

RESEARCH BRIEF

Master and Servant: Contradictory Roles of Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers

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The increasing number of migrant domestic workers leaving the country is now a new global trend. In the past, it was mainly men who went to countries far away; women came as followers. For the last 30 years, however, this has changed so much that today over half of all migrants are women. Furthermore, female migrants have often become the main or single wage earners of their families. Thus, the necessary conditions of work and survival fall increasingly on the shoulders of low-waged, deprived, and exploited migrant women (Gunduz, 2013). More Filipinas opted to work as domestic workers abroad because of poverty and lack of employment opportunities in the Philippines. Large pool of Filipino women chose to migrate in hope of upward economic mobility. People from developing countries are often faced with grim choices. Either they stay at home with their children, who are then kept in poverty with no prospects of a better future, or they leave their country to become migrant workers, but, at the same time, suffer the pains of being separated from their children. Driven away by poverty and social deprivation, the women feel compelled to leave home to provide

an income for their families (Ladegaard, 2012). This proves that Filipina domestic workers are particularly concerned about the future of their children despite the pain of separation from their family.

Paradoxical Households of Migrant Domestic Workers

The separation of transnational domestic workers from their kinship households and their inclusion into new ones is a conflict situation that creates social drama. Contradictions in their positions in these two global households highlight this drama, for example, in their contrasting roles as “domestic workers” in one household and as “breadwinners” in the other (Arnado, 2010, p. 133). International migration has engendered the restructuring of households. There are two contrasting patterns of household restructuring—from co-residential to transnational and from familial to non-kin, co-resident membership—that result in the formation of global households that challenge the conventional notion of the household. These two paradoxical global

households are simultaneously occupied by the foreign domestic worker, who is marginally integrated into the First World household while sustaining her own household in the geographic Third World (Arnado, 2009).

In these two paradoxical global households, transnational domestic workers play contradictory roles as masters (breadwinners) in their own households in the Philippines and as servants (domestic workers) in their employer's households. In this paper, I utilize the dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman (1959) particularly "frontstage" and "backstage" to examine the presentation of self in everyday life of migrant workers, across time and space, that is, in comparison with their contradictory roles as "breadwinners" or "masters" in their left-behind kinship households in the Philippines and as "domestic workers" or "servants" in their global households in foreign countries. According to this perspective, individuals perform actions in everyday life as if they were performers on a stage. Identity is performed through roles. Here, the term "role" works in two ways, referencing both the name for a theatrical character and the ways in which individuals fill roles in reality by acting as a mother, friend, daughter, master (breadwinner), domestic worker (servant), and so forth. Dramaturgy argues that the presentation of oneself through role is a way of engaging with society. The front and backstage schema also describes how migrant workers negotiate self-presentation and identity performance across spatial settings in the presence of various audiences—employers in foreign lands or family/kinship back home.

Several researches conducted by scholars revealed the different roles portrayed by migrant Filipina domestic workers such as servants, breadwinners, and transnational mothers (Parreñas, 2001; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Arnado, 2010). The contradictory roles of migrant Filipina domestic workers are the focus of this paper, particularly their contrasting roles

as masters (breadwinners) and as servants (domestic workers) in different milieu. In the case of Filipina domestic workers, the breach of social drama is when they move out of their own household and into that of their employers. Separated from their families, they are marginally incorporated into new households where they carry out the same work they performed for their families. In addition to the paradox related to their positions as masters (breadwinners) and servants (domestic workers), they face a transgression of national boundaries and confinement in the homes where they work (Arnado, 2010).

Servant Role of Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers

Majority of the Filipino women migrating abroad are employed as domestic workers and several studies conducted showed that there is a stigma attached to being a domestic worker abroad. In her study, Lan (2006) called them "disdained aliens and stratified others— migrant domestic workers in Taiwan doing the 3 D jobs: dirty, dangerous, and demanding works" (p. 36). Parreñas (2001) claimed in her study that migrant Filipina domestic workers are also called the "global servants of late capitalism" (p. 58). They are also known to perform the "three C's— cleaning, cooking, caring." (Anderson, 2000, p. 56). There continues to be a negative social label attached to the occupation of the domestic worker, which results from governments and agencies treating them as cheap, disposable goods (Ueno, 2008). Given these situations, the migrant domestic workers are often subject for abuses and exploitations without any protection from the receiving countries or even from the sending countries. They also become the object of discrimination from the local society because they are unskilled female workers from less developed countries. The stigma of being migrant domestic workers follows them wherever they go and it follows them even outside the household (Ueno, 2010).

