CHILDREN OF GLOBAL MIGRATION

Transnational Families and Gendered Woes

RHACEL SALAZAR PARREÑAS

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CHAPTER 5

The Gender Paradox: Recreating "the Family" in Women's Migration

The transnational families of migrant women hold tremendous promise for the transgression of gender boundaries. Women's migration not only increases the economic power of women vis-à-vis men, it also places biological mothers outside the domestic sphere. In this chapter, I interrogate whether such structural rearrangements engender ideological shifts in the family. I do so by examining the gender division of labor in transnational families of migrant women. From the perspective of children and other family members left behind in the Philippines, I look at the work of migrant mothers, fathers, children, and extended kin. In my discussion, I show that the maintenance of transnational families simultaneously questions and retains the ideology of separate spheres. It does so not only due to the occupational segregation of migrant women into care work, but as I establish in this chapter also because the ways that migrant families adapt to transnational households enforce gender boundaries.

This enforcement happens in various ways: fathers minimize their household work; migrant mothers maintain responsibility for nurturing their children; eldest daughters and female extended kin bear the brunt of household work left behind by migrant mothers; and finally extended kin impose social pressure on families to follow gender conventions. This process of gender reinforcement contradicts the gender reconstitution initiated by women's migration. This contradiction sets up a gender paradox: the reorganization of households into transnational structures questions the ideology of women's domesticity but the caring practices in these families maintain this view. Significantly, this paradox mars children's acceptance of the reconstitution of mothering and consequently hampers their acceptance of growing up in households split apart from their mothers.

My discussion begins with an overview of transnational mothering and then moves to the general characteristics of the mother-away transnational households in my study. Then, I examine the constitution of gender in the transnational families of migrant mothers via a discussion of the care practices in these households. I argue that the care received by the children of migrant mothers from afar as well as from up close upholds the gender division of labor, that is, of mothers as "the light of the home" and fathers as "the pillar of the home." The reinforcement of this division of labor inadvertently downplays the non-traditional forms of care that children do receive from either their surrogate parents or from their migrant mothers who must provide a reconstituted form of care from a distance. I found that children themselves sometimes do not acknowledge the care that they receive in the transnational family.

Transnational Mothering

Numerous studies have identified the increasing phenomenon of "transnational mothering" among migrant domestic workers from various poor countries including El Salvador, Peru, Poland, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines.[1] Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila define the process of transnational mothering as the organizational reconstitution and rearrangement of motherhood to accommodate the temporal and spatial separations forced by migration.[2] They found that this arrangement forms new meanings of motherhood; specifically it expands mothering to encompass breadwinning. This process must not be seen outside the context of the inequality of "stratified reproduction," an idea developed by anthropologist Shellee Colen to refer to the power relations between those able to reproduce their families and those who are unable to do so.[3] In globalization, migrant women from the Philippines are subject to inequalities of reproduction, because they often face legal restrictions that exclude the members of their families from host societies whose next generation they are reproducing via their care work.[4] Thus family reunification is not always a choice, and transnational mothering becomes an inevitable outcome of migration.

While the issue of transnational mothering has generated a great deal of attention from scholars of the family and migration, still sorely missing from this burgeoning literature is the experience of children. Families are not homogeneous units; instead, "women, men, and children of different sexes do not experience their families in the same way."[5] However, varia-

tions in perspectives on transnational family life remain missing in the literature, as studies continue to focus mainly on the perspective of migrant mothers, but not family members in the country of origin.[6]

Helping amend this gap, anthropologist Michelle Gamburd looks at the cultural transformations engendered by women's migration on family and community life in one Sri Lankan village. More specifically, she asserts that migration forces the rearrangement of household labor in transnational families as it "distribute[s] a portion of women's household chores [including childcare] to men."[7] However, her observation that transnational households still largely depend on the work of female kin suggests that transnational households do not completely transform gender relations. Moreover, she also found that men conveniently avoid housework by drinking or relocating to another area for employment. This finding suggests that a more nuanced process of gender is at work in these families, one that involves a struggle between change and tradition.

