to visit Cosmos. Its décor was inspired by outerspace movies like Star Wars. It was full of color and movement and shifting lights. They played the best American disco music. If you were lucky you could meet a U.S. citizen. Maybe he would even want to get married and you could go and live in El Paso. Things like that happen at discotheques. Once a Jordanian soldier in service at Fort Bliss had asked her to marry him the first time they met at Cosmos. But he wanted to return to his country, and she said no. Cosmos was definitely the best discotheque in Juárez, and Sandra could be found dancing there amidst the deafening sound of music every Saturday evening.

The inexhaustible level of energy of women working at the maquiladoras never ceased to impress me. How could anyone be in the mood for all-night dancing on Saturdays after forty-eight weekly hours of industrial work? I had seen many of these women stretching their muscles late at night, trying to soothe the pain they felt at the waist. After the incessant noise of the sewing machines, how could anyone long for even higher levels of sound? But as Sandra explained to me, life is too short. If you don’t go out and have fun, you will come to the end of your days having done nothing but sleep, eat and work. And she didn’t call that living.

F I F T Y - F I V E

The Care Crisis in the Philippines (2003)
Children and Transnational Families in the New Global Economy
Rhacel Salazar Parreñas

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A growing crisis of care troubles the world’s most developed nations. Even as demand for care has increased, its supply has dwindled. The result is a care deficit, to which women from the Philippines have responded in force. Roughly two-thirds of Filipino migrant workers are women, and their exodus, usually to fill domestic jobs, has generated tremendous social change in the Philippines. When female migrants are mothers, they leave behind their own children, usually in the care of other women. Many Filipino children now grow up in divided households, where geographic separation places children under serious emotional strain. And yet it is impossible to overlook the significance of migrant labor to the Philippine economy. Some 34 to 54 percent of the Filipino population is sustained by remittances from migrant workers.

Women in the Philippines, just like their counterparts in postindustrial nations, suffer from a "stalled revolution." Local gender ideology remains a few steps behind the economic reality, which has produced numerous female-headed, transnational households. Consequently, a far greater degree of anxiety attends the quality of family life for the dependents of migrant mothers than for those of migrant fathers. The dominant gender ideology, after all, holds that a woman’s rightful place is in the home, and the households of migrant mothers present a challenge to this view. In response, government officials and journalists denounce migrating mothers, claiming that they have caused the Filipino family to deteriorate, children to be abandoned, and a crisis of care to take root in the Philippines. To end this crisis, critics admonish, these mothers must return. Indeed, in May 1995, Philippine president Fidel Ramos called for initiatives to keep migrant mothers at home. He declared, "We are not against overseas employment of Filipino women. We are against overseas employment at the cost of family solidarity." Migration, Ramos strongly implied, is morally acceptable only when it is undertaken by single, childless women.

The Philippines consistently places the suffering of poor women at the center of social problems that they face. Despite the fact that millions of women are left with the responsibility for raising them as having children to rear, the reports, "A child is a burden when it is the last... Others link the inadequate child care situation to a lack of drinking." Women's drinking within bloodlines, however, is not only within Marawi. There are sons and daughters who have been left behind, sons and daughters who have been left behind and parents who have been left behind. The same conclusion supports the view that the social welfare system does not enough of the how many children in view, our society benefits.

From January 1999, nine in-depth interviews, grew up in the Philippines. The interviews are oriented with migrant mothers and parents. They have endured experiences, the media’s dark headlines, the fear and anxiety their mothers have endured. They have survived hardships in their efforts to raise children when they return to the Philippines and communicate with their mothers clearly understand their parents. To call for the end of the burden of the mothers, the women have increasingly decided to raise their knowledge, to raise their consciousness, toward a more just and equal society. They must be blamed on mothers who are forced to divert their...
The Philippine media reinforce this position by consistently publishing sensational reports on the suffering of children in transnational families. These reports tend to vilify migrant mothers, suggesting that their children face more profound problems than do those of migrant fathers; and despite the fact that most of the children in question are left with relatives, journalists tend to refer to them as having been “abandoned.” One article reports, “A child’s sense of loss appears to be greater when it is the mother who leaves to work abroad.”

