

**Understanding the Backlash:
Why Transnational Migrant Families Are Considered
the "Wrong Kind of Family" in the Philippines**

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[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. When she went to the US, 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 spent most of her adolescence in the Philippines under the care of her aunt and physically apart from her migrant mother – a domestic worker first in Malaysia, then Saudi Arabia, and lastly in the United States. Her case is not unusual. Many children are now growing up in the Philippines physically apart from at least one of their migrant parents. These children are divided between the care of relatives of migrant fathers and migrant mothers, and a few fall under the smaller category of two-parent migrant households. Between 2000 and 2001, I spent 18 months in the Philippines where I did research on young adult children such as Isabelle who had grown up in a transnational household. I conducted 69 interviews with young adults, which I supplemented with interviews with 31 of their guardians. Notably most of the guardians are women –the wives of migrant men and other female kin.

The formation of transnational households is nothing new. Migrants in earlier periods also left behind family members in the country of origin who later followed them to their country of destination or eventually reunited with the return migrant in the country of origin. For instance, this had been the case for Chinese, Italian, and other sojourning labor migrants in the 19th and 20th century.¹ What is new about today's transnational migrant household is its composition. Unlike transnational migrant households in the past, transnational households today form from the migration of women. The feminization of migration in this age of late capitalism has gone hand in hand with an increase in the number of women leaving behind children as they respond to the demand for their labor in richer countries the world over. To name a few, women from poorer countries of Asia – Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines; Eastern Europe – Poland, Rumania, and Ukraine; Central and South America – Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru – are leaving their children behind to pursue domestic work and other forms of low wage labor in richer countries inside or outside their region.² Women from Peru

¹ See Madelyn Hsu. 2000. *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press and Martha Gardner. 2005. *The Qualities of a Citizen*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

² For examples of studies on domestic workers, see Nicole Constable, 1997. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Michelle Gamburd, 2000. *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001. *Domestica*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Pei-Chia Lan, 2006, *Global Cinderellas*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild (eds.) 2003. *Global Woman*, New York: Metropolitan Books, and Rhacel Parreñas, 2001, *Servants of Globalization*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

for instance migrate not just to the United States but also to Italy. Likewise, women from the Philippines migrate to richer countries in Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

Arguably, transnational migrant households constitute a larger portion of migrant families than they did in the past. This is surely the case in the Philippines, where non-governmental organizations estimate there are approximately 9 million children growing up without a migrant father, a migrant mother, or both migrant parents (Kakammpi, 2004).³ This figure represents approximately 27 percent of the overall youth population in the Philippines. But numbers do not tell us the whole story because although transnational migrant households constitute a significant portion of households in the Philippines, they are not necessarily accepted as the norm. The public scorns such households as not just bad for the welfare of children but dangerous to the sanctity of the family. Moreover, they scorn the families of migrant mothers more so than migrant fathers. If one parent has no choice but to migrate, then it is better that a father and not a mother do so. Finally, for many, transnational migrant households symbolize the poverty of the Philippines and the elimination of such households – an ironic return to the nuclear family – is an end goal of many local non-profit organizations.

In this research report, I take a close look at the negative impressions of transnational households in the Philippines. I do so not to dismiss them but instead to explore the question of why such families are negatively perceived in a society that economically depends on their constitution. Moreover, I do so to situate our understanding of the experience of growing up in transnational migrant households in the societal context of the sending country of migration. In so doing, I show that growing up in transnational households is not just made difficult by the physical distance that hampers intergenerational relations but also by the lack of public support for such families.

Transnational households are not a choice.

In the Philippines, transnational households have come to symbolize the poor state of the economy. Without jobs available in the local economy, people migrate, including parents, as we see with the explosion in transnational migrant households in the country. Consequently, many advocates for migrant rights in the Philippines, for example, the organizations Kakkampi and Migrante International, use transnational migrant households as a platform to demand the creation of jobs in the local economy. Many believe that if jobs were available,

³ See Kakammpi (2004). 'NGO Position on the children of overseas workers', at [http://kakammpi.manilasites.com/stories/storyReader\\$42](http://kakammpi.manilasites.com/stories/storyReader$42) (August 30). Kakammpi, a non-governmental advocacy group for the children of migrant workers, also gives the more conservative estimate of 5,847,000 children. The larger figure is an estimate generated by a coalition of migrant-based non-governmental organizations based on the distribution of overseas workers with households according to geographical location and average household size of 3 children per household. There are no reliable figures available on the children of overseas Filipino workers.

people would not migrate, because who would prefer “dirty, dangerous and difficult” work, which is what individuals would face if they go abroad as most end up not in professional jobs but in menial employment. Moreover, Philippine migrant rights advocates, to make their point about the adversities of migration, claim that children in transnational families do not fare well in the long run.

The rejection of transnational migrant households inadvertently calls for a return to the nuclear family, which consequently makes it seem quite anti-feminist. Feminist scholars have long critiqued the notion of the family as a static institution. Moreover, feminists have long constructed the family as a vehicle for the subordination of women. So, in calling for the return migration of parents, it seems that migrant rights advocates in the Philippines are calling for a return to traditional mothering and in the process questioning the inadvertent reconstitution of the gender division of labor that occurs in the formation of transnational migrant households.

