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**“Like my own children”: Cross-border motherhood of Filipina domestic
helpers in Malaysia**

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Panel: Labour and Migration

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“Like my own children”: Cross-border motherhood of Filipina domestic helpers in Malaysia

Michelle Lee Guy

Increased flows of transmigration to and in Southeast Asia reflected the rapid economic growth and a relatively stable political environment in Southeast Asia during the last two decades. This shift of destination has also corresponded to international political changes which affected migration patterns. For instance, the end of the Cold War (late 1980s). Restrictions on migration from Russian or east and central European countries have been softened. In addition, the Gulf crisis has also led to the involuntary repatriation of millions of migrant workers, residents and refugees. Coupled by the virtually free movement of transnational capital in the era of globalisation, transmigration surged as a result of weaker international constraints and increased economic opportunities. However, this has also illustrated the uneven developments and rising rates of labour mobility in different regions or countries. The poor is further marginalised due to unequal access to formal economic sectors or failed to benefit from the economic growth. In many less developed countries, ineffective state policies and/or adjustment plans, and the intervention of international financial organisations have worsened the existing uneven development in many countries. The Philippines, Egypt, Jamaica and Mexico are a few examples [Bolles, 1983; Beneria and Feldman, 1992; Chant, 1992; Hoodfar, 1997; Buffoni, 1997].

Nonetheless, uneven development, expansion of world economy and technological and communication advancements have further accelerated transmigration, and migrants’ sustenance of multi-stranded social relations or networks that span two or more countries. This leads to a new fluidity of population within the global framework and further raises the question: how do transmigrants sustain socio-economic networks between their countries of origin and settlement in spite of their fluid condition or identities? To what extent does this condition provide a survival strategy, or a means of resistance in reaction to social changes? How do they find a balance between economic mobility and moral obligation? Two approaches, transnationalism and household-survival-strategy could be used to explicate the formation of this new diaspora.

Instead of categorising migrants into different groups according to their nature of mobility, such as ‘temporary’, ‘circular’, ‘permanent’ or ‘sojourner’, transnationalism entails political economic issues pertaining to cross-border movements. For instance, the formation of social classes, identities, sentiments and linkages by transmigrants between their host and home societies [Rouse, 1995; Schiller et. al., 1992; Basch et. al., 1994]. Even though the conceptualisation of transnationalism is closely related to the expansion of the capitalist world-economy, it recognises the fact that migrants have to adjust and adapt to the changing economic, social as well as political conditions between one place to the other. Hence, transnationalism provides a way of accommodating these forces, and a mechanism for transmigrants to survive transnational challenges.

On the other hand, the household-survival strategy approach indicates that transmigration is a decision made by the household as a collective unit, based on the mutual aim of household sustenance. Albeit economical in nature, household

survival offers a comprehensive framework, which “not only takes into account the intersection of gender-selective mobility and gender-differentiated involvement in production and reproduction, but it also concerned with the power relations that give rise to and sustain gender differences.” [Chant and McIlwaine, 1995: 30]. This paper therefore, contents that these approaches provide insights into migration processes, in relation to women and the linkages they create or maintain; and social reproduction at home and abroad¹. An added dimension is weaved in to these processes; that is the perception of motherhood, which was often overlooked in the study of international migration.

The rates of female labour force participation and transmigration surge due to the growth of employment opportunities in the international labour market. However, women’s involvement in transnational mobility has appeared to be a fringe phenomenon to the mainstream international migration. Limited research and attention were paid to the significance of women’s participation in overseas employment, especially within the Southeast Asia region. This delineates that gender issues in the gender-differentiated transmigration processes and job-selectivity have not received adequate analysis. Perhaps, this is mainly due to the dominant patriarchal perspectives of the division of labour between men and women. The importance of women’s participation in migration is therefore compromised. The social forces behind their extended engagement in overseas employment and the consequent effects on their households as well as their personal experiences are neglected in such perspectives².

This paper aims to explore the phenomenon of female transmigration from the Philippines to Malaysia, particularly in relation to the import of their widespread employment in domestic service. The proliferation of Filipina transmigration in many parts of the world and recently in Southeast Asia, has not only enriched the global labour market for women; it gives rise to some questions about existing theories of transmigration, gender relations and women’s roles. It is therefore necessary to investigate the motivations for Filipina transmigration, the cultural construction of gender roles and social reproduction. This new diaspora provides extended dimensions to the studies of women’s participation in the labour market, household and reproduction across national boundaries.

Filipina transmigration to Malaysia offers an extension to the existing perspectives of international labour mobility. Economic forces have been the essence of transmigration approaches that examine migrants’ reasons for departure, such as structuralism, and methodological-individualism [Lycklama, 1989; Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Adepoju 1978; Amin, 1974]. However, these perspectives discounted the significance of social impetus and personal experiences underlying economic factors. The Filipinas in my research reveal variable social forces inherent in their decisions for transmigration³, such as social sacrifice for loved ones, moral and familial obligations, independence and personal aspirations.

¹ However, I realise the shortcomings of these approaches which are presented elsewhere: Lee, 2000.

² Such as studies done by Wallerstein, 1974, Sklair, 1995 and Cohen, 1997a and 1997b show such weaknesses.