Scholars in the Philippines likewise address the cultural transformations engendered by women's migration in the family. Migration scholar Maruja Asis notes that migration poses the risk of endangering the institution of the family, because separation may lead to higher rates of infidelity, strained kin relations, and "wayward" children.[8] However, she is careful to add that the negative consequences of migration to the family are not as extensive as generally assumed by either the media or other scholars.[9] Indeed, the extensive survey conducted for the Scalabrini Migration Center by Graziano Battistella and Maria Cecilia Astrado-Conaco with more than 700 schoolchildren indicates that transnational households do not necessarily result in "severe cases of emotional disturbance nor does it translate into disruptive behavior."[10] Even so, they acknowledge that the "single most important finding in the survey is that the absence of the mother has the most disruptive effect in the life of the children."[11]

This finding does not necessarily suggest that the children of migrant mothers are without care. As Battistella and Astrado-Conaco acknowledge, fathers provide care and extended kin do as well, even if only to a somewhat limited degree. Our survey of 228 schoolchildren in transnational migrant families supports their conclusion. For instance, 61 of 94 children of migrant mothers who participated in our survey claim that they "never" feel unloved while only two "always" do. The rest categorize feeling unloved either "sometimes" or "seldomly." Likewise, 61 children of migrant mothers "never" feel neglected and only three "always" do. Even though fathers and kin left behind in the Philippines do not neglect children, we should acknowledge that their efforts rarely reach the extent to which the wives of migrant men compensate for the geographical distance of their husbands from their families. The efforts of these mothers, which I described extensively in the previous chapter, seem to pay off. Of the students participating in the school survey, 43 of 124 children of migrant fathers are in the top ten of their class, while only 16 of 94 children of migrant mothers are in the same position.

Gender and Care

My discussion of care practices in the families of migrant mothers continues the discussion in previous chapters of gender boundary work in the institutionalization of transnational families in the Philippines. I looked earlier at gender constructions in the public sphere, but I now focus specifically on caring acts in the family. This discussion of caring practices in the family builds from sociologists Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West's discussion of "doing gender" as well as Judith Butler's on gender as performance.[12] According to them, gender is a construction, produced in repeated actions that constitute concealed rules and norms. If so, the possibilities for gender transformation, as Butler notes, are to occur in action as well, specifically in the deformity of the repetition, or in the failure to repeat what one ought to be doing.[13]

Institutional rearrangements make this all the more possible, as Barbara Risman establishes in her study of American families, *Gender Vertigo*.[14] According to Risman, gender is a structure and is not only constituted in practices but created in individual, interactional, and institutional levels and must be tackled on all three levels to generate genuine transformations in society. Looking to "unpack" the social process by which gender transforms in the family, Risman argues that a change in one of these levels could lead to change in the others. Constituted in practices, gender establishes cultural parameters and institutional norms so as to socialize and shape identities. In turn, this controls and limits the practices that constitute gender. As Risman states, "Gender expectations are socially constructed and sustained by socialization, interactional expectations, and institutional arrangements. When individuals and collectivities change socialization, expectations and institutions, the gender structure changes."[15] According to Risman, transformations in socialization, institutional arrangements, or expectations could

destabilize norms to the point of engendering structural changes in the family. For instance, change could occur if women overcome their economic dependence on men, if society redefines domesticity and breadwinning, *or* if society includes nurturance in notions of masculinity.[16] One example Risman provides is the case of single fathers, who begin to attach "mothering" attributes to their construction of gendered selves when forced to do child care. The case of single fathers indicates that institutional transformations could lead to individual (i.e., identity) transformations, which then break cultural parameters and institutional norms that socialize and shape identities.

