts on a steady stream of migrant remittances to ensure a flow of income. Although
remittances do not assist in building a diverse national economy, the Philippine state counts on the billion-dollar industry as a cornerstone in the contemporary economy.

These are the political economic conditions under which mothers are choosing to migrate. They understand that their migration benefits the Philippine national economy through taxing their remittances while the money they send to their family is also used to inject capital into the national economy (Rodriguez 1996). Marisol, a 50-year old mother of four says, “Definitely, the government is encouraging us to leave because big bulk of their income comes from OFW income. And in a way, we’re also off the books right? Of course! Its in the in the in the money that we send back to the family. So the family has money to spend.” Marisol demonstrates her knowledge of the labor brokerage system—how the Philippine state profits from her absence and also her family’s dependence on her foreign remittances. In this comment, Marisol stitches her own decision to migration for her family to the governmental policies of labor export in the Philippines. She acknowledges that the Philippine state is invested in an ongoing stream of outmigration because of the various avenues of income migration generates. However, Marisol isn’t talking about this relationship with the state in theoretical terms, she understands how intimately bound governmental forces are to life changing decisions such as migration and separation in her own family. This dialectic between state and individual often showed in the narratives of migrant women in this study as Filipinas displayed an inherent analysis and critique of neoliberal consequences that led to their decisions to work abroad.

For Filipinas, the decision to migrate to support their families has become an increasingly attractive option because the retreat of the neoliberal Philippine state (Harvey 2007). The Philippine state continues to privatize social services driving up the costs for basic needs such as health care and education (Wozniak 2015; Chua 2007) while failing to provide a stable economic
livelihood in the country. Joan, a mother of three, describes how she came to the decision of migrating:

_Yung husband ko, he had a good job, and suddenly nung mag fluctuate ang peso naging 50 to a dollar suddenly nawalan siya ng trabaho. And then from there nagka-on, on and off siya ng trabaho. Mga kompanya na lumilipat from Philippines to India, Philippines to Mexico, ganoon. My cousin influenced him to go to Dubai to seek for a job. So nagpunta siya doon, hindi siya nakatagal. So ang nangyari is nalubog kami sa utang, ang daming utang para lang makabayaran ng koryente, LPG, makabili ng bigas, basic lang! So then pagdating nya sa Pilipinas, wala siyang makuha ng trabaho, kasi may edad na siya. At that time, pag may edad ka na, wala kang nangmakakuha ng trabaho. 45 years old, wala kaming makuha na stable na trabaho e! It’s been 6 months and then...6 months and you’re going to get laid off from the company because they don’t want to hired you as a regular employee._

My husband, he had a good job and suddenly when the peso fluctuated from P50 to a dollar suddenly he lost his job. From then on he had a job on and off. The companies that moves from Philippines to India, Philippines to Mexico. My cousin influenced him to go to Dubai to seek for a job. So he went and didn’t stay that long. So what happened is we got buried in debt, huge debt to pay for electricity, gas, rice, just the basics! So when he returned, he couldn’t find a job again because he was older. 45 years old and he couldn’t get a stable job! Jobs would be 6 months and then you’d get laid off from the company because they don’t want to hire you as a regular employee with benefits.

Joan’s story demonstrates the necessity to find work abroad comes from the instability of economic livelihood in the Philippines; from the rising standards of living, unaffordable basic expenses and labor contractualization, Joan’s family was impacted greatly by neoliberal trends in liberalization and deregulation. Joan’s husband, employed as a contractual worker in corporations that are highly mobile and engage in temporary contracts to maintain a precarious labor pool, was the main reason for Joan’s unpredictable financial situation. Deregulated labor laws that prioritize corporate interests and profit push job stability off the table for families like Joan’s. Moreover, her family life was increasingly threatened by the effects of liberalization of trade policies adopted by the Philippines which have driven the prices of goods up; when rice from neighboring countries like Vietnam and Thailand become cheaper than rice grown in her own province, Joan started to understand that the global economy wasn’t just an entity “out
there” rather it was restructuring her country, her province and ultimately, her family. These concurrent political economic conditions often result of the neoliberalizing strategies of the Philippine state put many Filipino families in a position to consider working abroad to stabilize their family incomes.