³ The research was done in 1996 and 1997 in Malaysia and the Philippines, under the sponsorship of the National University of Malaysia (UKM). I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr.

In addition, embedded in women's involvement in the labour market and cross borders social reproduction is women's endurance of hardwork, guilt and fear. Domestic service represents the circumstances of reproduction in the household in a transnational context⁴, which include female employers and domestic helpers. Women's (chosen or ascribed) social and economic obligations for their households, particularly in transnational domestic service, illustrates a system of stratified reproduction on the one hand; and on the other, a different notion of motherhood.

I content in this paper that Filipina transmigration for work embraces economic and social contexts enmeshed in the country's experiences of historical, political, economic and cultural transformations. These transformations characterised Filipino's ideology of women's roles/identities and job-selectivity, transnationalism, religious and cultural practices. In the first part of the paper, I examine the historical development, economic context and social construction of gendered transmigration in the Philippines. It would then reveal Filipina migrants' motivation for overseas (selected) employment, transnationalism and survival strategies. Bearing in mind the Philippines comprises various ethnic groups, cultures and beliefs, this study refers to the lowland population in the central Philippines who primarily subscribes to Christianity (Catholicism)⁵.

The paper continues to explore the nature of, and women's involvement in, domestic service in Malaysia. Women's (employers and employees) interactions and experiences in transnational reproduction in the household are investigated. This leads to the discussion of the performance or substitution of mothering or nurturing tasks in maintaining (biological) mother-child bonding and the household. The changing notions of motherhood due to women's participation in the labour force and/or transmigration are found embedded in the web of their aspirations for socio-economic mobility, and fulfillment of household responsibilities.

Subsequently, the final section discusses some outcome from this study to the existing discourses of transmigration, gender roles and social reproduction; and the extent of government policies in sustaining women's socio-economic (and subjugated) roles, and in perpetuating the importance of other-mothers.

1.0 The Construction of Transmigration in the Philippines

Historical experiences of foreign domination and traditional social values have constructed Filipino flexible and ambivalent cultural norms and beliefs. Colonisation and foreign influences also enhanced geographical mobility within and outside the Archipelago. The Philippines obtained its independence in 1946

Nanneke Redclift, Prof. Danny Miller, Prof. Mike Rowlands, Prof. Shamsul Amri and Prof. Sharifah Zaleha for their invaluable guidance and comments.

⁴ Ginsburg and Rapp's [1995] book puts forward a political perspective on reproduction, which is applicable to the examination of transmigration and domestic service. They highlighted the global political implication on social and familial continuity. Reproductive practices are fundamentally politicised and stratified because women's bodies and their family planning are greatly affected by new technologies for birth or birth control, state policies, legality pertaining to parenthood, rights to bear or to rear children and transnational childcare services.

⁵ Approximately 85% of the Philippine population Catholics [Steinberg, 1990: 90].

after more than three centuries of colonisation; first by Spain, then followed by the United States of America. Within the long period of colonisation, the Archipelago experienced a wide range of social, economic and political transitions.

The Spanish had radically changed the political administration, religious beliefs, and transformed the traditional patterns of Filipino life and livelihood. However, the Filipino accepted and adjusted well to the new and foreign cultural values as well as the socio-economic institutions. Apart from a fundamental change in gender relations and productive-reproductive division of labour, a large part of the Spanish religious belief, language and cultural values are enmeshed in Philippine society until today. During the period of Spanish colonisation, the church played a major role in restructuring the Filipino's way of life, and eventually gained great power in political and social spheres. In addition, a taxation system was implemented and quotas of produce were imposed on the people.

The church also emphasised the reproductive role of women in the household, and virginity, chastity, the virtue of being a mother and to serve god as exemplified by the ideal Virgin Mary, should be inspired by all women. The family was seen as the centre of women's lives and women were subordinated. Women are therefore distanced from political activities. Patriarchal structures in the political, economic and social spheres were enhanced by Christianity [Mananzan, 1987]. Men were deemed to be heads of the household, breadwinners (and taxpayers) and as dominant actors in politics.

Economic transition from subsistence to commercialisation and market oriented linked the Archipelago to the world economy. This was largely due to the international trade through the galleon business. An indirect political and religious administration through the local male elite group was used by the colonial government. Identification of class or social status was related to race, appearances and dress codes, which were often drawn along gender lines and further reinforced colonial superiority [Blanc-Szanton, 1990].

In the Hispanic era, the transformation of the perception of sexuality and gender roles in the Philippine society was based on the extensive expansion of Catholicism. It was in fact, more of a consequence of the imposition of colonial social norms and values on the Filipinos. The spread of geographical, religious and political ideologies has empowered the colonisers and their acquisition of the Filipinos' compliance and submissiveness. This was however, supported by the people's general flexibility to and acceptance of external influences. Therefore, economic development and religious conveyance were but the implicit strategies implemented by the Spaniards for political, ideological and social domination. In connection to this, Blanc Szanton [1990: 350-360] asserts that:

[t]his strategy had a profound overall impact locally on both men and women because it tightly tied notions of Christian morality and personal good and evil to ideas of colonial superiority and gave a moral edge to the colonialists, thus reinforcing their power and authority. It also gave a moral edge to men over women, transforming their relationship almost to one between colonizer and colonized.