Applying Risman's argument, the critical mass of women's emigration from the Philippines instigates institutional rearrangements that promise gender shifts in the family. However, as I establish in this chapter, I found this not to be the case. The ideology of women's domesticity retains its stronghold in the family. As I show, this happens because care practices in the transnational families of migrant women retain this ideology. I found that practices do not always conform to institutional structures or abide by institutional reorganizations. Instead, practices could produce contradictory constructions of gender. Moreover, contradictions between the constitution of gender in practices and its construction in institutional organizations may actually spur resistance to change and consequently retain gender inequities in institutionally rearranged families.

Mother-Away Families

In the Philippines, scholars assert that women are less likely to leave their families than men are.[17] They make this claim on the basis of government figures, which indicate that more than half of women migrants are unmarried (approximately 56 percent) whereas the majority of male migrants are married (72 percent).[18] However, we cannot assume that unmarried women are without children. In actuality, I found unmarried women with children to be overrepresented in migrant communities, including in my current sample of thirty children of migrant mothers.[19]

The maintenance of the transnational families of migrant mothers generally relies on the work of extended kin. The survey of schoolchildren reflects their dependence. Only 20 of 94 children of migrant mothers expect their fathers to make sure they are ready for school, whereas 34 rely on either a grandparent or aunt to do so. In contrast, as I established in the previous chapter, the households of migrant fathers are more nuclear in structure. For instance, 87 of 123 children of migrant fathers report that their mothers make sure they are ready for school every morning while only three report that extended kin do this work for them.

The guardianship of children also reflects the wider extended kinship base of the households of migrant mothers. While almost all the children of migrant fathers who participated in this study consider their mother to be their primary guardian, for the children of migrant mothers the guardians are more varied. Most children of single mothers (16) usually identified a female relative as their primary guardian, but some of these children are in contact with their biological fathers. In my sample of children who do have contact with their biological fathers (22), only 11 children identify their father as their primary guardian. Notably, most of them also name another female relative as a co-guardian.

The families of migrant mothers also represent more varied class backgrounds than do the majority of the stable middle-class families of migrant fathers. This heterogeneity is reflected in the occupations of migrant mothers, which include low-skill, semi-professional, and professional jobs, and the diversity of their destinations, which encompass nations in Asia, the Americas, Europe, and the Gulf region. In contrast, the fathers of the children in my study were mostly seafarers. The jobs of the fathers left behind in the Philippines also reflect the wide range of their class status. Nine of their fathers hold low-wage jobs, for instance as drivers and security guards. Others hold higher-status occupations (e.g., college professor, military officer, and research scientist). Notably, only two fathers are jobless in the Philippines.

The Division of Labor in the Transnational Family

Regardless of duration of separation or class status, the children of migrant mothers face greater difficulties than do the children of migrant fathers. As I noted, this fact is not necessarily due to the inadequacy of care in mother-away transnational families. Instead, this is because the provision of care in these families reinforces the conventional division of labor in the family. These practices perpetuate conventional notions of mothering among children and concomitantly establish a standard of care that disagrees with the reconstitution of mothering initiated by the rearrangement of their households.

In this section, I show that children face difficulty accepting the reconstitution of mothering in transnational families because caring practices in the family reinforce the ideology of women's domesticity. I describe the care

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when talking to me about the caregiving responsibilities given to her by her cousin, who works as a nurse in the United States. Claudia describes her role in the lives of her two nieces to be "like a mommy"; she feeds them, washes their clothes, and cooks their food every day. She states: "I do whatever they need to be done. They always call out to me when they need something, just me." Aggravating Claudia's resentment is the minimal work done by the children's father in the Philippines, who, while not divorced or even separated from the migrant mother, remains emotionally distant from his children. Claudia says with frustration: "The father does not work. For example, when something is broken in the house, he often cannot help, not even with the clothes hanger. He does not do anything at all in the house." Although she would rather return to her home province, Claudia stays and looks after the children left under her care. She, not the father, drives them to school. She, not he, attends their school meetings. Finally, she is the one whom they run to for any of their emotional needs. Claudia tells me that she does not do this work out of financial necessity but out of worry for the welfare of her nieces, who she fears would be neglected if left under the care of their father.