However, working abroad is a gamble in it of itself. Joan’s husband first attempt at labor migration to Dubai confirm that migration decisions are often made with and among extended family members—those who may benefit from a person’s decision to work abroad and send money to the extended family—still, there’s no guarantee that a family member abroad can ensure the family’s economic situation. Joan demonstrates that decisions to migrate are often sparked by hardships caused by the “invisible hand” of the economy when she notes that her family is “buried” in debt, but kin in contact with migrants in their own networks also compound their decision to leave. Indeed the neoliberal state is the context behind migration but in the meso interactions within kin, migration starts to become normalized as a form of parenthood. I highlight this form of decision making because it is produced in and through kin networks becomes a platform for acceptable shifts in the roles of parents in the family. It was perfectly fine for Joan’s husband to leave his family as long as he was providing for them. Tracing it to the micro transformations in the family, this type of collective decision-making process opens up the possibility of family members not only accepting but encouraging mothers to migrate for the same purposes.

Filipina migrants also point to another meso-level process that is produced by the Philippine labor export policy and deeply influential in shaping their lives and decisions. When Filipinas have expressed the notion that they have been farmed out to the world by the Philippine
state, they often point at the meso-level recruiting and placement agencies that animate the labor export system:

I feel like the agency looked for a girl like me. Attracted me to the salary abroad and then have all of these options to give me different professional skills to be a maid. I learn how to cook eggs 7 ways, how to change diaper in one minute. Then, after I went through PDOS (Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar), I know to be a quiet worker, no fuss with my boss. They have this process already, how can I say no if I can earn and help my family?

The supply for the global demand for Filipina migrant workers is managed through the Philippine labor brokerage state’s multi-tiered export systems. The sophisticated recruitment strategy of headhunters, placement agencies, training programs, etc. has organized highly trained set of workers that not only meet the global demand for domestic work but supply a “quality” workforce (Guevarra 2009). Andrea’s experience in “training” and the institutionalized way in which her future work was being framed for her by agencies and the state-sponsored pre-departure orientation seminar, convince Andrea that not only migration a viable avenue for work but it is endorsed by her government and these supposedly reliable agencies.

Filipinas see their families’ needs for stable income and then they are exposed to many meso-level structures that paint a picture of work abroad as an opportunity to meet that need. However, post migration, many Filipinas see that these macro- and meso-level institutions are organized around a gendered logic to push women out into the global market. Although Andrea states that the agency that trained her in “professional skills to be a maid” gave her the confidence to migrate and work in the US, her arrival to the US and her first job would prove to her that even if she was “trained” in being a maid, she was an exploitable commodity. Still, these interactions with agencies, both state and private sector, are the very gendered processes that influence Filipinas’ very intimate and personal decisions to leave their families.
The confluence of a neoliberal state, the invisible hand of globalization with an overwhelmingly gendered call for domestic labor and the kin and community networks in migrants’ localities often make it hard for Filipina mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and daughters to ignore migration as a viable solution to their economic woes. Yet, they contend with the patriarchal culture that box Filipinas in to a certain type of role and labor in the Filipino family. Marisol describes the shifting logics in work:

You know in the Philippines they say our culture is very patriarchal so it’s like headed by men. Its different now, changing now because of economic reasons. Because they used to be the one that make the money. But because of the healthcare and domestic profession abroad, they want only women. Doesn’t matter what you studied. The kind of work that is abroad now, more and more want women to take care of kids and older people because of we know how to do it with our own families.