Others link the emigration of mothers to the inadequate child care and unstable family life that eventually lead such children to “drugs, gambling, and drinking.” Writes one columnist, “Incest and rapes within blood relatives are alarmingly on the rise not only within Metro Manila but also in the provinces. There are some indications that the absence of mothers who have become OCWs [overseas contract workers] has something to do with the situation.”

The same columnist elsewhere expresses the popular view that the children of migrants become a burden on the larger society: “Guidance counselors and social welfare agencies can show grim statistics on how many children have turned into liabilities to our society because of absentee parents.”

From January to July 2000, I conducted sixty-nine in-depth interviews with young adults who grew up in transnational households in the Philippines. Almost none of these children have yet reunited with their migrant parents. I interviewed thirty children with migrant mothers, twenty-six with migrant fathers, and thirteen with two migrant parents. The children I spoke to certainly had endured emotional hardships; but contrary to the media’s dark presentation, they did not all experience their mothers’ migration as abandonment. The hardships in their lives were frequently diminished when they received support from extended families and communities, when they enjoyed open communication with their migrant parents, and when they clearly understood the limited financial options that led their parents to migrate in the first place.

To call for the return of migrant mothers is to ignore the fact that the Philippines has grown increasingly dependent on their remittances. To acknowledge this reality could lead the Philippines toward a more egalitarian gender ideology. Casting blame on migrant mothers, however, serves only to divert the society’s attention away from these children’s needs, finally aggravating their difficulties by stigmatizing their family’s choices.

The Philippine media has certainly sensationalized the issue of child welfare in migrating families, but that should not obscure the fact that the Philippines faces a genuine care crisis. Care is now the country’s primary export. Remittances—mostly from migrant domestic workers—constitute the economy’s largest source of foreign currency, totaling almost $7 billion in 1999. With limited choices in the Philippines, women migrate to help sustain their families financially, but the price is very high. Both mothers and children suffer from family separation, even under the best of circumstances.

Migrant mothers who work as nannies often face the painful prospect of caring for other people’s children while being unable to tend to their own. One such mother in Rome, Rosemarie Samaniego, describes this predicament:

When the girl that I take care of calls her mother “Mama,” my heart jumps all the time because my children also call me “Mama.” I feel the gap caused by our physical separation especially in the morning, when I pack [her] lunch, because that’s what I used to do for my children. . . . I used to do that very same thing for them. I begin thinking that at this hour I should be taking care of my very own children and not someone else’s, someone who is not related to me in any way, shape, or form. . . . The work that I do here is done for my family, but the problem is they are not close to me but are far away in the Philippines. Sometimes, you feel the separation and you start to cry. Sometimes, I just start crying while I am sweeping the floor because I am thinking about my children in the Philippines. Sometimes, when I receive a letter from my children telling me that they are sick, I look up out the window and ask the Lord to look after them and make sure they get better even without me around to care after them. [Starts crying.] If I had wings, I would fly home to my children. Just for a moment, to see my children and take care of their needs, help them, then fly back over here to continue my work.

The children of migrant workers also suffer an incalculable loss when a parent disappears overseas.
As Ellen Seneriches, a twenty-one-year-old daughter of a domestic worker in New York, says:

There are times when you want to talk to her, but she is not there. That is really hard, very difficult. . . . There are times when I want to call her, speak to her, cry to her, and I cannot. It is difficult. The only thing that I can do is write to her. And I cannot cry through the e-mails and sometimes I just want to cry on her shoulder.

Children like Ellen, who was only ten years old when her mother left for New York, often repress their longings to reunite with their mothers. Knowing that their families have few financial options, they are left with no choice but to put their emotional needs aside. Often, they do so knowing that their mothers’ care and attention have been diverted to other children. When I asked her how she felt about her mother’s wards in New York, Ellen responded:

Very jealous. I am very, very jealous. There was even a time when she told the children she was caring for that they are very lucky that she was taking care of them, while her children back in the Philippines don’t even have a mom to take care of them. It’s pathetic, but it’s true. We were left alone by ourselves and we had to be responsible at a very young age without a mother. Can you imagine?