Another aunt in a similar situation is Quirina Belleza, who helps look after the three children of her brother and his migrant wife. Quirina does not rely at all on the remittances sent by her sister-in-law in Hong Kong, because she herself receives a greater monthly allowance from her husband, who works as a seafarer. Still, Quirina does a significant amount of household work for her brother's family. As she tells it,

> Before, I would wonder why I was willing to carry them all on my shoulder. I would ask myself that question. Why do I make all these sacrifices? I would ask that too. I only have one child, and yet I make all these sacrifices. Oh, sometimes I would just be overwhelmed by the work. There would be piles and piles of clothes that I need to sort. I would need to clean after so many people. I have to cook before a certain time. I would cook lunch right before noon. When they all get home, all the food is cooked. My schedule would be, I would take my child to school, then I would go to the market, then I would cook. Then after the food is cooked, I would take food to my child at school. But the food for Phoebe and her siblings would be there waiting for them.[47] I take care of everything. The only thing their mother needs to do is give them an allowance. Then, I take care of all the needs in the household. I do this because I do not want the studies of the children negatively affected, which it could be if they had household responsibilities at home.

Quirina helps run two transnational households—one initiated by her husband's migration and the other by her sister-in-law's departure for Hong Kong. In the first household, she performs "intensive mothering" for her son. For instance, she prepares a home-cooked lunch for him to eat at school every day. This practice is quite common among the wives of migrant men, who do so as a way of reciprocating for the efforts of their "ultimate breadwinner" husband. In addition, Quirina helps maintain the transnational household of her brother, who plays the most minimal of roles in his children's lives. In the latter transnational household, the division of labor is distributed only between women. The mother provides for her children economically while Quirina, as an aunt, looks after their other caring needs. With the burden of nurturing multiple households, Quirina's extended family unit clearly has left her with too many responsibilities.

Extended kin, as we see with the cases of Claudia Hizon and Quirina Belleza, do not always welcome their new responsibilities with open arms. Instead, they view this work not as a responsibility that is rightfully their own, but as a burden and cultural expectation that they have no choice but to fulfill. Unfortunately, they meet this cultural expectation not always without strain. I spoke to thirteen female guardians who assist in mother-away transnational families. Many of them are aunts who have families of their own or grandmothers who feel they are too old to raise children. Notably, most of them sobbed during the course of our interview. They are often overextended by their duties and responsibilities to care for the children of migrant parents. Thus, it is dangerous for us to romanticize extended kinship ties and celebrate their work as a symbol of collective family unity, one that goes against the heteronormative structure of nuclear households. In assisting migrant mothers, female extended kin bear the brunt of persistent gender inequalities that free men of household work and in the process they perpetuate the responsibilities bound to them.

If they are so overworked, why do women left behind in the Philippines still provide care? Significantly, not all extended kin need the financial support of migrant women, a fact that lessens their incentive to take on additional family responsibilities; however, it does not necessarily deter them from doing so. The aunt of the earlier cited Roan, for instance, is a business proprietor and landowner not in need of the monthly remittances of her sister, Roan's mother; even so, she takes on the role of surrogate mother in his life. Regardless of financial incentives, cultural expectations of familial cooperation seem to dictate the caring practices of extended kin. The male guardian of Gailanie Tejada, a twenty-three-year-old college student whose parents both work in the United States, explains: "I never really chose to be anyone's guardian. Just that, you know, this responsibility had to fall on my lap because I was here most of the time. And it was like, hey, you know, they

are my nieces. I just feel responsible. . . . but it wasn't really my responsibility because I was not their parent."