Marisol describes the gender ideologies in the Philippines but she asserts that the intersection of global economic demand makes the realities of Filipino men and women “different now”. Accurately, Marisol states that the very gendered work ascribed to Filipinas in a highly patriarchal society gives them a leg up on the global market as they are racially coded as “good” domestic workers (Pratt 1998). Their knowledge of care work in their own families becomes a selling point to the global market no matter what their field of study and past work experience could be.

When Marisol says that the tide has shifted because of “economic reasons”, she acknowledges that Filipinos, such as her own family members, do not see migration as a male-dominated sphere of work. Rather that migration is an answer to the economic paucity in the families and in the country. Lily states, “Kung walang hanapbuhay, walang asa para sa lalaki or babae at maganda ang kita dito sa abroad, walang question ang sinong magaabroad. Kung pamilya, dapat nagkakatulungan. Babae man siya magaabroad, yon na yon. If there are no jobs, no hope for men or women and you can make a decent wage abroad, there’s no question who is
going to migrate. If its family, you have to help one another. If it’s a woman that has to leave, that’s it.” Marisol and Lily’s comments about the reasons why they choose to migrate rings true for many Filipinas. Often the need for economic stability trumps the gender ideologies that have circumvented the lives of Filipinas. The sheer necessity and viability of a Filipina migrating and being able to support her family from abroad is enough to change patriarchal constructs of the breadwinner in the family.

The cultural narrative of “good motherhood” and the painful reality of separation often complicates the revision of the ascribed gender role of breadwinning for Filipinas. This sword is double-edged: to become the new breadwinner and provide for their families, Filipinas are readily accepting the risk to work in domestic occupations abroad that are known to be precarious, unstable and oftentimes unregulated and exploitative (see the case of Mary Jane Veloso, Francisco, forthcoming CITE). Although this gendered shift could be read as “women’s empowerment”, I argue that the decision to migration and work abroad capitalizes on gendered processes on macro- and meso-levels that bank on the filial obligation that places Filipinas self-worth as responsible contributors to their families as mothers, grandmothers, sisters and daughters. Additionally, their value as migrant workers rests on their ability to attend to gendered domestic work abroad thereby calcifying their subjugated positions in a patriarchal gender order that is produced by the neoliberal state, kin and community networks and within families.

These conditions of neoliberal globalization compel Filipinas to migrate and produce the transnational family as a normalized family form in the Philippines. The dynamics of these political economic conditions have changed the ideas of filial piety and how Filipinas attend to mothering practices. Filipinas who are not just mothers but fill roles that require mothering have accepted that migration is a viable performance of their duties to their families given the lack of
opportunities to do so in the Philippines. Many have accepted that migration is a measure of their responsibilities to their families, much like other ascribed gendered duties such as birthing or domestic functions. Leaving the family has become an extension of what it means to be a “good mother” or to be good at “mothering,” Filipinas are accepting separation as part of their duty as family members.

_A Dollar A Day, A New Mama’s Way_

An analysis of the macro and meso institutions of labor export paints a forlorn picture of the lot of Filipina migrants. The structural patriarchal logics produce them in a gendered way and therefore they are products of a gendered system. But that isn’t the whole picture. After all, it is the narratives of Filipina migrants that analyze and critique the very systems that are aimed at producing them as a global, “quality” domestic worker workforce. Filipina migrants have developed a grammar around their lives, the many invisible hands that shape it and in what ways they are negotiating these conditions. This negotiation is mired with the reality that it is quite difficult for Filipina mothers to be away from their families for so long but they are also finding that their decisions circumvented by larger social forces also gives way to new dimensions of themselves and their motherhood that wasn’t there before.