Children like Ellen do experience emotional stress when they grow up in transnational households. But it is worth emphasizing that many migrant mothers attempt to sustain ties with their children, and their children often recognize and appreciate these efforts. Although her mother, undocumented in the United States, has not returned once to the Philippines in twelve years, Ellen does not doubt that she has struggled to remain close to her children despite the distance. In fact, although Ellen lives only three hours away from her father, she feels closer to and communicates more frequently with her mother. Says Ellen:

I realize that my mother loves us very much. Even if she is far away, she would send us her love. She would make us feel like she really loved us. She would do this by always being there. She would just assure us that whenever we have problems to just call her and tell her.

[Pauses.] And so I know that it has been more difficult for her than other mothers. She has had to do extra work because she is so far away from us.

Like Ellen’s mother, who managed to “be there” despite a vast distance, other migrant mothers do not necessarily “abandon” their traditional duty of nurturing their families. Rather, they provide emotional care and guidance from afar. Ellen even credits her mother for her success in school. Now a second-year medical school student, Ellen graduated at the top of her class in both high school and college. She says that the constant, open communication she shares with her mother provided the key to her success. She reflects:

We communicate as often as we can, like twice or thrice a week through e-mails. Then she would call us every week. And it is very expensive, I know. . . . My mother and I have a very open relationship. We are like best friends. She would give me advice whenever I had problems. . . . She understands everything I do. She understands why I would act this or that way. She knows me really well. And she is also transparent to me. She always knows when I have problems, and likewise I know when she does. I am closer to her than to my father.

Ellen is clearly not the abandoned child or social liability the Philippine media describe. She not only benefits from sufficient parental support—from both her geographically distant mother and her nearby father—but also exceeds the bar of excellence in schooling. Her story indicates that children of migrant parents can overcome the emotional strains of transnational family life, and that they can enjoy sufficient family support, even from their geographically distant parent.

Of course, her good fortune is not universal. But it does raise questions about how children withstand such geographical strains; whether and how they maintain solid ties with their distant parents; and what circumstances lead some children to feel that those ties have weakened or given out. The Philippine media tend to equate the absence of a child’s biological mother with abandonment, which leads to the assumption that all such children, lacking familial support, will become social liabilities.  

But I do not believe this, and others feel the same. Filipino children feel the absence of one biological parent if they are brought up alongside family members, like aunts and uncles, who care for them and allay their fears. A flood of children come from other family members and other relatives in the Philippines.

Ellen is one of the lucky ones. The Seneriches and Filipino Americans experience the absence of one or both biological parents in a way that is not universal. I believe that other children have far more continuity than they are given credit for.

Jeek Embala: A Transnational Filipina

Jeek Embala is a twenty-two-year-old student at the University of California at Berkeley. Born in the United States, she has lived there all her life. She is the daughter of a Filipino American and her mother is from the Philippines. Jeek has two older siblings: a sister and a brother. Jeek and her siblings have seen their parents in the Philippines only twice in their lives. Jeek’s mother has lived in California since the early 1990s and works as a domestic worker. Jeek’s father has not worked in the United States for many years and has lived in the Philippines for most of his life. Jeek’s parents met in the Philippines and have been married for over twenty years. Jeek has a strong relationship with her mother, who she describes as very supportive and loving. She also has a close relationship with her sister, who she describes as her best friend. Jeek has a more distant relationship with her brother, who she says is not very present in her life.

Jeek is a junior at Berkeley studying psychology. She is interested in pursuing a career in social work or psychology. She is very involved in her community and volunteers at a local soup kitchen twice a week. Jeek is also involved in the Filipino American community and participates in events and activities organized by the Philippines.