Indeed, such mentality still exists in Philippine society as shown in their admiration of the West, in terms of lifestyle, goods and languages [Cannell, 1999; Johnson, 1997].

After the Spaniards, the Philippines was colonised by the Americans. During the American occupation (1898-42, 45-6), the social structures and gender relations established in the Spanish era had changed. The American colonialists took over the prestigious status of the Spanish. However, women's oppressed condition was later improved. The shift to a more egalitarian and democratic colonial system was largely due to the educational system introduced by the Americans. The system appeared to have stressed equality and freedom [Blanc-Szanton, 1990: 370-371 & 451]. Consequently, Filipino women and men had supposedly enjoyed a greater equality of rights and opportunities in education and employment. In relation to female experiences during this period, Hilsdon [1995: 40] argues that:

the diversity of women's employment and the sharing of tasks by couples have increased women's mobility and power. Women's agency with respect of domestic violence, their grossly unequal levels of housework, and coercive sexual relations, have increased through the 'bargaining power' of their own self-sufficiency.

This bargaining power was further utilised in women's movements, such as the Suffragette Movement (1921-1937) and nationalist actions [Hilsdon, 1995; Israel-Sobritchea, 1987]. This elevation of women's autonomy is further enhanced by women's control on their households' finances.

Despite the economic and social development enhanced by and in part, repatriated by colonialists, serious consequences were observed in the Philippines. Some of the effects prevail, such as population pressure, uneven development and distribution of wealth between rural and urban areas, as well as between regions in the country. Additionally, a large influx of dwellers from less-developed areas into the rapidly growing Metro Manila. This has resulted in an excessive portion of labour force compared to limited job provisions. Thus, un- and under-employment rates are high in the urban areas. Hence, even though foreign colonisation has brought the Philippines into the world economic system mainly as a supplier of primary commodities, it gave rise to the country's dependency on the United States.

The country's fast but biased urbanisation, increased educational opportunity and the introduction of modern technological industrial equipment during the American colonisation, had all upgraded socio-economic status in the Philippines. Nevertheless, World War II had seriously disrupted the country's economy and social life, transportation and communication infrastructures. During the Japanese occupation, resources were used for war needs. Besides, inflation, unemployment, shortages of basic commodities, hunger and disease became chronic problems.

After its Independence, the country found itself afflicted by acute financial shortcomings. Serious trouble in the balance-of-payments, internal and external debts, fall of commodity prices, high rates of un- and under-employment, and the population boom have all hampered economic growth in the country. The failure in

national economic transformation dragged the country into huge deficit; the poverty rate stood high at 59.65 percent in 1985 and 49.52 percent in 1988 [Srinivasan, 1993: 3]. At this juncture, more Filipinos had resorted to overseas employment. Women were particularly affected by acute poverty and lack of basic public services. They had to bear the burden in sustaining their households with limited means. They worked in informal economy or performed a few odd jobs for minimum pay, sought foreign employment; or engaged in the mail-order bride trade.

Migration for work has long been institutionalised in the Philippines. Movement of people within the Archipelago happened before the Spanish colonisation and it perpetuates until today. Drought, harvest seasons and poverty were part of the reasons for movement. Women had generally followed their husbands and families. Massive transmigration began in the early 20th century when a vast number of Filipinos moved to the United States, particularly to Hawaii [CIIR, 1987: 14]. The Filipinos, mostly men, were recruited to work in sugar plantations since 1909.

Intensive movement of independent women was evident in the 1960s, when they migrated for work within the country as a result of capitalist development and increased job offers [Eviota, 1992; Chant and McIlwaine, 1995]. In 1970, it was estimated that the internal migration rates stood at 42.6 percent for men and 58.6 for women [Eviota, 1992: 142]. However, women's aggressive participation in international migration only started a decade later. During the period between 1980 and 1986, the number of women travellers rose from 35.8 percent of the total travellers (155,999) to 46 percent (358,447) [SMC, 1989: 14]. It has increased even further by 1994 when women made up 59.9 percent of the total deployment. Beside economic shortcomings, the forces behind these increasing numbers are also affected by an oversupply of labour, extensive international demands for migrant workers and other social or political factors such as, family reunion, asylum, education, etc.

Under- and unemployment rates in the Philippines have been relatively high. Data from the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) indicated that in 1992, the unemployment rate was 9.8 percent. It showed a lower rate of 9.3 percent in 1993, but rose to 9.5 percent in 1994 and 1995. On the other hand, underemployment rates have been constantly decreasing since 1991; from 22.5 percent in 1991 to 21.7 (1993) and 20.0 in 1995. By October 1996, the unemployment rate had sharply decreased to 7.4 percent, which was the lowest in five years; while underemployment rate had further decreased to 18.7 percent [NEDA, 1997: 15].