Yet, we should not reject the criticism of the transnational family by local advocates for migrant rights in the Philippines. Because in critiquing the formation of transnational households, they are calling attention to the problem of the country’s use of migration as a short-term solution for its long-term economic woes. Moreover, in critiquing the explosion of transnational households in the Philippines and by constructing the creation of such families as a social problem, they are underscoring the fact that it is more difficult for children to receive affection from their parents while living apart rather than together. Finally, in calling for the return migration of parents – both mothers and fathers – they are not calling for a return of women (or for that matter men) to literally stay at home. Calling for the return migration of mothers does not necessarily mean a call for women not to work outside the home.

Threatening gender boundaries

As I noted, transnational households are not a preferred strategy of household maintenance and family reproduction in the Philippines. And if families have no other choice but to send one of its income earners abroad, then it is better that a father rather than a mother go abroad. This is the mainstream perspective concerning migrant families in the Philippines and one that I repeatedly heard in the course of my research. For instance, one mother told me during a focus-group discussion with members of transnational migrant households: “If the mother is not with them, especially that it is really the mother who takes care of the children, prepares for their need. Unlike with the father, he is only the breadwinner of the family. All he does is give his earning to the mother and it is really the mother who manages everything in the house. So most of the time the children really run to the mother. Even if the father is abroad, as long as the mother is in the home, it is better” (A wife of seafarer). This conventional view of the family clearly maintains its traditional gender division of labor and relegates

women to homemaking and men to breadwinning. Needless to say, it also frees men of care responsibilities in the family.

The formation of transnational households engenders drastic changes in the gender division of labor in the family. In the families of migrant men, a slight shift in the gender division of labor occurs as women left behind in the Philippines must adjust to the absence of men and expand definitions of mothering to include those typically relegated to men such as the disciplining of children. In contrast, migration's complete removal of the mother from the home prompts more drastic gender transformations. It encourages the reconstitution of mothering to not just include breadwinning but to also mean a lesser responsibility for homemaking.

In the Philippines, the public has not accepted the social phenomenon of transnational mothering all too well. Instead, a backlash has faced the emigration of mothers. In a speech delivered to the Department of Social Welfare on May 25, 1995, President Fidel Ramos had called for initiatives to keep migrant mothers at home. As he said, "We are not against overseas employment of Filipino women. We are against overseas employment at the cost of family solidarity." By calling for the return migration of mothers, President Ramos does not disregard the dependence of the Philippine economy on the foreign remittances of its mostly female migrant workers. However, he does suggest that it would be immoral for mothers to leave their children in the Philippines. Yet, in calling for the return migration of mothers, President Ramos was only echoing public sentiment. Media reports on the children of migrant mothers repeatedly depict these children as 'deviant' and prone to drinking, drugs, and other vices such as gambling. Yet, such reports are nothing more than mere speculations. Still they fuel the already negative sentiments concerning the migration of mothers in the Philippines

Gender is at play in the negative constructions of transnational migrant households that float around public discourse in the Philippines. Society resists the reconstitution of gender that women's migration engenders. This resistance does not stay in the realm of public discourse, but actually reflects what is going on inside the household of migrant women. For the most part, I found that only women play a large role in the upbringing of the children of migrant mothers. Grandmothers, aunts, older daughters and other female kin are those who are taking up the housework left behind by migrant women. Fathers are for the most part physically present but emotionally absent in the lives of children. By calling for the return migration of mothers, society surely supports the rejection of housework, in other words the "gender revolt," by men left behind in the Philippines.

Yet, children, especially daughters, lose when men reject the care work left behind by migrant mothers. Daughters like the young woman I cited earlier Isabelle Tirador complain that their studies have unduly suffered since the migration of their mothers. This is because they have been saddled with too

much housework. Notably, many children like Isabelle do not necessarily agree with the public and place the blame for their school difficulties on their migrant mothers. However, some do. Still, most children are like Isabelle as they blame their fathers more than their mothers. They see that their fathers have not done much to reciprocate for the work that their mothers do for the family abroad. As Isabelle complains: "It's annoying. I cannot help but feel resentful, because I feel abandoned. It's because my father is here but he does not care. He does not support us, especially when it comes to school."

The division of labor in the family of Isabelle still retains women's responsibility for care work. This is why her schoolwork suffers. Isabelle does more work around the house than does her father. Additionally, despite her greater earnings and despite her geographical distance, her mother also provides more nurturing for Isabelle and her siblings than does their father. As Isabelle 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." Isabelle's mother notably does this with her frequent phone calls from the United States to the Philippines.

In the Philippines, the public could learn a lot from a young woman like Isabelle. If they listened to Isabelle, they would not think that mothers have "abandoned" their children in the process of migration. They would instead look to the fathers left behind in the Philippines and ask them to reciprocate for the contributions of migrant women to the family. Only then will they see that the transnational households of migrant women do not have to be the "wrong kind of family." And only then will we see a reconstitution of gender relations in the family.

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