Jeek’s experience as a transnational Filipino American has been important in shaping her identity. She describes her identity as being a mix of her Filipino and American heritage. She feels proud of her heritage and is committed to preserving it. Jeek is very involved in her community and is passionate about helping others. She hopes to use her education and her passion to make a positive impact in her community.
But I found that positive surrogate parental figures and open communication with the migrant parent, along with acknowledgment of the migrant parent's contribution to the collective mobility of the family, ally many of the emotional insecurities that arise from transnational household arrangements. Children who lack these resources have greater difficulty adjusting.

Extensive research bears out this observation. The Scalabrini Migration Center, a nongovernmental organization for migration research in the Philippines, surveyed 709 elementary-school-age Filipino children in 2000, comparing the experiences of those with a father absent, a mother absent, both parents absent, and both parents present. While the researchers observed that parental absence does prompt feelings of abandonment and loneliness among children, they concluded that "it does not necessarily become an occasion for laziness and unruliness." Rather, if the extended family supports the child and makes him or her aware of the material benefits migration brings, the child may actually be spurred toward greater self-reliance and ambition, despite continued longings for family unity.

Jeek Pereno's life has been defined by those longings. At twenty-five, he is a merchandiser for a large department store in the Philippines. His mother more than adequately provided for his children, managing with her meager wages first as a domestic worker and then as a nurse's aide, to send them $200 a month and even to purchase a house in a fairly exclusive neighborhood in the city center. But Jeek still feels abandoned and insecure in his mother's affection, he believes that growing up without his parents robbed him of the discipline he needed. Like other children of migrant workers, Jeek does not feel that his faraway mother's financial support has been enough. Instead, he wishes she had offered him more guidance, concern, and emotional care.

Jeek was eight years old when his parents relocated to New York and left him, along with his three brothers, in the care of their aunt. Eight years later, Jeek's father passed away, and two of his brothers (the oldest and youngest) joined their mother in New York. Visa complications have prevented Jeek and his other brother from following—but their mother has not once returned to visit them in the Philippines.

When I expressed surprise at this, Jeek solemnly replied: "Never. It will cost too much, she said."

Years of separation breed unfamiliarity among family members, and Jeek does not have the emotional security of knowing that his mother has genuinely tried to lessen that estrangement. For Jeek, only a visit could shore up this security after seventeen years of separation. His mother's weekly phone calls do not suffice. And because he experiences his mother's absence as indifference, he does not feel comfortable communicating with her openly about his unmet needs. The result is repression, which in turn aggravates the resentment he feels. Jeek told me:

I talk to my mother once in a while. But what happens, whenever she asks how I am doing, I just say okay. It's not like I am really going to tell her that I have problems here. . . . It's not like she can do anything about my problems if I told her about them. Financial problems, yes she can help. But not the other problems, like emotional problems. . . . She will try to give advice, but I am not very interested to talk to her about things like that. . . . Of course, you are still young, you don't really know what is going to happen in the future. Before you realize that your parents left you, you can't do anything about it anymore. You are not in a position to tell them not to leave you. They should have not left us. (Sobs.)

I asked Jeek if his mother knew he felt this way. "No," he said, "she doesn't know." Asked if he received emotional support from anyone, Jeek replied, "As much as possible, if I can handle it. I try not to get emotional support from anyone. I just keep everything inside me."

Jeek feels that his mother not only abandoned him but failed to leave him with an adequate surrogate. His aunt had a family and children of her own. Jeek recalled, "While I do know that my aunt loves me and she took care of us to the best of her ability, I am not convinced that it was enough. . . . Because we were not disciplined enough. She let us do whatever we wanted to do." Jeek feels that his education suffered from this lack of discipline, and he greatly regrets not having concentrated on his studies. Having completed only a two-year vocational program in electronics, he doubts his competency to pursue a college degree. At twenty-five, he feels stuck, with only the limited option of turning from one low-paying job to another.
Children who, unlike Jeek, received good surrogate parenting managed to concentrate on their studies and in the end to fare much better. Rudy Montoya, a nineteen-year-old whose mother has done domestic work in Hong Kong for more than twelve years, credits his mother's brother for helping him succeed in high school:

My uncle is the most influential person in my life. Well, he is in Saudi Arabia now... He would tell me that my mother loves me and not to resent her, and that whatever happens, I should write her. He would encourage me and he would tell me to trust the Lord. And then, I remember in high school, he would push me to study. I learned a lot from him in high school. Showing his love for me, he would help me with my schoolwork... The time that I spent with my uncle was short, but he is the person who helped me grow up to be a better person.