Breadwinning is one way Filipinas are asserting their new role as migrant mothers. Yes, they interpret their ability to provide for their family as an extension of their maternal duty, however, their reinterpretation of motherhood does not stop at their ability to remit money to their families. Filipina migrant mothers also stay involved in what what families spend their remittance money on. For example, Cara migrated to the U.S. at the age of 40, leaving behind her only child, Nikki, in the Philippines. In our tearful conversation about her changing definition of motherhood, she expressed that leaving her child was one of the hardest things she
had ever done. But she feels that she has stepped into a new role as a migrant mother, “I am a different mother, yes. My whole life is only for the family. All my money is for them. I send money every month 60 thousand pesos plus. I have no savings. Just to provide food, education and shelter for Nikki and my parents.” And although her provider role has given her a new confidence about what she can give to her family, Cara was ambivalent about embracing this new type of motherhood. She was embattled about what she is able to give and what she had to give up.

For Cara, her motherhood is enacted in a “different way” because she has been able to provide for her family. Yet, she laments her inability to mother her child in the ways she understands a traditional mother is supposed to.

Still, as she told her story, the amount of times Cara said “pero” or “but” signaled to me that she was actively negotiating her ideas of good or bad mothering. Cara is clearly ambivalent about her new role; proud she can provide for her daughter but at the same time ashamed that she
is not living up to the standards of traditional motherhood in her mind. She actively combats the internalized narrative of a mother that is close in proximity and hands-on by taking on strategies that help her continue to be part of Nikki’s growth, namely, working together with the tutor that works with her daughter every week. In this way, the provider role has become enmeshed with a traditional gendered practice of nurturance (Fisher, Berenice and Tronto 1990). Cara is definitely making a dollar a day while she is away but she is also always finding a way to maintain a semblance of traditional motherhood albeit from abroad. At the end of the interview, Cara stated, “Migrating abroad is a hard thing to do. But it was what I had to do for Nikki. She is my responsibility.” Migration is a tormented decision but it has become a part of what Filipinas consider part of being a responsible mother.

When Lallie left her 6-year old daughter, Donna, she told her that she would only be gone a few days and at the mention of this Donna handed her mother her most prized doll to keep with her on her trip. After almost nine years of being away from Donna, Lallie even cries when she recounts the day she left home. A single mother, Lallie worked as a public school teacher in her province in the Philippines but because of the decreasing budget for public education, her yearly salary could no longer support her household which consisted of her daughter, mother and father. She tried her luck in Manila working at another public school but found an opportunity to apply for a tourist visa. She chose to travel to New York because of a cousin’s promise of job working as a nanny because the pay was quadruple what she earned as a school teacher. Lallie left her career and family to ensure that her daughter could have the opportunity to attend a private institution in Manila instead of the public school in the province because she saw the early potential in her daughter’s intelligence. Although the decision was quite hard, she knew that
migrating abroad was the right decision to provide for her daughter and support her aging parents.

For Lallie, leaving her daughter and parents was commensurate to working at the local public school or at a public school a few hours away from the province. The sacrifice of time and distance is just a part of her duty as a mother and daughter to maintain her family’s lifestyle. She makes meaning of her motherhood through her sacrifice of being abroad. Like Cara, Lallie finds ways to stay involved with her daughter through her mother. In her story, Lallie used the details of her daughter’s talents as evidence that she still knew some intimate details about her daughter’s life. Rationalizing her decision to go, Lallie told me her story in tears as she expressed her pride that her daughter’s intelligence and aptitude in school were excellent. Her motherhood, albeit afar, still hinges on the success of her daughter in her endeavors. In her mind, migration was a necessary sacrifice to help her daughter meet the expectations she had for her. Just like a mother nearby, Lallie understood that her sacrifice of migration was part of what made her a good mother, one that could provide and furnish opportunities for her daughter.
New definitions of motherhood also come with Filipinas developed sense of confidence and perseverance abroad. Many Filipina migrants chose migration after their husbands had tried their luck abroad and failed at maintaining a job; whether the reasons were about the actual job or being unable to live in a new country without the familiar support of their wives or families, coming back to the Philippines set up a springboard for Filipinas to migrate and pursue success abroad. Charlene, much like Joan’s story above, had a husband who couldn’t find work in the Philippines and tried his luck in the Middle East. Charlene’s husband, a very conservative and patriarchal man, couldn’t stand being abroad more than three months because he not only had to work but fend for himself in terms of cooking and cleaning. Upon his return, Charlene was determined to keep her three children in private school, she remembers the process of deciding to migrate:


