Reconceptualizing Motherhood,
Reconceptualizing Resistance

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Reconceptualizing Motherhood, Reconceptualizing Resistance

MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS, TRANSNATIONAL HYPER-MATERNALISM AND ACTIVISM

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Abstract
Female labour migrants face contradictory expectations. On the one hand, they are expected to be their families’ and communities’ economic saviours. On the other hand, they are expected to meet their maternal responsibilities even while they are abroad; otherwise, they face charges of maternal neglect. My goal in this article is to highlight how female migrant workers handle these conflicting demands. I discuss how migrant women simultaneously adapt to and challenge imposed family separation through the case study of Filipina live-in caregivers in Canada. They do this in two ways. First, they exhibit transnational hyper-maternalism which allows them to overcome accusations of neglect. They ‘mother across borders’ by providing for their families and by using technology to supervise, monitor and communicate with their children. In doing so, they reify and contest established gender roles. Second, they are active in civil society. In doing so, they highlight the negative consequences migrant women and their families face. Reconceptualized notions of motherhood characterize migrant women’s transnational parenting, while the desire to ameliorate the negative consequences of family separation and reunification explain their activism.

Keywords
migrant domestic workers, transnational families, women-employment, women-migrants

There are several ways to understand the feminization of migration. According to neoclassical approaches to labour migration, the rise in the numbers of female migrants is a simple supply/demand scenario (Yin 2005).
Migrant-receiving countries facing labour shortages in female-dominated industries such as manufacturing, nursing and care work recruit women who are facing unemployment in migrant-sending countries. Using gender analysis to assess these trends provides useful insights. From a macro-level perspective, applying gender analysis shows how trade liberalization and structural adjustment policies have disproportionately affected more women than men in developing countries, leading more women to view labour migration as the solution to their economic difficulties (Elson 1995).

Gender analysis also illustrates how sending states have responded to such economic constraints by deliberately using stereotypes on female ‘docility’ and female ‘compliance’ to market their nationals to prospective employers abroad; sending states have concurrently used rhetoric concerning female sacrifice and piety to encourage the labour migration of women (Rodriguez 2010). Migrant women send remittances more frequently than male migrants and are more likely to maintain ties to their home countries, making them a crucial source of revenue for economically beleaguered countries. Sending countries therefore benefit financially from the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. Moreover, although receiving states still encourage male migration in lucrative industries such as seafaring and construction, gender analysis explains receiving states’ preference for female migrants, who are deemed cheaper and more acquiescent than male migrants. As Mirjana Morokvasic (1984) and Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson (1981) discuss, employers in receiving states see female migrants as ideal workers because they are reticent and more productive. Employers ‘manufacture’ migrant women’s ‘otherness’ by emphasizing migrant women’s purportedly ‘inferior’ race, nationality, class and femininity (Maher and Staab 2005). They construct ‘poor’ and ‘working-class’ ‘Third World’ women as better workers driven by economic desperation.

In addition, gender analysis shows how gender discourses that bolster the private/public dichotomy and nuclear family ideologies - all of which operate within the nation, the community and the household - affect migrants’ experiences. Gendered norms enshrining ideas concerning maternal nurturing and paternal providing affect migrants’ decisions to migrate (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997), influence their experiences in their host country (Bakan and Stasiulis 2005) and impact their re-integration into their home country upon repatriation (Parrenas 2001, 2005).

For labour migrants with children, such gendered norms irrevocably clash with socially-constructed expectations of maternal behaviour, which have their roots in patriarchal ideology. These require the supposedly ‘nurturing’ presence of women in the household to ensure that families receive sufficient care. Migrant women who decide to work abroad in order to meet their families’ economic needs are caught in an ideological impasse. On the one hand, sending countries’ rhetoric of female piety and sacrifice venerate female migrants as ‘martyrs’ whose labour is an integral source of revenue for their communities, households and home countries (Rodriguez 2010). On the other hand, dominant expectations of maternal behaviour have as its
basis women’s physical presence in the household; the purported inability of female labour migrants to be active caregivers within their households has therefore caused much consternation within migrants’ home communities, which equate the demise of nuclear family structures with female migration (Parrenas 2005). Thus, female migrants face competing expectations. They are expected to be economic heroes whose remittances ‘save’ their countries, communities and households. At the same time, they are criticised for absenteeism. Conceptualizing maternal care and domesticity as the sole domain of women simultaneously elevates and denigrates migrant women, in that the maternal ‘sacrifice’ they display by working abroad is a source of both admiration and condemnation for sending and receiving states, migrants’ families and migrants themselves.