Unlike Jeek's aunt, Rudy's uncle did not have a family of his own. He was able to devote more time to Rudy, instilling discipline in his young charge as well as reassuring him that his mother, who is the sole income provider for her family, did not abandon him. Although his mother has returned to visit him only twice—once when he was in the fourth grade and again two years later—Rudy, who is now a college student, sees his mother as a "good provider" who has made tremendous sacrifices for his sake. This knowledge offers him emotional security, as well as a strong feeling of gratitude. When I asked him about the importance of education, he replied, "I haven't given anything back to my mother for the sacrifices she has made for me. The least I could do for her is graduate, so that I can find a good job, so that eventually I will be able to help her out, too."

Many children resolve the emotional insecurity of being left by their parents the way that Rudy has: by viewing migration as a sacrifice to be repaid by adult children. Children who believe that their migrant mothers are struggling for the sake of the family's collective mobility, rather than leaving to live the "good life," are less likely to feel abandoned and more likely to accept their mothers' efforts to sustain close relationships from a distance. One such child is Theresa Bascara, an eighteen-year-old college student whose mother has worked as a domestic in Hong Kong since 1984. As she puts it, "[My inspiration is] my mother, because she is the one suffering over there. So the least I can give back to her is doing well in school."

For Ellen Seneriches, the image of her suffering mother compels her to reciprocate. She explained:

Especially after my mother left, I became more motivated to study harder. I did because my mother was sacrificing a lot and I had to compensate for how hard it is to be away from your children and then crying a lot at night, not knowing what we are doing. She would tell us in voice tapes. She would send us voice tapes every month, twice a month, and we would hear her cry in these tapes.

Having witnessed her mother's suffering even from a distance, Ellen can acknowledge the sacrifices her mother has made and the hardships she has endured in order to be a "good provider" for her family. This knowledge assuaged the resentment Ellen frequently felt when her mother first migrated.

Many of the children I interviewed harbored images of their mothers as martyrs, and they often found comfort in their mother's grief over not being able to nurture them directly. The expectation among such children that they will continue to receive a significant part of their nurturing from their mothers, despite the distance, points to the conservative gender ideology most of them maintain. But whether or not they see their mothers as martyrs, children of migrant women feel best cared for when their mothers make consistent efforts to show parental concern from a distance. As Jeek's and Ellen's stories indicate, open communication with the migrant parent soothes feelings of abandonment; those who enjoy such open channels fare much better than those who lack them. Not only does communication ease children's emotional difficulties; it also fosters a sense of family unity, and it promotes the view that migration is a survival strategy that requires sacrifices from both children and parents for the good of the family.

For daughters of migrant mothers, such sacrifices commonly take the form of assuming some of their absent mothers' responsibilities, including the care of younger siblings. As Ellen told me:

It was a strategy, and all of us had to sacrifice for it... We all had to adjust, every day of our lives... Imagine waking up without a mother calling...
calling you for breakfast. Then there would be no one to prepare the clothes for my brothers. We are all going to school… I had to wake up earlier. I had to prepare their clothes. I had to wake them up and help them prepare for school. Then I also had to help them with their homework at night. I had to tutor them.

As I would stay with them, I would help them with their homework. I would help them with their studies. I would help them with their schoolwork.

Ellen’s effort to assist in the household’s daily maintenance was another way she reciprocated for her mother’s emotional and financial support. Viewing her added work as a positive life lesson, Ellen feels that these responsibilities enabled her to develop leadership skills. Notably, her high school selected her as its first ever female commander for its government-mandated military training corps.