So my husband, he went to Saudi. He tried. Not successful. Like he couldn’t make it on his own. Now, I don’t know if it was a lack of determination or something. But, us women we’re committed, the kids at the forefront of our mind. Them…its not that um…lazy, but their initiative…Us, we’re dedicated and determined. We are determined that this is what we’re going to do, this is what I’m going to do. Them, if they fail, they get discouraged. Us, its like, this is life.

Charlene’s redefinitions of migrant motherhood stems from the disappointment of patriarchal logics in her family. The expectations of her husband to be able to financially support their family in the Philippines and then abroad was too high and then the disappointment in being unable to do so was a long crash from that high ledge. The failures of patriarchal constructs gave Charlene, and many other Filipinas like Joan and Lily, an opportunity to not only step into the
vacancy of breadwinner but step out to create a new sense of responsibility and power as a
woman and mother. Charlene’s determination and dedication to her family becomes her
inspiration to do better than her husband, for her husband and for her family.

Charlene’s “initiative” in New York city looked like four jobs: two part-time nannying
jobs on alternate days and housekeeping on the weekends and evenings. She was exhausted but
she had a renewed sense of purpose. Asked if she saw migration as part of her duty as a mother,
she answered, “I think so, yah. Because it’s hard there eh. It’s really hard if you weigh-out the
situation. Nandoon ka nga, mabuti ka ngang nanay pero ‘di mo ma-provide yung
pangangailangan. Eh magporoblema ka lang, yung anak mo hindi mo mabigyan kahit baon.

When you’re there [in the Philippines] you’re a “good mom” but you can’t provide for their
needs. You’re still gonna have problems if you can’t even give your children something to eat.”

For Charlene, definition of motherhood shifted to being able to care for your children and also
being resolute about the decision of being separated from them. This theme of accepting and
living up to the challenge of working abroad is key in Filipinas’ redefinition of motherhood from
afar.

Marisol, who in her earlier comments was highly critical of the state, joined a spate of
Filipinas who understood that migration was a constrained decision made out of necessity, while
requires a new understanding on mothering practices as a migrant.

I think it’s…it was necessary. I don’t know if it was the best really because when you say
best it’s not only for the consideration is not only financial, its the whole effect on the
family. So I thought I think it was a necessary evil to come over here because life would
have been, you know, a real struggle financially if I didn’t come over here. There are
some good fathers but it’s not the norm. It’s always the woman who takes care of the
kids. Even if that means we have to be away. I have to have courage to be away.

Marisol spins the patriarchal trope of mother’s care for her children and figures her migration as
part of that narrative. If it is the woman that takes care of the kids, then she is doing just that. If
caring for her family is her duty as a mother is to support them, she has to choose if it will be financially or holistically. This has become the type of decisions that are in her life course as Filipina and as a mother. Her condition as a mother that can only mother from afar is a condition shaped by the lack in her family’s life and yet Marisol, like so many others, interpret this part of their life as a moment to define the type of motherhood their stepping into—at times courageous, and other times, guilt-ridden. In her comment, Marisol mixes the emotions of lamenting and also finding the purpose in her decision to migrate when she says that it was a “necessary evil” and also understanding it as an act of bravery. Here, in this moment chock full of mixed emotions, Marisol’s ambivalence about her migration is a part of making meaning of migration as a necessary part of motherhood and her life.

