Gender dimensions of care migration: Perspectives from Southeast Asia

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Increasing feminisation of migration

- **Feminisation of migration** in Southeast Asia as women take an increasingly prominent part in contract labour systems.
  
  - Women migrating for overseas jobs as paid domestic workers and careworkers as a result of the intensification of the ‘care deficit’ in advanced industrialized countries where reproductive labour is being shifted from the household to the market.
  
  - Women now comprise the majority of migrant workers legally deployed from the Philippines and Indonesia, of which most are employed as workers in the domestic, care and entertainment sectors.
Structure of Presentation

- **Migration-and-Development optimism & national development discourses**
  - Migrant workers as “agents of development”

- **At the Southernmost end of the global care chain**
  - Care migration as a household livelihood strategy
  - More flexible gender practices of care?

- **In the global cities of Asia**
  - Gender mode of care substitution
  - Global culture of gendered servitude

- **Migrant workers’ self-development**
  - Diminished regime of rights within the nation-state
  - Role of civil society
1. MAD optimism and national development discourses

- In response to the global demand for waged care labour, governments in developing countries in parts of Asia have increasingly promoted *overseas labour migration as a development strategy* to address issues of poverty, domestic unemployment and underemployment, as well as to grow foreign exchange income through remittances.

- The repositioning of the ‘migrant worker’ as an ‘agent of development’ in nationalist discourses is congruent with the recent swing towards a ‘new optimism’ about migration-and-development championed by many international organizations.
Economic **remittances** generated by overseas migrant workers are increasingly seen as a key resource for national development.

The evidence seems to suggest that migrant men—who usually earn more than women—tend to send larger sums while **women are more consistent and reliable remitters** who send home a larger proportion of their earnings.

May be attributed to the **greater moral obligation to remit placed on women**: migrant mothers who leave family members behind are expected to willingly practice self-sacrifice “for the sake of their families” and especially their children (and in contrast, migrant fathers do not face the same moral censure for “neglecting” their children).
2. In the South: Care migration as household livelihood strategy

- Distinctively **gender differentiated migration flows** of unprecedented volume and complexity have become one of the main drivers of contemporary social change in Southeast Asia.
  - taken-for-granted objects of study such as the “family” and the “household” rethought in terms of new spatialities and temporalities as borders are transgressed, rigidified or redrawn in the face of increased transnational mobilities.
  - the **potential rearrangement of gender roles** and **redefinition of gender identities** for both the migrant and the left-behind family members at work.
At the Southernmost end of the care chain ....

- As a ‘non-traditional’ form of labour migration, feminised care migration involving ‘migrant mothers’ immediately triggers off the need to adjust arrangements and relationships of care for millions of left-behind children.

- Research on migrant ‘breadwinning’ mothers emphasises the resilience of gender ideals surrounding motherhood even under the pressures of transnational migration:
  
  – While mothering at a distance reconstitutes ‘good mothering’ to incorporate breadwinning, it also continues maternal responsibility of nurturing by employing (tele)communications regularly to demonstrate transnational ‘circuits of affection’.

  – ‘Long-distant mothering’ is an intensive emotional labour that involves activities of ‘multiple burden and sacrifice’, spending ‘quality time’ during brief home visits, and reaffirming their ‘presence’ through surrogate figures and regular communication with children (Sobritchea, 2007).
At the Southernmost end: Who cares?

- The continued pressure to conform to gender norms with respect to caring and nurturing practices may lead to men's resistance to, and sometimes complete abdication of, parenting responsibilities in their wives' absence.

- The delegation of the mother's nurturing and caring tasks to other women family members, and not the father, upholds normative gender behaviours in the domestic sphere and thereby keep the conventional gendered division of labour intact.
At the Southernmost end: Flexible gender practices of care?

- Other more in-depth studies have begun to reveal a more complex picture of more flexible gender practices of care in sending countries.

- Even in the context of Vietnam with its strong patriarchal traditions, Hoang and Yeoh (2011) found that Vietnamese men struggle to live up to highly moralistic masculine ideals of being both ‘good fathers’ and ‘independent breadwinners’ when their wives are working abroad, by taking on at least some care functions that signified parental love and authority while holding on to paid work (even if monetary returns are low) for a semblance of economic autonomy.

- Calls into question the commonly held view of the delinquent left-behind husband who is resistant to adjust his family duties in the wives’ absence”? 
Today, the figure of the female transnational domestic or care worker constitutes an important aspect of migration flows to the rapidly globalising cities in Asia, as a result of the shift of reproductive work from the household to the market.

The increased labour force participation of skilled women in these developed economies is being sustained on the backs of migrant women from low-growth countries seeking work as domestics and caregivers.
Gendered mode of care substitution

- The neoliberal economic strategies of the state often entails minimizing institutional support for household reproduction, thus leading to the privatization and commercialization of care work, where women (including working women) are expected to subsidize the economy with their caring work in the household.

- As a result, many middle-class households are resorting to what Douglass calls “global householding” strategies to fill the care deficit within families.
Global householding strategies involving the import of migrant women into the family as care substitutes essentially strengthens the **gender divide in the household division of labour** in developed economies.
In the context of eldercare, Ochiai (2010) coined the phrase ‘liberal familialism’, where the cost of purchasing care labour is borne by the family but where filial piety is outsourced to others whose services are bought from the market.
“Global culture of servitude”

• Often perceived as labour that women required little training to do, and coupled with its location within the home, paid domestic service is often devalued and poorly paid as it is considered unskilled work.

• When performed by migrants, paid domestic labour is further devalued and commoditised, not only as work that locals shun, but also work that takes on racialised and nationalised connotations.

• While employer-employee relations may vary across households, asymmetrical power relations and hierarchies “channeled through the discourse of class and culture distinction” produces a “global culture of servitude” that is inextricably intertwined with the availability of lowly paid migrant women.
4. Migrant workers’ ‘self-development’?

- Despite the retrogressive dimensions of transnational domestic and care work, many migrant workers are able to acquire not just a source of independent income but also work-related and personal skills as well as cultural competencies ("working-class cosmopolitans")?

- Apart from contributing to the sustenance of their families, they also build up social capital and bargaining power.
“Permanent temporariness” in the Nation-state

- **Permanent temporariness** fostered by migration regimes in host societies which treat migrant workers as **disposable labour** governed through ‘revolving door’ policies rather than socio-political subjects with rights to family formation and integration.

- **Singapore**: State policies directed at **transience** do not simply target the individual but strictly circumscribe family formation ➔ the foreign domestic worker cannot bring along any dependents and in fact is also prohibited from marrying Singapore citizens and permanent residents.

- The ‘**management of borders**’ requires the ‘**management of bodies**’, and vice versa (Mackie, 2010).
Role of civil society

- For migrant domestic workers who often have limited material resources and few civil rights, the prospect of self-development and the building up of new subjectivities and political spaces to act often runs up against state and society’s rules of marginality and exclusion.

- Lack of political will on the part of most governments implies that the role of non-state actors such as NGOs and faith-based groups is crucial in encouraging migrant women to participate in welfare-oriented or advocacy work, forge cross-national alliances and networks, and pursue transnational activisms to negotiate for human rights and better working conditions.
The intensification of interdependencies between the global North and South through **global householding** and **care migration** strategies offers us a window to reflect on the changing implications for broader social relations in Asia.

As a form of ‘**development**’, care migration inextricably links the fates of individuals, households and nation-states.

More needs to be done in connecting women’s labour migration and the roles they play in development **across sites and scales**, the multiple forms of contribution (economic, social, cultural and political) that women as migrants make to nation-states and households, as well as the spaces for self-development of the women themselves.
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