Unlike Jeek, Ellen is secure in her mother’s love. She feels that her mother has struggled to be there; Jeek feels that his has not. Hence, Ellen has managed to successfully adjust to her household arrangement, while Jeek has not. The continual open communication between Ellen and her mother has had ramifications for their entire family: in return for her mother’s sacrifices, Ellen assumed the role of second mother to her younger siblings, visiting them every weekend during her college years in order to spend quality time with them.

In general, eldest daughters of migrant mothers assume substantial familial responsibilities, often becoming substitute mothers for their siblings. Similarly, eldest sons stand in for migrant fathers. Amando Martinez, a twenty-nine-year-old entrepreneur whose father worked in Dubai for six months while he was in high school, related his experiences:

I became a father during those six months. It was like, ughhh, I made the rules… I was able to see that it was hard if your family is not complete, you feel that there is something missing. It’s because the major decisions, at times, was not old enough for them. I was only a teenager, and I was not that strong in my convictions when it came to making decisions. It was like work that I should not have been responsible for. I still wanted to play. So it was an added burden on my side.

Even when there is a parent left behind, children of migrant workers tend to assume added familial responsibilities, and these responsibilities vary along gender lines. Nonetheless, the weight tends to fall most heavily on children of migrant mothers, who are often left to struggle with the lack of male responsibility for care work in the Philippines. While a great number of children with migrant fathers receive fulltime care from stay-at-home mothers, those with migrant mothers do not receive the same amount of care. Their fathers are likely to hold full-time jobs, and they are rarely able to see their children. Of thirty children of migrant mothers I interviewed, only four had stay-at-home fathers.

Most fathers passed the caregiving responsibilities on to other relatives, many of whom, like Jeek’s aunt, already had families of their own to care for and regarded the children of migrant relatives as an extra burden. Families of migrant fathers are less likely to rely on the care work of extended kin. Among my interviewees, thirteen of twenty-six children with migrant fathers lived with and were cared for primarily by their stay-at-home mothers.

Children of migrant mothers, unlike those of migrant fathers, have the added burden of accepting nontraditional gender roles in their families. The Scalabrini Migration Center reports that these children “tend to be more angry, confused, apathetic, and more afraid than other children.”

They are caught within an “ideological stall” in the societal acceptance of female-headed transnational households. Because her family does not fit the traditional nuclear household model, Theresa Bascara sees her family as “broken,” even though she describes her relationship to her mother as “very close.” She says, “A family, I can say, is only whole if your father is the one working and your mother is only staying at home. It’s okay if your mother works too, but somewhere close to you.”

Some children in transnational families adjust to their household arrangements with greater success than others do. Those who feel that their mothers strive to nurture them as well as to be good providers are more likely to be accepting. The support of extended kin, or perhaps a sense of public accountability for their welfare, also helps children
combat feelings of abandonment. Likewise, a more
gender-egalitarian value system enables children to
appreciate their mothers as good providers, which
in turn allows them to see their mothers’ migrations
as demonstrations of love.

Even if they are well-adjusted, however, children
in transnational families still suffer the loss of
family intimacy. They are often forced to compens-
ate by accepting commodities, rather than affection,
as the most tangible reassurance of their parents’
love. By putting family intimacy on hold, children
can only wait for the opportunity to spend quality
time with their migrant parents. Even when that
time comes, it can be painful. As Theresa related:

When my mother is home, I just sit next to her.
I stare at her face, to see the changes in her
face, to see how she aged during the years
that she was away from us. But when she is about
to go back to Hong Kong, it’s like my heart is
going to burst. I would just cry and cry. I really
can’t explain the feeling. Sometimes, when my
mother is home, preparing to leave for Hong
Kong, I would just start crying, because I
already start missing her. I ask myself, how
many more years will it be until we see each
other again?

Telephone calls. That’s not enough. You
can’t hug her, kiss her, feel her, everything. You
can’t feel her presence. It’s just words that you
have. What I want is to have my mother close
to me, to see her grow older, and when she is
sick, you are the one taking care of her and
when you are sick, she is the one taking care
of you.