For Filipina migrants in this study, redefining motherhood as a migrant is a process of ambivalence as they are contending with internalized ideas of traditional “good” motherhood and then coming to terms with the fact that often, their decision to migrate was constrained by necessity. Although most of the time, their lives separated from their families are riddled with sadness and guilt, they are also finding ways to recognize that they are doing what they need to do for their family—that this action, in fact, requires determination, perseverance, and courage. Indeed, those parts of their character develop from the fact that mothering as a migrant.

**Conclusion**

Filipinas are in the midst of a heated debate, on a national stage and within themselves. Are Filipinas who migrate to work abroad living up to their responsibility as mothers? Are they bad mothers because even if they are performing their duties as mothers, it is in a way that is so radically different from what is considered good motherhood? In this article, I have considered that macro conditions under which Filipinas are choosing to migrate and perform mothering
Filipina mothers in this study are making meaning of their provider roles in the rubric of their modern motherhood, juxtaposed to patriarchal Filipino narratives of good motherhood and the socially accepted norms of bad motherhood. Although Filipinas are ambivalent about it, they see their financial contributions from afar as part of their mothering because they understand their decisions to migrate are constrained by the conditions of joblessness and regulated by a labor brokering state. Filipinas have accepted that migration is a predictable and oftentimes unavoidable choice in scope of the contemporary Filipino motherhood and family. They come to understand their choices as courageous, an emergent characteristic in the migrant motherhood. Just as giving birth, raising children, working are all measures of motherhood, migration and working abroad is becoming increasingly a marker in Filipina life course in service of their families.

The problems in the popular debate both socially and internally within the migrant Filipino mother’s psyche is the unchanging, calcified definition of “good motherhood” in the Philippine context. Although the labor export policy is nearing its half-century mark, the shifts in gender roles and ideas of the family have yet moved to reflect the stark reality that thousands of Filipinas have migrated and remitted billions of dollars to keep their families and the country afloat. Some Filipino husbands, fathers and sons have taken up the vacuum created by the women who have left, yet Philippine culture and society still holds on to the view that women’s position in the family and society must not change with the tides. So much so that Filipina migrants reflect this unyielding social status through the ambivalence they articulate in their interviews. I believe that this ambivalence is not just an internalized idea of normative motherhood, the “generalized other” in play for Filipina migrants. Rather, the problem is in the limited options in which Filipinas are able to make decisions they can be confident in. Because
the Philippine state so committed to globalizing Filipina as labor export, Filipinas are restricted in the types of mothering they can perform: the physically present, struggling mother or the physically, absent providing mother. To have to make a decision such as this is unfair and punishing.

Perhaps bad migrant mother and good mother is a false dichotomy. I presented the paradox in this way to illustrate the complexity in the stories of migrant mothers I collected through the years. Regardless of if they are labeled bad or good mother by whomever, the social fact is that motherhood is constrained by structural forces and for Filipinas, neoliberal globalization is a crucial social force determining the practice of mothering and the definition of motherhood. Still, migrant mothers are making meaning of their separation in context and in negotiation with decisions they made under the conditions of neoliberal globalization. This link between the macro forces shaping the micro meanings mothers make of their migration is important so that we suture that the most intimate of our emotions are always connected to global, structural forces. However, the unjust part of this linkage is that the burden to understand this paradox and what produces it always falls on families to accept and then adjust to the situation. Although the Philippine state is the culprit in burying itself in debt and relying on migrant remittances to keep the economy afloat, it is often children of migrant mothers that must try to understand why their loved one cannot be present at their birthdays or graduation. Although it is the capitalist world system that restructures economies to pull cheap domestic labor from countries like the Philippines, only to accrue profit in their financial centers like New York City, it is often migrant mothers who have to explain to their children, and sometimes researchers like me, that they did not want to leave home but they had to for the sake of the future of their families. I have found that while Filipinas have contended with themselves, their
family’s opinions, and national debates about their decisions, they are also crafting a practice of motherhood that reflects their social reality. As those adjustments within one’s psyche are articulated to family members, the practice of leaving and still loving is always mired in contradictions.
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