In spite of this decrease, there are still many under- or un-employed Filipinos who are in destitute. In 1995, out of a total of about 29 million in the labour force, approximately 2.7 million were unemployed; whereas, only 1.7 million new jobs were created by the end of 1996. An oversupply of labour is a push factor which forces many Filipinos out of their country looking for waged employment. A total number of 719,602 Filipinos were deployed in 1994 and 654,022 in 1995 [Torres, 1996: 39]. These figures are overseas Filipinos workers who are legally registered with the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA). 50.8 percent of the total overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are women, and majority of them works in the service sectors, i.e.

domestic service, entertainment, hotel cleaning and housekeeping department, waitress and restaurant help. In 1994, 73,951 OFWs worked as domestic helpers; 52,964 in entertainment; and 131,932 in other skills which were categorised as vulnerable occupations⁶; 95 percent of which were women. Extensive national debt, inefficiency in job creation, poor management of national financial resources, failure in stabilising programmes, and natural calamities have accentuated poverty rate. Briones [1991: 21] explained that:

In 1989, the government estimated that 49.5 % of the Filipino population of over 60 million lived in absolute poverty. This estimate is now considered understated in the light of the killer typhoon, the earthquake and the volcano eruption which increased the number of poor people by the hundreds of thousands. Equally devastating are the stabilisation programs required by the International Monetary Fund which have drastically increased the number of poor families.

Because women are responsible in housekeeping and childcaring, they are heavily affected by the debt burden. One of the most apparent ways of getting out of or to buffer the burden is to seek employment overseas. At the same time, the government realises the potential of human export and the growing international demands on human resources; thus institutionalised transmigration and its pertinent rules and regulations⁷. For instance, the Philippines has established a Memorandum of Understanding with Malaysia to encourage placements of Filipino workers in Malaysia.

1.1 Filipina Transmigration and Job Selectivity

Attractive remuneration and better working environment, work related benefits and advertisements often draw women and men to emigrate for work. Poor and/or unemployed people flee for a better chance and for a variety of personal motives; whereas, professionals migrate for better salaries and advancement. In addition to this, Filipinos also attach high privilege to overseas employment simply because they are able to earn foreign currency [Torres, 1996: 42]. This encourages some Filipinos to emigrate by choice, even if there are available job opportunities for them in the home country. The general social perception of foreign employment as “prestigious” thereby confers high social status within the community. This echoes Torres’s [1996] assertion that this “colonial mentality” is one of the push factors for Filipinos to leave their country and families behind; and indeed, it is frequently for their families that they emigrate. However, why are there more Filipino women than men transmigrate for work; and concentrate in particular occupations?

The international demands for women workers in export processing or free trade zones have accentuated gendered division of labour. Women are generally perceived as docile, patient and submissive; they are believed to have ‘nimble’

⁶ Which include nurses, musicians, chefs, teachers, cultural dancers, and service workers in hotels and restaurants.

⁷ From as early as 1915 until 1974, overseas labour movement was regulated by the Act 2486; in 1974, a New Labour Code was introduced in the Philippines. These acts have generally listed the requirements for recruiters to pay tax to the national government and provincial authorities; prohibited the recruitment of minors under 18 years old without parental permission; or the use of ethnic minorities for exhibition purposes; and obliged recruiters to ensure migrants were provided with a passage home at the end of their contracts, if they fell ill or were injured [CIIR, 1987: 22].

fingers [Elson and Pearson, 1989] and are perfect for repetitive work which often requires manual dexterity. Elson and Pearson [1989: 90] explain that transnational factories create a situation in which “a higher productivity in less developed countries resulted from greater intensity of work, great continuity of production; or greater control over the performance of the labour force.” Women are particularly favoured. The fundamental explanation is that women enter the labour force with the skill and manual dexterity required for assembly line operations. Women also learn sewing and cutting textiles in the house. Therefore, they require a shorter period of on-the-job training, but are accepted as more productive than most male workers due to their patience and aptitude. However, due to their engagement in household reproductive activities, they are ascribed secondary status in the labour market. Their work is categorised as unskilled or low skilled, thus low waged. In addition, women are the first to be retrenched when the economy is bad or when production is to be reduced. It is assumed that they can return to their homes and resume full-time household responsibilities; whereas men are considered head of the household, who have to financially support their families.

These widespread beliefs about women’s role and ‘natural’ attributes suggest that:

- (a) The femininisation of labour market is obvious, and nation-states play an important part in supporting it. State governments in less developed countries welcome transnational capital and production, and in the Philippines’ case, emigration for work. Their policies of integrating women into development plans and processes are to increase female employment rates, but overlook the consequences and implications;
- (b) Women are subordinated and discriminated against due to their allegedly natural capabilities, arising from the social construction of gender roles and activities. Women are assigned to domestic chores and childcare in the private sphere. Thus, women’s employment in domestic service is related to their prior training at home. The perception of men and women’s activities as public or private indicates separated spheres based on gender; hence, the superior-subordinated statuses.

Such perception of women’s household bounded roles also relates to the construction of household as a ‘safe’ workplace for women. It is widely assumed that they fit in well into the job/s within the household boundary. This is one of the reasons why women are recruited (or choose to be employed) to work in the household.