Ironically, the existing literature on gender ‘care chains’ affirm gendered narratives, leading to a ‘precarious linearity’ which assumes that ‘there is a total and universal subjugation of third world women in the domestic sphere’ and that ‘affect is a cumulative essence that can be neatly packaged and transferred’ (Manalansan 2008: 2). By providing a ‘linear’ account that portrays Third World women as triply oppressed by sending states, receiving states and their employers, the oppressive circumstances facing migrant women at every juncture of their migration trajectories appear inevitable. Migrant women are tragic because their maternal obligations to take care of their families forces them to seek employment abroad - where they oftentimes have to care for other people’s children - while other women in their home communities are dispatched to care for their children. Though I recognise the different ways in which the feminization of migration is harmful and acknowledge the pains wrought by family separation and reunification which scholars like Rhacel Parrenas (2001, 2005) and Geraldine Pratt (2009) discuss, I argue that it is equally important to acknowledge the complexity with which migrant women view their circumstances. In order to see ‘distinctive counter-narratives’, questioning the inevitability of migrant women’s supposedly inferior positions as ‘racialized and menial “others”’ in migration is important (Kofman 2001).

I do this by examining how migrant domestic workers meet their maternal obligations. Through the case study of Filipina live-in caregivers in Toronto, I contest the ‘tragic linearity’ that has dominated most accounts of migrant women by highlighting two findings. First, migrant women handle the restrictions imposed by distance by practising what I call transnational hyper-maternalism. For the purpose of this article, I define transnational hyper-maternalism as the way migrant women exhibit maternal care through financial support and thorough surveillance techniques enabling close communication across borders. Whereas migrant women in other periods maintained contact with their families, technological breakthroughs allow migrant women today to be more involved in their households, paving the way for more intensive transnational mothering. Indeed, the women I interviewed are arguably better equipped to meet their maternal responsibilities while abroad compared to when they
lived in the same households as their families. In doing so, my respondents affirm and contest gendered scripts of maternalist ideology. Second, migrant women resist the restrictions wrought by labour migration policies and the way these policies separate them from their families through their activism, refuting the stereotype of ‘passive’ migrant women.

METHODS

The material for this analysis comes from fifteen semi-structured interviews I undertook in the spring and summer of 2010 with Filipina migrant domestic workers, who ranged in age from twenty-five to thirty-eight and who have been in Canada from 4 months to 25 years. Because of my broader interests in migrant domestic workers’ civic activities, I began my study by contacting activists who are part of Filipino community groups and migrants’ rights organizations. Upon discussing the motivations behind their activist work, I saw that issues of motherhood, family separation and reunification were concerns that were prominent among migrant domestic workers, regardless of the type of organization with which they were affiliated. I asked for their insights on transnational mothering and began exploring how motherhood and family issues infused their activism. Through snowball sampling, I was able to correspond with other migrant workers with diverse family arrangements and migration trajectories. For this article, I selected interviews with women who were involved in some capacity with civil society organizations, worked as live-in caregivers and who had children. The purpose of my interviews was to determine how women negotiated their maternal responsibilities from afar and how such maternal responsibilities informed their political activities in Canada.

TRANSNATIONAL HYPER-MATERNALISM

Upon the establishment of the Caribbean Domestics Scheme (CDS) in the 1950s, Canadians began seeing women from developing countries as desirable migrant domestic workers. In contrast to British and Irish domestics, women from Third World countries were deemed ‘captive’ labour who could be forced to stay in domestic work for extended periods of time due to their dire economic situations (Schecter 1998). The advances of the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s led more white, middle-class women to pursue careers, leading to an increased need for new childcare arrangements that were cheaper and more widely available than public daycare. The Foreign Domestics Movements (FDM), established in 1981, endeavoured to meet white, middle-class Canadian women’s demand for migrant domestic workers. It made improvements to the CDS by entrenching labour protections and by ‘rewarding’ migrant women and their families.
with Canadian permanent residency after working as live-in caregivers for 24 months and an additional 12 months as ‘live-out’ carers (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Schecter 1998). Once migrant women successfully met these terms and other stipulations concerning their ability to successfully integrate into Canada (Arat-Koc 1989), they were able to claim their families.

The Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP), founded in 1992, replaced the FDM and attempted to improve live-in caregivers’ situations through increased professionalization. Women who entered the programme are seen as caregivers, not as domestics, and had to show educational credentials and work experience. These changes occurred because migrant domestic workers formed organizations like Intercede, and took the initiative to ask for reforms after so-called ‘progressive’ organizations in Canada did not want to be associated with them, an observation that my respondents say is the case even today (Villasin and Phillips 1994).

Despite these efforts, the changes were mainly semantic. Live-in caregivers had the same reproductive responsibilities as women under the FDM. They are tasked with housekeeping and child and elderly care, among many duties. The only decisive changes that occurred worked to the disadvantage of caregivers. According to community leader Cecilia Diocson, the transition to the LCP only made it more difficult for women to enter Canada, and also contributed to migrant women’s deskilling. That the composition of migrant domestic workers shifted during this time period is indicative of how race, class and gender constructions shift to accommodate the demands of employers and receiving states. Changing perceptions of Caribbean women’s ‘suitability’ for domestic work because of their activism and their ostensible propensity for ‘trouble’ coincided with an increase in the numbers of Filipina migrant domestic workers. Whereas working-class Caribbean women with elementary school educations dominated the FDM initially, the majority of the women who were part of the FDM in its later years and the LCP are Filipina women with university degrees (Bakan and Stasiulis 2005).

The women I interviewed, like other live-in caregivers, were employed as white-collar professionals in the Philippines. Although they lamented the deskilling they faced as live-in caregivers and expressed a desire to eventually find work in their former professions, they were determined to stay in Canada. Because working as live-in caregivers allowed them meet their children’s needs, they were willing to overlook the pain caused by separation.

Seeing that gendered expectations affect female labour migrants, whose maternal ‘caring’ responsibilities are different from male migrants’ ‘breadwinning’ duties in that they were asked to be the primary caregivers even while abroad, the weight of parental obligations created higher expectations for my respondents to sustain family relationships. The entrenchment of gender roles can be seen by looking at how daily caregiving responsibilities in migrant families are transferred not to fathers, who are left behind in the country, but to other female members of the household, or to local women...
hired to work as caregivers (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parrenas 2005). The women I interviewed, who either hired nannies or asked female relatives to be caregivers, justified these arrangements by asserting the inherent superiority of female care, thus illustrating the pervasiveness of maternalist ideology. My respondents described female caregivers as being more ‘nurturing’ and more ‘affectionate’, though those women whose children were being cared for by a paid caregiver expressed some unease regarding the financial transaction lying at the heart of their arrangements. One woman felt the irony of hiring a caregiver while being employed as a caregiver herself, which has led her to question maternalist ideology. She asserted that her experiences in Canada, juxtaposed with her interactions with ‘competent’ male caregivers in Canadian nursing homes, led her to believe that perhaps providing caregivers with sufficient financial compensation for their labour was more important than gender identity in ensuring competent caregiving. When asked whether generous financial compensation motivated her to do her job well as a caregiver, she said yes. Such insights, however, were in the minority. My respondents’ participation in global care chains shows the ubiquity of ideals on ‘female’ nurturing.

Men, in contrast, are deemed ‘distant’ and ‘unreliable’. Although the husbands of seven respondents also work abroad, the inability of these fathers to assume an active role in child rearing because of physical distance was irrelevant; like the remaining respondents, whose husbands were in the Philippines, these women believed that female care was superior. Notwithstanding the fact that one-third of my respondents were separated from their husbands, one of whom had lost contact with his family, both separated and married women disputed the legitimacy of men’s caregiving abilities, showing that maternalist ideology persisted across various marital and family statuses. While there are examples of migrant men who contest gender scripts by remaining involved with their households (Nobles 2011), my respondents adhered to gendered divisions of labour and argued that caregiving is the purview of women, implicitly showing how gender socialization and reproduction is reduced to a ‘feminine act’. Consequently, they affirmed the findings of gender care chain scholars (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parrenas 2005) who discuss how labour migration reifies the gendered nature of caregiving.