Migrant Filipinas working as domestic helpers (servants) shared common experiences of pain, loneliness, discrimination, abuse, exploitation, and other forms of dislocation. The research conducted by Parreñas (2001) spotlighted the diasporic nature of migrant domestic workers. She discussed the social identity of Filipina domestic workers from the shared experiences of dislocation in migration such as partial citizenship, the pain of family separation, contradictory class mobility, and the feeling of non-belonging within the migrant community. According to Parreñas' study, "the dislocation of contradictory class mobility is a concrete effect of the larger structural forces of globalization. It emerges from the unequal development of regions, including the nation-based hierarchy of educational qualifications" (2001, p. 65). Scholars such as Rhacel Parreñas (2001) and Pei-Chia Lan (2006) suggested that many of their informants held relatively prestigious positions in the Philippines, as teachers and supervisors. Prior to their migration, most of the domestic workers are working in the Philippines as teachers, bank employees, or nurses; and now they are doing a new role as domestic workers or servants in the foreign land.

Despite their educational qualifications, Filipina migrant workers find their college credentials and life experiences unrecognized and devalued since they are treated like servants by their employers. Bridget Anderson (2000) raised insight to the extreme manifestations of the deskilling process that many Filipina domestic workers encounter. "Their work can be singularly degrading: cleaning cats' anuses, flushing employers' toilets, scrubbing the floors with a toothbrush three times a day, or standing by the door in the same position for hours at a time" (Anderson, 2000, p. 85). The shift from working as teachers, supervisors, bank employees, and nurses in the Philippines to working as domestic servants in foreign countries means that these migrant women generally have

not gained any marketable or transferable skills for their subsequent jobs especially when they return home.

Concerning their role as servants using the "frontstage" and "backstage" of Goffman, these migrant domestic workers in doing such degrading chores are unknown or unseen by their families back home and this serve as their "backstage". While they are away from home they are portraying servant role and doing dirty works not seen by their family members, but whenever they are conversing with their family members in the Philippines they are pretending that everything is well and this is their "frontstage". In front of their family members they are happy and acting as if everything in their work is doing well. The "frontstage" and "backstage" for Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan according to Lan's (2006) study are the living room and dining room that are reserved for the social activities of the family; they also constitute a front region where the family receives and entertains guests. In contrast, the spaces deemed appropriate for a domestic worker include the kitchen and the balcony. In the backstage, she cooks and does laundry to maintain the daily cycle of the family. Garbage collection is another occasion for migrant domestic workers to leave the houses and meet other migrants in the neighborhood. These are their backstage areas where they can take a break from the observation of their employers and connect with their national fellows. Filipina domestic workers are happy with simple conversation among their friends. "These Filipinas are very simple people. They can get pleasure out of very simple things. She is used to being a servant," stated Pratt and Johnston (2013, p. 290).

Albeit the negative experiences from their employers such as maltreatment and abuse, still many Filipinas are migrating to work as domestic helpers or servants for the future of their families. A study conducted by Ladegaard (2012) revealed how Filipina domestic helpers keep quiet when

they are being abused by their employer and does not complain because they do not want to be sent home. Filipina domestic helpers portray the role of the submissive servants who tolerate their employer's abusive behavior because most of them have huge debts back home and they feel obligated to fulfill their commitment to their families in the Philippines. Yeoh and Huang (2000) argued that "far from eroding notions of family ties, diasporic existence often serves to strengthen women's gendered identifications as sacrificial sisters, daughters, mothers, and wives" (p. 420), and this is confirmed in the stories told by some domestic workers in the study. Domestic workers are not only victims within this tough global economy, but also active agents chasing a better future for their families and themselves.

Master Role of Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers

Different stories from migrant Filipina domestic workers demonstrate how they portray their different roles in a given milieu and in a particular audience. They are migrating in anticipation of upward economic mobility and for the realization of their dreams particularly for the future of their children. In the Philippine context, mothers are doing mostly the reproductive role like taking care of the children, doing the household chores, and home management. On the other hand, fathers are responsible for productive role and serve as the breadwinners of the family. With the migration phenomena, more Filipinas are migrating as domestic workers leaving their families behind. Migrant mothers now have different roles, not just reproductive role but also productive role. They are now contributing through their remittances not only to the economy of the country but most especially their contribution to the financial needs of their family, which is very significant. In most cases, migrant Filipina domestic workers are now the masters or breadwinners in the family. This role as master (breadwinner) is contradictory to

their role in a global household of their foreign employers. As Arnado (2010) said "In addition to the paradox related to their positions as masters (breadwinners) and servants (domestic workers), they face a transgression of national boundaries and confinement in the homes where they work" (p. 140).