In the Philippines, the general social construction of women’s roles is also evident in the labour market and women’s job selection. Chant and McIlwaine [1995] found that, recruitment to certain sectors of employment in the Philippines is strongly based on social perceptions and stereotype of gender roles. In their research on employment, migration and household characteristics of low-income population in Cebu City, Lapu-Lapu and Boracay, they recognised that a large number of women were employed in industrial assembly lines. The reason given by their employers was that women are thought to be docile, patient and capable in performing repetitive manual work; they are assumed to be good in handling work which needs a light touch and manual dexterity

Rapid development in the tourism industry also generates a biased and exploitative demand for women workers in formal sectors such as hotel, restaurant, tourist and gift shops; another related and fast growing business is the sex trade. According to Chant and McIlwaine, Filipino women who are engaged in the sex industry, including high-class call girls, escorts or guest-relation ladies, dancers, masseuses, brothel workers, street walkers and frequently, mail-order brides are seen as part of this industry. Some of these women are abandoned by their partners, or are widows with children, who have moved from poor villages. There are limited offers in villages, and for women who lack education and skills. Sex work is an alternative for them to earn sufficient income to support themselves and/or their children, siblings and parents. Better wages and freedom from patriarchal rule at home are often the reasons which encourage women to work in the entertainment and tourism industries.

Gender selectivity and the domestication of women are also apparent in hotel, restaurant and household services; where women are employed for their appearance (beautiful, sexy and colourful) and their traditional roles in housekeeping and childcare. There were 95,352 Filipinas deployed in various countries as domestic helpers in 1991, compared to 81,000 in 1987 [Palma-Beltran, 1992: 3]. In 1995, it was documented that amongst 30,128 legal Filipino migrants in Malaysia, 26,876 Filipinas were employed as domestic helpers. There were 95,352 Filipinas deployed as domestic helpers in 1991, compared to 81,000 in 1987 [Palma-Beltran, 1992: 3]. However, women accepted these stereotyped gender roles and responsibilities. On the one hand, it is a result of socialisation and compliance to the ideology of femininity, hence the perpetuation of these roles and responsibilities. On the other hand, it is a response to the market demand and availability of employment for women.

The Women in Development Foundation conducted a research in between July 1990 and January 1991 on women's emigration, as part of a project for The Philippine Overseas Employment Authority (POEA). It is found that 94 percent of the respondents applied for work as domestic helpers abroad [Palma-Beltran, 1992: 5]. Tyner explains that "social construction of gender influences the migration of Filipina overseas workers and contributes to the increased vulnerability and exploitation of women workers...socialisation processes, as well as gender and racial stereotypes, are manifest within the labour recruitment process, helping to channel women migrants into the domestic services and entertainment sectors of this migration flow." [Tyner, 1994: 589]. This reflects the unequal status of Filipino women and men, which intensifies the suffering of grassroots Filipino women.

Filipino women are also subordinated and exploited by Filipino society itself. The stress on *machismo*, separate spheres for men and women and women are domesticated. They are expected to sacrifice own welfare for the family and be faithful to their religion. This was inherited from the Spanish legacy. Filipino values and morality are however, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory in actual practice. Andres [1984: 7] described it as "Spanish Catholicism—a religion based on folk Christianity mixed with pre-Spanish superstitious and pagan beliefs." The double standard of morality and religiosity results in conflicts between traditional values and norms, religious teachings and modern education. These conflicts are however, delicately compromised, adjusted and accepted by the Filipinos.

Filipinos consider the family and kinship as first priority. A Filipino household is often full of people who are related to each other. Small children are

looked after by a whole lot of family members or relatives; older siblings are also expected to care for the younger ones. In such setting, a child learns to share, adhere to the elders' rules and demands, and rely on other members in the household. He or she is also introduced to the values of *pakikisama* (belongingness or relatedness) and *utang na loob* (inner debt) in an early age. Teasing is a technique used for expressing unacceptable or sensitive issues, and serves as a control for Filipinos to protect and defend their *amor propio* (self-respect) and *hiya* (shame); thereby, be more sensitive to others'. Children are expected to pay their *utang na loob* or inner debt to their parents; younger to older siblings; grandchildren to their grandparents, throughout their natural lives.

Filipino women aspire to have a family and maintain a happy marriage. They also manage household finances. Despite American colonial influences of equality between men and women, Filipinos retain part of their traditional values. For example, as a mother, she is expected to sacrifice her own aspirations for her family, and to suffer in silence. This parallels their religious teaching.

Therefore, Filipinas are motivated (if not impelled) to emigrate in search of income for the survival of their households and themselves. The main reasons are: economic instability and hardship, coupled with moral obligations and religious influences. Some examples are quoted from my research in 1996 and 1997: Gina, a Filipina domestic helper in her early 30s revealed that "I have to find a job overseas because there isn't enough jobs in the Philippines and the pay is very low. I also want to help my family. We are building a house for my mother, and send my younger brother to college." In another instance, Vicky who is a widow with two children has to work abroad to generate income for raising and sending her children to school⁸.

Filipinas' decisions for transmigration enmeshed in their household-survival strategies are weaved in their discourses of sacrifice and caring. Although their ideology of household maintenance is similar to that of their female employer, these women have different ways of expressing it. This is due to different economic and social circumstances. Such differentiated situations also illustrate the essential role of other-mothers represented in women's (transnational) mothering and caring activities.