Adherence to gender scripts can also be witnessed when looking at migrant women’s decisions to go abroad and the way they show maternal love through financial support. Migrant mothers may show their care through their financial contributions to the household, in some cases ‘paradoxically resulting in the way mother–child ties are reduced to commodity-based relations with love shown through material goods’. This then allows them to transgress gender expectations by occupying the ‘breadwinning’ role of the family (Moors 2003). All of my respondents had careers prior to migrating, and agreed that earning money and being their families’ primary providers heightened feelings of independence and self-worth.
Nonetheless, mothers, children and family members deem financial support as insufficient evidence of maternal love because of the mother’s physical absence from the household. Though migrant women are represented as heroes of the nation by the sending state, they are also blamed by the sending state, the media, family and community members and other actors for ‘abandoning’ their children. ‘Good mothering’ rests on the idea of mothers’ physical presence in the household as a result of social expectations on traditional, stay-at-home motherhood. Their children are seen as being more prone to delinquency, deviance and poor educational performance, despite a lack of empirical evidence showing that this is the case. A rhetoric of blame exists when mothers do not live up to societal expectations: media reports circulate anecdotal accounts of children of absent parents engaging in high-risk activities such as drug consumption (Cinco 2009) while state accounts caution mothers against leaving their children because doing so affects ‘family solidarity’ (Parrenas 2006). One such report, entitled ‘When Mom is Away, the Family Goes Astray’, provides a sensationalistic account of what happened to a ‘typical’ family once the mother went abroad (Ubalde 2009). A litany of harms ostensibly resulted from the woman’s labour migration abroad, ranging from her husband’s infidelity to her sons’ bad grades to incest. The same report asserts that, ‘when fathers [take] jobs abroad, it only had a little dent on the family but when the mothers left, entire families needed to adjust’ (Parrenas 2005).

Of course, my respondents resented these generalizations. One woman expressed the need for more nuance, arguing that blaming migrant mothers conveniently overlooked other structural explanations: ‘[Rising levels of poverty], the absence of local jobs and cuts in funding to schools may be some of the reasons why families are suffering and children are doing badly. It’s not just the children of migrant women who are affected. Everyone is affected’. When asked how they felt about being scapegoated for these social problems, the women were angry but resigned. They denied that their families fared worse because of their absence, reasoning that their ability to support their families financially elevated their families’ standards of living.

Paradoxically, while the migrant women I interviewed insisted that their children are not faring badly because of their decision to work abroad, all of them tried to compensate for their absence by caring for their children while away. Guilt and sadness were expressed by all of my respondents, with everyone acknowledging the pain wrought by separation and the difficulties of daily life away from home. They indicated that labour migration enabled them to be ‘better’ mothers but all of them were aware of the disadvantages wrought by existing arrangements, subsequently affirming studies showing that the decision to migrate was oftentimes instigated by the mother (Asis et al. 2004). As one woman surmised, ‘I am a bad mother if I leave, but [would have been] an even worse mother if I stayed’. The ambivalence expressed by some of the women I interviewed illustrated their mixed feelings about the effects of labour migration on their families. One woman admitted that she felt she
could only justify her decision to be apart from her children for so long by telling herself that she became a better caregiver by being the primary breadwinner. The two roles were inextricably intertwined: ‘leaving allowed me to show my love. I showed I cared by sending all of my earnings back. I never buy anything for myself’. When pressed about how she justified her physical absence from her children’s lives in light of previous statements regarding the superiority of female care, she insisted that working abroad did not mean that she was not present. It therefore seemed as though migrant women ‘become better mothers’ only if they can financially provide for their families and if they are able to maintain a maternal presence even when they are away. The other women I spoke to concurred, with some stressing that they never would have left if they thought they would become ‘bad mothers’.

As a result, migrant mothers try to maintain affective ties with their children through repeated contact, using phone calls, taped messages, emails and text messaging to keep abreast of their children’s lives (Parangas 2008). All of the women I interviewed relied on more than one way of communicating with their children. They made phone calls, wrote texts, sent care packages, used social networking sites like Facebook to monitor their children’s activities and used Skype. They were aware of the events occurring in their children’s lives and were regularly consulted on important household decisions. As one respondent explained:

My children and I don’t talk on the phone as much as I want... but we text all the time. It is funny because some of my children are getting mad at me for texting too much. My son says that even when I am away, I still nag. It’s also funny because my husband keeps texting me to ask what to do. I’m happy that it isn’t that expensive to text or to call or to email. The distance doesn’t seem that big.