In addition, the affinity among women that develops from resentment over how little work men do also motivates female kin to provide care in transnational families. They pity the children, whom they see as those who unduly suffer from the lack of male efforts to reciprocate for the work of migrant women. As Quirina Belleza, the earlier cited guardian and aunt of Phoebe Latorre,[48] exclaims in frustration, "You cannot help but feel resentful. He should be taking care of his children, especially in the evening when they come home from school. He should make sure their clothes are ready for school the next day. He should make sure they finished their homework. He should be attending their meetings at school." Phoebe's father does not do any housework at all but spends most of his time drinking and gambling with neighbors next door. Because of his irresponsibility, Quirina finds herself saddled with mothering responsibilities that she does not see as rightfully hers. As she herself clarifies, "This responsibility is not mine." Clearly, she resents this duty and blames the weight of it on her brother's neglect of his share of household work.

However, she finds herself with no choice but to do this work, because of sentiments of *pakikisama* (mutual obligation) in the family. She acknowledges that Phoebe and her siblings would not be able to go to college without the earnings of their mother and that she as an aunt would not want to see the efforts of her sister-in-law to go in vain. She goes on to state:

You would not be able to help but feel pity, at the situation. Even if you try to stop yourself from taking on the work, you can't do it. You will do the work. How could the mother look after them when she is so far away? You cannot get that out of your mind. You cannot help but think that you have to do the work so she sees her children are okay after all these years. They would be bigger when she gets home. And she will see they are okay and she will know that you are the one who took care of them for her.

Certainly, sentiments of mutual cooperation among extended kin motivate female kin to assist in the maintenance of transnational households. As Quirina adds, "Among me and my siblings, the problem of one is the problem of all."

But even if they are willing to do care work, extended kin would not sacrifice their own personal happiness to meet family obligations. Aunts usually ease their workload upon marriage. Phoebe's aunt, who gives greater priority to her own son than to her brother's children, did so. However, the fact that female kin would be less able to provide care does not necessarily mean that fathers would do more work. Quirina complains: "It is a lot harder now that I have a husband. So I was telling their father that he should be the one disciplining his children, especially now that I have my own family. And I do not really know what he is doing all the way in Cabugao [a distant province]."

The fact that female kin in the Philippines free men of housework leads to contradictions of gender in the family, because it conflicts with migration's promotion of gender boundary crossings. Gender contradictions emerge not only because mothers pass down their caring work to other women, which maintains the ideology of their domesticity; in addition, they emerge out of the social pressure imposed by extended kin to conform to normative gender behavior. As sociologist Judith Lorber observes, "people go along with the imposition of gender norms because the weight of morality as well as immediate social pressure enforces them."[49] In the transnational families of migrant mothers, extended kin tend to assert the normativity of conventional nuclear families. Extended kin are usually part of non-transnational nuclear families or are of the older generation. Scott Coltrane observed that families embedded in dense kin networks face greater social pressure to conform to gender conventions.[50] This I found to be true among the families of migrant mothers.

Extended kin tend to label the families of migrant mothers as not the right kind of family, especially those of single mothers, who make up a considerable portion of migrant women. For instance, consider one interviewee, Lourdes Dumangas,[51] the only child of a single mother working in the United States. Lourdes's grandmother describes the circumstances of her birth as a "*disgrasya*" or "accident," an "embarrassment" that she and her husband feel should not be talked about publicly. Similarly, the extended kin of Rudy Montoya, also a child of a single mother, hold to the ideal of the nuclear household and consider Rudy to be more prone to deviant behavior despite the care that they provide him. His uncle states: "I thank God that he really cared for [Rudy]. That he did not indulge in drugs, not indulge in juvenile delinquency. . . . Based on my observation, an illegitimate child and those children without parental guidance [i.e., children in transnational families] are prone to such kind of vices. This is because nobody guides them. So, they resort to some vices, which lead them to destruction." Extended kin like Rudy's uncle often romanticize the care that biological parents provide children. They consider the substitute care that they give to be an insufficient replacement of parental love. Thus, they assume that children in non-nuclear families are naturally more prone to deviance.