2.0 Extended Motherhood

Female employers and employees in domestic service envisage paid work outside the household as a means for their family socio-economic well being, but sacrificing closeness to their families and/or children. Beside a non-conformation to conventional perceptions of stereotyped wife/mother roles that are confined to household boundaries, these women induce an extended dimension in the discourse of motherhood⁹, and give rise to a different perception of nurturing/mothering work

⁸ There are other reasons given by Filipina transmigrants in Malaysia, such as, independence; make use of their knowledge; see other countries and cultures; failure in marriage or relationship; or hope to go to work in developed countries after this.

⁹ Kaplan [1992] discusses definitions and perceptions of motherhood, mothering and nurturance, and the differences between womanhood and motherhood. This is not withstanding the fact that

and mother-child relations. In other words, motherhood entails more than giving birth to a child and the natural bonding between the woman who bears the child and the child itself.

The discourse of women's familial roles surrounding the mother-child (biological) bonding as the centre of the family is substituted by 'other-mother'-child relations, particularly for women who participate in domestic service and/or transmigration. Close relationships are formed (sometimes resulted in the children addressing the helper as 'mummy') because of the long hours helpers spend daily with the children. Therefore, the domestic helper becomes the main carer, performing the roles of nurturing/caring and mothering their employers' children, and maintaining the household. This leads to the question about the manifestation of motherhood and nurturance which essentially involves blood or biological relations between the one who mother/nurture and the child. In domestic service, the biological mother is replaced by other-mother (domestic helpers), and mothering or caring responsibilities are paid. Apparently, in the case of transmigration and domestic service, motherhood is beyond biological ties and national and cultural boundaries, and is connected to consumption.

Both sets of women/mothers in domestic service pursue relatively long term (compared to immediate survival needs) goals of personal ambition and family welfare through paid work and consumption. In other words, motherhood encompasses paid employment (and reproduction), consumption of time, materials and domestic labour for the comfort and well being of household members. Female employers who envisage career achievement and freedom outside the household see full-time domestic help as inevitable. One female employer, Mrs. M in Kuala Lumpur says:

It gives us the opportunity to have quality time and it helps in maintaining relationships, and more time for the children. I can leave the children with her [when we go out]. We have the freedom...if I need help, I need continuity and stability, that's a full-time one ...we don't have family support. We need someone to be with us full-time. She is sensitive...very close with my children...it's difficult because this person is going to spend a lot of time with my children and at this time, they are learning to speak, you think that this person is very much a model for them. If I have a maid who speaks a different language, I have to have a lot of patience with her.

The nature of the full-time services provided by Filipina domestic helpers, and their ability to speak English are stressed by the employer. All the employers whom I spoke to, wanted full-time help and see the competence in English as an advantage for their children, which is implicitly a symbol of affluent social status. In addition to this, Mrs M is very pleased with her domestic helper's extra qualities. She stressed that:

there are different perceptions and definitions of motherhood and maternity in different cultures, community and stages of history, see Jolly, 1998; Dureau, 1998; Etienne, 1993.

She is not just intelligent but bright and is always level headed, she knows what she should do; she knows that the children are the first priority... she is very patient... without her help, I'll be yelling at the children. She has a true professional attitude... we are very lucky to have her.

Hence, qualities such as level headed, household oriented, good with children, children as the first priority and patience are required. These are the qualities supposedly possessed by women. On top of that, migrants who have to stay-in as part of the work contract, provide full-time help.

In domestic service, childrearing tasks and mothering that are an essential part of maternity such as feeding, holding, changing, cleaning, companionship and communication with children are largely done by another woman instead of the biological mother. This renders the domestic helper's role as the 'other-mother' significant. On the other hand, the helper's children are also looked after by other women back home. This complicated web of transnational reproduction, and the feelings of guilt (for leaving their children in the hands of others), and justification of having a paid job outside the household within the female employer and migrant worker, is fabricated by the imagination of a better life (or upgraded socio-economic status) and success. The rhetoric of well being, better quality of living and education is enmeshed in both employer's and employee's narratives, which in fact, are practically accomplished by other-mothers.

In the employer's household, the helper ensures daily social needs of the children and other members are met, such as preparing food, housekeeping, and monitoring time tables and activities of children: times for school work, bathing, playing, eating and sleeping, etc. Almost every activity of the children or elderly and other family members is supervised or observed by the helper. This further enhances fear and insecurity of the employer, in terms of mother-child and spousal relationships. Female employers may fear that their husbands might be attracted to their helpers, due to the extensive time and emotion helpers spent with the children and in housekeeping; or because of their younger age and vulnerability, they are often suspected as sexually threatening [Constable, 1997a].

Mrs F told me about the negative factors of having a migrant domestic helper in her house. She admitted that:

You are cautious that there is a foreigner in your house. Sometimes I have to come back earlier when we are out, because you realise that the kids are with a foreigner. It affects privacy too... it's hard for me to deal with it. It's different to have someone else to look after your kids.