Not surprisingly, when asked if they would
leave their own children to take jobs as migrant
workers, almost all of my respondents answered,
“Never.” When I asked why not, most said that they
would never want their children to go through what
they had gone through, or to be denied what they
were denied, in their childhoods. Armando Martínez
best summed up what children in transnational
families lose when he said:

You just cannot buy the times when your family
is together. Isn’t that right? Time together is
something that money can neither buy nor replace. . . . The first time your baby speaks, you
are not there. Other people would experience
that joy. And when your child graduates with
honors, you are also not there. . . . Is that right?
When your child wins a basketball game, no
one will be there to ask him how his game
went, how many points he made. Is that right?
Your family loses, don’t you think?

Children of transnational families repeatedly
stress that they lack the pleasure and comfort of
daily interaction with their parents. Nonetheless,
these children do not necessarily become
“delinquent,” nor are their families necessarily broken,
like the manner in which the Philippine media depicts.
Armando mirrored the opinion of most of the chil-

Transnational families were not always equated with “broken homes” in the Philippine public
discourse. Nor did labor migration emerge as a per-
cieved threat to family life before the late 1980s,
when the number of migrant workers significantly
increased. This suggests that changes to the gen-
dered division of family labor may have as much as
anything else to do with the Philippine care crisis.
The Philippine public simply assumes that the
proliferation of female-headed transnational
households would lead to suffering in the
children. The Salvadoran women of migran
families, however, believe that women are more
likely to lose their children and pay more than
women who do not migrate. Unlike the Filipino
mothers, who are kept from leaving by economic
forces, women are kept from leaving by economic
forces, to facilitate the economic needs of the
main in the family. Women’s separation from their
mothers is necessary for the survival of their fami-
lies. Rather, the burden of the separation is
experienced in the family, where women are forced
in the family, where women are forced
households will wreak havoc on the lives of children. The Scalabrini Migration Center explains that children of migrant mothers suffer more than those of migrant fathers because child rearing is "a role [women] are not adept at, are better prepared for, and pay more attention to." The center's study, like the Philippine media, recommends that mothers be kept from migrating. The researchers suggest that "economic programs should be targeted particularly toward the absorption of the female labor force, to facilitate the possibility for mothers to remain in the family." Yet the return migration of mothers is neither a plausible nor a desirable solution. Rather, it implicitly accepts gender inequities in the family, even as it ignores the economic pressures generated by globalization.

As national discourse on the care crisis in the Philippines vilifies migrant women, it also downplays the contributions these women make to the country's economy. Such hand-wringing merely offers the public an opportunity to discipline women morally and to resist reconstituting family life in a manner that reflects the country's increasing dependence on women's foreign remittances. This pattern is not exclusive to the Philippines. As Arjun Appadarai observes, globalization has commonly led to "ideas about gender and modernity that create large female work forces at the same time that cross-national ideologies of 'culture,' 'authenticity,' and national honor put increasing pressure on various communities to morally discipline working women."

The moral disciplining of women, however, hurts those who most need protection. It pathologizes the children of migrants, and it downplays the emotional difficulties that mothers like Rosemarie Samaniego face. Moreover, it ignores the struggles of migrant mothers who attempt to nurture their children from a distance. Vilifying migrant women as bad mothers promotes the view that the return to the nuclear family is the only viable solution to the emotional difficulties of children in transnational families. In so doing, it directs attention away from the special needs of children in transnational families—for instance, the need for community projects that would improve communication among far-flung family members, or for special school programs, the like of which did not exist at my field research site. It's also a strategy that sidelines the agency and adaptability of the children themselves.

To say that children are perfectly capable of adjusting to nontraditional households is not to say that they don't suffer hardships. But the overwhelming public support for keeping migrant mothers at home does have a negative impact on these children's adjustment. Implicit in such views is a rejection of the division of labor in families with migrant mothers, and the message such children receive is that their household arrangements are simply wrong. Moreover, calling for the return migration of women does not necessarily solve the problems plaguing families in the Philippines. Domestic violence and male infidelity, for instance—two social problems the government has never adequately addressed—would still threaten the well-being of children.