Another respondent agreed, stating that: ‘the technology that is available is great because I have different ways to monitor and talk to my children. I don’t even really feel so distant during major events’.

Interestingly, six of the fifteen women I interviewed mused that they were more aware of what was happening in their children’s lives after migrating because they were too busy juggling economic and household responsibilities in the Philippines. They insisted that they became better caregivers because they now had the time to be more involved. Two women admitted that they occupied a plethora of other roles in their home communities, which sometimes led them to place ‘maternal duties’ low on their list of priorities. They challenged assumptions about motherhood by highlighting that there are different ways to show care, with physical proximity not necessarily determining superior caregiving. Said one respondent:

Being in Canada can be sad because you’re not there to hug your children but even when I was in the Philippines, I didn’t really see them because I was too
busy making ends meet, dealing with family issues, etc. Now, because there’s not a lot going on in Toronto and I don’t know that many people, I spend my free time thinking about my children, supervising them, checking to see what they are doing on Facebook.

To be clear, none of the women felt that these modes of communication were ideal. All of them bridged the physical distance from their children by taking short trips home – usually in between working contracts – during which they tried to show their children that quality time is a more significant indicator of maternal love. That said, all of them admitted that technology may not entirely erase the pains of separation but at least allowed them to be present in their families’ lives. Everyone discussed their good luck in having such access. As one respondent argued:

I still wish I could be [in the Philippines], but ... being in Canada means that I can send money home and can sponsor my son to [immigrate]. Because of the Internet and the phone, I can still check on him and take care of him. I feel bad about not seeing him everyday but because I can ask how he is doing by emailing or texting, it’s not so bad. It’s not perfect but we make do. Even if I’m not there, I am caring for him by [communicating] often and by sending money.

Thus, migrant women exhibit transnational hyper-maternalism through constant surveillance and contact with their children, allowing them to meet societal expectations concerning maternal care. Such transnational hyper-maternalism enables them to contest these gender roles by assuming the breadwinning roles that have traditionally been the purview of men: ‘Rather than replacing caregiving with breadwinning definitions of motherhood, migrant women appear to be expanding their definitions of motherhood’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997: 562). While it is true that assuming the double-burden of caregiving and breadwinning puts added pressure on women, which magnifies existing gender imbalances (Brines 1994), migrant women’s transnational hyper-maternalism has made migrant women feel empowered because they have surpassed traditional ‘female’ ways of ‘caring’ by assuming breadwinning roles and by caregiving transnationally, ensuring that productive and reproductive roles are met:

Working abroad and supporting my family makes me feel good. Before, I relied on other people to take care of everything. I borrowed money from family so I can pay for food, rent and my children’s tuition fees. Instead of relying on them for support, now they rely on me. I’m paying for my parents’ medical bills and also paying for the schooling of my children as well as my nieces and nephews. I’m not just the one who takes care of people ... now, I’m the one who sends money and who cares ... I’m both the ‘father’ and the ‘mother’.

Whether transnational hyper-maternalism is an adequate substitute for ‘traditional’ day-to-day mothering is debatable. Different family members are
prone to ‘relativizing’, meaning that their perceptions of their migrant parents vary; they see such relationships as continuously being (re)negotiated, with feelings of distance and separation existing alongside feelings of closeness at different time periods (Asis et al. 2004). It is difficult to determine whether the absence of migrant mothers leads to lasting emotional trauma, especially in light of migrant mothers’ efforts to maintain ties. Furthermore, there have been no studies definitively showing that the children of migrant mothers fare worse. What these studies do show is that the children of migrant mothers feel that they have been abandoned but that they are able to cope with their mother’s absence through regular communication, which not only helps them to connect transnationally but also allows them to see the sacrifices their mothers are making on their behalf (Parrenas 2005).

It is telling that nearly all of the women felt that despite the hardships they endured under the LCP and the difficulties of family separation, they did not want to be anywhere else. They pragmatically weighed their alternatives, ultimately concluding that dire economic conditions in the Philippines made migration necessary. One woman said:

Life in Canada is hard but life in the Philippines was harder. I worked so many different jobs to support my family. Now, I work one job. It’s tough ... I still cry sometimes, especially [during holidays] ... but now I feel like I am a better mother. I wouldn’t want to go back. I want us all to come here.