In other instances, I found guardians questioning the ability of fathers to

nurture their children. Voicing her disapproval, the earlier cited aunt Quirina Belleza, for instance, asks in judgment and disbelief: "Can you believe that it is only the father who manages the home? *Is that wrong?* A man is different." Extended kin do not hide their disapproval of transnational and other non-traditional families from the children they are caring for, who do take note of their opinion. As Nelida Yarra[52] states, "My aunt blames my mother for my father's failures in life."

The gender conventions projected by extended kin most likely perpetuate the "stalled revolution" that confronts the outmigration of women from the Philippines.[53] The aunt of Phoebe Latorre, for instance, sees the caring work that she reluctantly performs on behalf of her sister-in-law as work that cannot completely replace what Phoebe's mother herself could provide for her children. Mirroring the views of Phoebe's aunt, children tend to have greater care expectations of their mothers than they do of their fathers, even if the fathers remain in the Philippines. Thus, mothers seem to face pressure to nurture their children directly despite the distance, because violating gender boundaries of mothering risks stigma and the judgment of kin.[54]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've described the caring work of various members of the transnational families of migrant mothers. To capture the essence of their care work, I refer to them as absentee fathers, martyr moms, dutiful daughters, and overextended kin. Absentee fathers only do the most minimal of care work. Conversely, martyr moms do more, but they often mourn in the process of doing care work from a distance. By mourning, mothers portray that they would much rather be at home with their children then earning a living outside the country. This picture often helps their daughters cope with the burden of taking on most of the housework that the mothers have left behind in the process of migration. Dutiful daughters, as I refer to them, do more housework than their fathers do. Finally, extended kin provide a great deal of care to the transnational families of migrant mothers. Yet, I found that extended kin are not without resentment of their responsibilities. In fact, they tend to be overextended, doing more work than the fathers, who usually provide only the bare minimum of care. In reconstituting the family's division of labor, fathers tend to pass on the caregiving responsibilities of children to other women, including daughters, extended kin, and even the migrant mothers themselves. This is done at the expense of women, as men's

freedom from this work strains relations between women, particularly causing tensions between the overworked daughters and female extended kin, who often need to hear that migrant mothers are suffering, too.

The transnational families of migrant mothers embody contradictory constructions of gender. Migration places women outside the domestic sphere and increases their income-earning power. Moreover, the geographical distance imposed by migration helps denaturalize particular mothering acts, making them doable by men and other women in the family. Nonetheless, the caring practices in these families also recreate conventional gender ideologies that seem to be more fitting of modern nuclear families, thereby contradicting the gender ideology promoted by the family's transnational arrangement. Unfortunately, the contradiction of gender that embodies the transnational families of migrant women does not necessarily destabilize the gender structure. It also does not necessarily engender the formation of more egalitarian gender relations in Filipino families. Instead, the internal contradictions of gender, as I show more extensively in the next chapter, may reinforce the ideology of women's domesticity as they could exacerbate the emotional difficulties of children. I illustrate in the next chapter that sentiments of abandonment dominate children's views about their intergenerational relations with their migrant mothers. This is so for children whose mothers nurture them from a distance, children whose extended kin provide care, and children whose fathers are present in their lives. To ease these problems, family members frequently reinforce traditional gender ideologies, and in the process fail to adapt ideological views that support the reconstituted form of mothering imposed by migration.

Institutional rearrangements thus do not necessarily instigate gender transformations. Indeed, my discussion of caring practices in the family indicates that practices do not always conform to structures or abide by institutional reorganizations. In the case of transnational families, contradictions of gender fuel negative perceptions of migrant mothers and hide the degree to which children do receive care. This tells us that gender expectations could still guide practices so as to slow down the changes enabled by institutional rearrangements.[55] This is certainly the case in the transnational families of migrant mothers, whose members confront social pressure from community and kin to recreate the traditional family against its reorganization. The backlash against these families, and men's resistance to the changes encouraged by the rearrangement of their households, tells us that hegemonic beliefs win over the possibilities for change that emerge from the internal contradictions of gender in the family.