Without a doubt, the children of migrant Filipino domestic workers suffer from the extraction of care from the global south to the global north. The plight of these children is a timely and necessary concern for nongovernmental, governmental, and academic groups in the Philippines. Blaming migrant mothers, however, has not helped, and has even hurt, those whose relationships suffer most from the movement of care in the global economy. Advocates for children in transnational families should focus their attention not on calling for a return to the nuclear family but on trying to meet the special needs transnational families possess. One of those needs is for a reconstituted gender ideology in the Philippines; another is for the elimination of legislation that penalizes migrant families in the nations where they work.

If we want to secure quality care for the children of transnational families, gender egalitarian views of child rearing are essential. Such views can be fostered by recognizing the economic contributions women make to their families and by redefining motherhood to include providing for one's family. Gender should be recognized as a fluid social category, and masculinity should be redefined, as the larger society questions the biologically based assumption that only women have an aptitude to provide care. Government officials and the media could then stop vilifying migrant women, redirecting their attention, instead, to men. They could question the lack of male accountability for care work, and they could demand that men, including migrant fathers, take more responsibility for the emotional welfare of their children.
The host societies of migrant Filipino domestic workers should also be held more accountable for their welfare and for that of their families. These women’s work allows First World women to enter the paid labor force. As one Dutch employer states, “There are people who would look after children, but other things are more fun. Carers from other countries, if we can use their surplus carers, that’s a solution.”

Yet, as we’ve seen, one cannot simply assume that the care leaving disadvantaged nations is surplus care. What is a solution for rich nations creates a problem in poor nations. Mothers like Rosemarie Samaniego and children like Ellen Seneriches and Jeek Pereno bear the brunt of this problem, while the receiving countries and the employing families benefit.

Most receiving countries have yet to recognize the contributions of their migrant care workers. They have consistently ignored these women’s rights and limited their full incorporation into society. The wages of migrant workers are so low that they cannot afford to bring their own families to join them, or to regularly visit their children in the Philippines; relegated to the status of guest workers, they are restricted to the low-wage employment sector, and with very few exceptions, the migration of their spouses and children is also restricted. These arrangements work to the benefit of employers, since migrant care workers can give the best possible care for their employers’ families when they are free of care-giving responsibilities to their own families. But there is a dire need to lobby for more inclusive policies, and for employers to develop a sense of accountability for their workers’ children. After all, migrant workers significantly help their employers to reduce their families’ care deficit.

NOTES


2. While women made up only 12 percent of the total worker outflow in 1975, this figure grew to 47 percent twelve years later in 1987 and surpassed the number of men by 1995. IBON Facts and Figures, “Filipinos as Global Slaves,” vol. 22, nos. 5-6 (March 15–31, 1999), p. 6.

3. Notably, Filipino women . . . also alleviate the care crisis plaguing hospitals and hospices in more developed nations by providing services as professional nurses. At the expense of the quality of professional care in the Philippines, nurses have sought the better wages available outside the country.


5. Hochschild and Machung, 1989. By “stalled revolution,” Hochschild refers to the fact that the economic contributions of women to the family have not been met with a corresponding increase in male responsibility for household work.


12. Rosemarie Samaniego is a pseudonym. This excerpt is drawn from Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

13. Ellen Seneriches and the names of the other children whom I quote in this article are all pseudonyms.


15. A two-part special report by Caparas, “OCWs Children,” which appeared on the front page of the Manila Times, summarized the media’s incredibly negative view on the plight of children in transnational families. It reported that children suffer from a “psychological toll,” “extreme loneliness,” “unbearable loss,” “strained relations,” “incest,” and consequently delinquency, as indicated, for instance, by rampant “premature pregnancies.” See also Caparas’s “OCWs and the Changing Lives of Filipino Families,” Manila Times (August 29, n.d.), pp. 1, 5.

16. Similarly, I found that children use the corollary image of the struggling “breadwinner” father to negotiate the emotional strains of their transnational household arrangement.