This indicates, perhaps, a compromise of privacy and insecurity in the home to attain a better lifestyle. Female employers obviously have the freedom, independence and autonomy in planning their time. The concept of a better quality of living, indicated by the repeated articulation of 'quality time', 'stability', 'have more time for myself', and the need of 'full-time domestic help', is contextualised by the employers' aspiration of socio-economic achievement and advancement. The illustration of a busy life, juggling between waged work outside the house, domestic responsibilities and providing comfort for their children and themselves induces an imagination of time scarcity and 'squeezing' daily activities into their busy schedules. This imagination attributed to the limited but vital time for their

families, which sometimes is substituted with consumption (holidays for the family, materials, gifts and food, paying for domestic help for comfort and household maintenance, domestic and personal cleanliness and well being). It further intensifies the necessities of waged work outside the house and obtaining domestic help to sustain the comfort or welfare and consumption which are accompanied by economic achievement and class status.

Employer Y, for instance, enjoys the freedom and autonomy of spending her own money and time. She is able to schedule and adjust her time of work, though working hours are relatively long, and earns more than enough for herself and her children. This is illuminated in her aspiration and ability of being able to purchase whatever she wants for herself and her children. Living in her parents' house means she gives her parents some money as well. She is proud of her independence and at the same time has her children with her, which means she has the chance of seeing them at any time. Mrs. Y or other female employers are able to enjoy financial independence and therefore consolidate their social status; and domestic help free them for this which would otherwise be difficult to achieve. However, there are dilemmas and fear on the part of female employers.

Differences in perception or expectations of household activities including childcare, between female employers and their domestic helpers, not only created the ground for stratified reproduction, there is tension between them. Because Filipino culture stresses the importance of children, a lot of attention is paid on the children in the household. Female employers might think that the Filipina helpers were paying too much attention to the children that they neglected domestic chores. Even though female employers repeatedly emphasised their trust in the Filipinas, based on their educational level and knowledge of English, suspicion prevails. On the one hand, the positive influences of their abilities on the children enhance the employers' social status, but on the other, their migrant status and differences in ethnicity and culture induce doubts and insecurity. Frequent telephone check-ups, having a relative in the house to keep an eye on the domestic helper, or limited outings without the children, indicated the doubts and lack of trust which underlies the fear of bad treatment of children, thefts or threats to the mother-child attachment and marriage. These feelings of insecurity are expressed by female employers who change their domestic helpers every two years when work contract terminates; or do not allow their helpers to wear stylish clothes or be in the same room as their male employers; or request the helpers to retire to their own rooms or space when the employer's family gets together.

It is reasonable to relate the important impact of other-motherness to the building and maintenance of middle-classness in the case of this study. When the employment of a female domestic helper is deemed crucial to sustain a household of another woman who envisages improved socio-economic status and success, the notion of (biological) motherhood is thus defined by 'quality time', well being, educational achievement and consumption. Therefore, communication, relatedness and emotional attachment between a child and the biological mother are limitedly built on or enhanced by hands-on experiences or perhaps physical interaction, since there is minimum time for interactions. Motherhood as expressed by female employers and Filipina domestics in my study, is defined and perhaps sustained by blood relation and provisions of money and materials—in connection with a better living. The acute desire to spend 'quality time' expressed by female employers delineates the insufficiency of time spent with their families, and the guilt of not

fulfilling their obligations as 'good' mothers. Whether or not this guilt is embedded in the intrinsic maternal (or psychological) efficacy of a mother-child bond, or their ambivalent organisation of priorities is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, a changing notion of motherhood and mothering are noteworthy here.

For Filipina transmigrants, motherhood and mothering span across national boundaries and are extended to other women's families. Mothering is a paid 'reproductive' occupation. However, do the nurturing tasks a helper does in another household stop her devotion and attachment as a mother to her own family? While migrant helpers are paid to look after others' children, their own children are ironically mothered¹⁰ by others. The enmeshment of paid work, nurturing and guilt are therefore encapsulated in the phenomenon of 'maternity for the other', at the expense of transmigrants' endurances and the threat of detached mother-child bondings with, or resentment of, their own children back home. This is exemplified by a few Filipina migrants who work in Kuala Lumpur. For instance, Carol's daughter's refusal to call her 'mummy'; Eve's son who became involved in the drug trade as a deviant reaction to his parents' absence; and Nori's five-year old girl died in a car accident.

This phenomenon (maternity for the other) is however, distinct from other anthropological studies of shared maternity, such as Jolly's [1998] study of other mothers in Fiji and Vanuatu; or Stack's [1993] research of kin or siblings co-operation, that discuss about shared childrearing responsibilities that are unpaid. In the case of Filipina transmigrants in domestic service, the performance of maternal responsibilities is a job which generates income. Thus, (transnational) maternity is compensated in monetary terms.

Although in domestic service, household chores and childcaring are still perceived as women's work, female employers and domestic helpers have transcended the classical framework of women's dependence on conventional family support or male breadwinners. Domestic service illustrates the co-operation among women instead of male domination in the domestic sphere or the patriarchal idealisation of women as good wives and/or mothers, who are household-bonded.