Migrant mothers redefine their motherhood and adopt several strategies to negotiate their absence from home and to give meaning to the contradictions they experience through migration. Transnational and gender perspectives on the study of motherhood among migrant women have illustrated the nurturing alternatives available to them, such as sending remittances and gifts, making telephone calls, and turning to their extended family to care for their children. Filipino migrant mothers in France are in the same situation, their maternal obligations now include their new role as breadwinners (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). Although migration is characterized by pains, anxieties, loneliness, and tensions due to familial separation, but on the other hand migration has empowered Filipino women by giving them voice in household decision-making since now they are playing the role of masters (breadwinners) in their own household.

The study conducted by Fresnoza-Flot (2009) among Filipino domestic migrants in France pointed out that being a good mother implies the fulfillment of their maternal obligations through their new role as primary economic provider or breadwinner of the family. The physical absence of migrant mothers from home is compensated somehow by the remittances they regularly send to their families in the Philippines. They usually prioritize the education of their children because they believe that this is their way towards upward social mobility.

Migrant Filipina domestic workers are now in contradictory situations. On the one hand, their family members consider them as "masters" for being the breadwinners in the family through remittances they sent from abroad. They are now

being served and treated like “master” by their own family members, a contrasting role they usually do abroad as servants. Their husbands and families celebrate with them because they can now have a better life and can afford to buy healthy and nutritious food, better houses, and study in private schools. On the other hand, the same migrant women are portraying the role of “servants” in a foreign country; they are maltreated, abused, and exploited by their employers. In a foreign land, Filipina domestic workers are the ones serving their masters but here in the Philippines they are the masters of their own households.

With regards to “frontstage” and “backstage” of Erving Goffman (1959), in front of the audience back at home, their family, friends, and villagers, migrant workers are cast in the role of “masters” or breadwinners who have acquired financial and material gains for the welfare of the family. The dark secrets of their working experiences as servants abroad—filled with hardships, suffering, and alienation—are often hidden backstage and shared only with migrants in the host country (Lan, 2006). During vacation time in the country of migrant Filipina domestic workers, they usually spent on improving the family house, buying new furniture, and shopping for their children. They are the ones consulted in major decision-making considering the fact that they are now the breadwinners in the family. In front of their family they are the heroes and this is synonymous of being the masters of the households, a contradictory role they have in a foreign land where they were considered as servants or domestic workers by their employers.

CONCLUSION

In the Philippine context, family is the basic unit of society and parents play a vital role in building a better society. Both parents, father and mother, are expected to stay always

beside their children to guide them. In a typical Filipino family, fathers are the breadwinners while mothers usually are responsible for reproductive role and stay home to look after their children. This is not the scenario nowadays in every Filipino family due to economic and poverty situations in the Philippines. More Filipinas are migrating as domestic workers to attain upward economic mobility. But female migration brought many changes and challenges in the roles portrayed by Filipinas. This migration gave them the experience of living in two paradoxical global households where the contradictory roles of masters (breadwinners) and servants (domestic workers) emerged. Portraying these contradictory roles is like performing in “frontstage” and “backstage” coined by Erving Goffman. Acting as the masters (breadwinners) in their familial households gave them empowerment because from reproductive role they are now into productive role and oftentimes considered by their family members in major decision-making. The remittances they sent to their families uplifted their economic mobility. Migrant Filipina domestic workers can now send their children to private schools, buy healthy and nutritious food, purchase of new appliances, and acquire land and better house. These are just some of the benefits they obtained from working as domestic workers abroad and also serve as their frontstage.

On the other hand, in portraying the role of servants (domestic workers) in their employer’s households they are mostly doing the dirty, dangerous, and demanding jobs like cleaning, cooking, caring, laundry, garbage collection, and other chores. Migrant Filipina domestic workers experienced several forms of abuse, exploitation, and maltreatment from their employers. But despite their situations, they keep quiet when they are being abused by their employer and do not complain because they do not want to be sent home. Filipina domestic workers portray the role of submissive servants who tolerate

their employer's abusive behavior because most of them have huge debts back home and they feel obligated to fulfill their commitment to their families in the Philippines. This scenario is unknown to their family in the Philippines, they just keep this dark side of their servant role to themselves and this is their "backstage"; the reality of everyday life away from home. They endure the pain and loneliness of family separation just to give their loved ones a good life and better future.

Thus, becoming a good domestic worker also requires becoming a good wife and mother whose "empowerment" stems from her ability to supervise her families from a distance. Their ability to manage their families both financially and emotionally is very important to retain strong family relationship but migrant domestic workers should not use money and material goods or promote unnecessary consumerism as an effective way of managing and strengthening family relationships. Instead, they should invest their earnings into productive ventures, such as small business to stop their family's overdependence on the money earned from migration. Therefore, the contradictory roles of migrant Filipina domestic workers as "master" and "servant" in different households made them not only victims because of their role as servants but they are also agents and become masters in their own simple ways. As agents they are empowered and able to give better future for their family.

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