Conclusion

Filipina mobility illustrates not only a shift of women's labour and identities across political and geographical boundaries; it entails strategies of household survival embedded in the practice of transnationalism, and the enmeshment of the discourses of gendered public and private spheres, or productive and reproductive roles. Even though mainstream approaches to the study of transmigration and/or women have shed lights to the understanding of international human mobility, women roles, gender inequality etc; they however, underemphasised women's different lived experiences, self perception and more importantly, women's interactions and co-operation. The concentration on inequalities between men and women has overlooked the essence and significance of women's changing roles and identities, as well as collaboration especially in transnational contexts.

¹⁰ The term 'mothered' by here means nurtured and cared by, is differentiated from the term 'fathered' by which carries the connotation of being biologically related to a man. See Chodorow, 1978: 11.

Filipina transmigration delineates personal and household participation in the global economy, and the effects of this economy on Filipina overseas employment. Filipino women's involvement in household decision making and in the labour market also signifies that women's mobility is beyond economic forces; cultural values and religious belief play an essential role in propelling women to transmigrate due to familial or moral obligation, and to sacrifice for their loved ones.

Apart from the goal of household socio-economic advancement, transmigration has however, reinforced women's stereotypical roles and channeled women to domestic tasks. It also reflects an unequal condition of social reproductive responsibilities in transnational conditions. This stratification is based on differences of social status, culture and women's positions (as employers or employees) in domestic service, which also provides an extension to the notion of mothering.

There are limited studies of the mother-child relationship and motherhood in Southeast Asia, and a lack of interest in feminist and transmigration studies about mothering and children, particularly of their roles in and the implication of transmigration and other-mother-child relations. In fact, not even about children as a marginal subject¹¹. Women's participation in the labour force and international mobility reveals their different and perhaps, complicated priorities and ideologies of establishing a successful career, family and bearing children. There are apparently some contradicting ideas and practices within these ideologies. For example, women in Kuala Lumpur envisage a modern style of living, which entails advancement in career, 'Western' or modern tastes and consumption, nuclear family and independence. However, to accomplish all these characteristics of a modern urban living, women confront multiple responsibilities and shortcomings. For instance, they perform multiple roles of a wife, mother, waged worker and citizen; and are often affected or constrained by cultural and religious influences/constraints, personal capabilities and state's policies. The state's role in regulating the in-flow of female workers and channeling women to certain job sectors along the lines of gender and ethnicity also reinforces women's stereotypical roles.

Working mothers' recital of 'no choice' but to pay for (migrants') domestic help shows their preference for career to childcare, and the lack of state's support in childcare. At the same time, they endure fear, insecurity and guilt for leaving their children to a foreign helper. Such contradictory sentiments are also professed by Filipina migrants. Their cultural emphasis of child-centredness enhances Filipinas' sense of motherhood and selflessness. Yet, children are left behind while Filipinas aspire to provide a 'better' living for them. Thus, the discourse of sacrifice may appear to be dubious: is it a justification of getting out of a depressive and unfulfilled life; or an expression of their guilt?

The states (Malaysia and the Philippines) play an important though indirect role, in perpetuating domestic service. For instance, the Philippine government encourages the large exodus of unemployment and sees the influx of foreign remittances is invariably important to ease local scarcity. The welfare of its

¹¹ Except Battistella and Conaco [1996], and Colen [1995].

emigrants and re-adjustment of returnees may not be its first political and economic priority.

At the receiving end, rapid economic and educational developments in Malaysia have encouraged women to participate in waged employment outside the household, thus sustaining a middle-class life style particularly in urban areas. These women can therefore, afford to pay for transmigrants who are comparatively low paid, to share their household responsibilities. On the one hand, this signifies that the state (Malaysia) benefits from its female citizens' contribution to the economic growth and also, from the female transmigrants' relatively low-paid labour. On the other hand, the state not only has the opportunity to minimise the provision of family support and care for children and the elderly; in fact, these services are subsidised by female labour (i.e. middle-class female wage-earners or professionals, and migrant women). Furthermore, it endorses women's responsibilities in social reproduction and the continuity of daily life, instead of social tasks being shared by men and women. This endorsement accentuates the influx of migrant women and women's subjectivity in the domestic sphere.

The state's effort in systematically importing foreign workers to substitute domestic labour in Malaysian households also indirectly ratifies the significance of the other-mother, and render mothering a paid occupation. This in turn, gives rise to the argument that maternity or motherhood is monetarily valued and is regulated by state's (immigration, labour and political-economic) policies, and international trade and regulations. From the blame of bad motherhood and poor hygiene during colonialism [Stivens, 1998] to the contemporary import of domestic help, the Malaysian government¹² has been controlling and monitoring women's maternal and reproductive roles. Throughout this period, it has practised pronatalism, rapid 'modernisation' and '70-million-population' policy, and systematically regulating the influx of foreign workers.

It is proposed that, due to the inefficiency of the states in terms of economic instability, poor planning and lack of support in home and host countries, legal protection and just labour legislation are essential for transmigrant workers. Protection should be extended to migrants' families and returnees. Elaborate programmes and sufficient fundings from government agencies and private organisations should be created and implemented to ensure their socio-economic welfare, which include children's education, tighten security of remittances, job security, saving plans, and improved standard of living.

¹² Chin [1998] sees the formation of middle-classes in Malaysia as an intervention of the government. State's policies tend to re-domesticate women and to sustain the patriarchal construction of the family.

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