Responding to the question of whether they would return if economic circumstances in the Philippines changed and jobs became available, most women were ambivalent. One woman’s response captured the sentiments of the group when she said that, ‘it would be good for my children to grow up in their culture and for families to stay together but I don’t see this happening’.

Framing the accounts of the women I interviewed by seeing them as embodying transnational hyper-maternalism consequently disrupts the ‘precarious linearity’ (Manalansan 2008) described earlier. Their accounts demonstrate their resistance to the stereotypes of absentee migrant mothers and delinquent children. Though my respondents strengthened gender stereotypes by believing in the superiority of female care, they were not bound by their gendered ‘maternal’ roles, because they assumed both breadwinning and caregiving duties. Migrant women know the advantages and disadvantages of their situations and show care through the means available to them.

To be clear, for all of the women I interviewed, transnational hyper-maternalism compensated for their absence but was not meant to be permanent. Their ability to mother while abroad did not mean that they liked living away from their families. Their opposition to family separation stemmed from their experiences. While their resistance to family separation could be interpreted as their acquiescence to maternalist ideology that require good mothers to be physically present - thereby repudiating to some extent their expressed resistance to imposed gender norms through transnational hyper-maternalism - it is
likely that the ongoing pressures to be ‘good’ mothers alerted them to the unsustainability of their situations and for the need to fight against restrictive gendered norms. Seen in this light, their actions were not contradictory; their use of transnational hyper-maternalism was a way for them to cope with present challenges. This did not mean that they did not think that the status quo should prevail. As the next section shows, far from being disempowered, they challenged existing policies by questioning family separation through their activism.

CONTESTING FAMILY SEPARATION AND REUNIFICATION

Despite their lack of citizenship that barred them from partaking in official forms of political participation such as voting or running for office, migrant workers still engage with both sending and receiving states through civil society activity (Bakan and Stasiulis 2005; Landolt and Goldring 2010). Live-in caregivers in Toronto, in particular, have resisted the LCP. Changes to the Foreign Domestics Movement (FDM), which preceded the LCP, and to the LCP itself, were largely the result of migrant domestic workers’ activism (Schecter 1998; Bakan and Stasiulis 2005; Kelly 2007). For example, one woman I spoke to, who has been involved with migrant domestic worker activism since arriving in Canada in the 1980s, described how her organization’s persistent letter-writing campaign to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) in the 1990s led CIC to revoke its practice of requiring live-in caregivers to obtain release letters from their employers before changing jobs. While the campaigns that activists fought for and won have not led to fundamental changes within the LCP, with onerous requirements regarding live-in work and temporary migration status still in place, the very presence of migrant women activists holds policymakers accountable.

Currently, issues concerning migrant women’s separation from their families are becoming prominent. Even though my respondents adapted to existing constraints through transnational hyper-maternalism, which in turn has resulted in a simultaneous reification and modification of traditional gender scripts, all of them were at least somewhat critical of the way the LCP, like other migrant domestic worker programmes in other countries, divided families. Their participation in civic activities was tied to their experiences as migrant mothers, particularly when issues of family separation and reunification were concerned. Even migrant women who pragmatically weighed the strengths of the LCP versus other migrant domestic worker programmes felt that migrant women’s family concerns needed accommodation. As one woman said:

Canada’s LCP is better than the programme in Hong Kong and Singapore [where I worked previously] but it can still be improved. I’m happy that I can give money
to my family and that I can use [technology] to talk to them but of course it would be better if they are here with me.

All of the respondents were pessimistic about the possibility of policymakers changing the terms of the LCP to allow women and their families to enter the country with landed immigrant status, which is the desired long-term goal of most migrant domestic worker organizations and Filipino community groups. Nonetheless, they conceded that this would be ideal and would rectify some of the abuses associated with the LCP. Argued one activist:

If I can come in here as a landed immigrant and not as a temporary worker, I don’t have to bear my employer’s unreasonable demands. [Currently] I am afraid of saying no to her requests because I need a good referral from her to get permanent residency. If I have the papers, I won’t be afraid of being sent back to the Philippines. If my family can come with me, we can start building our lives in Canada.

In fact, much of the impetus behind migrant women’s campaigns concerning the LCP’s effects on migrant workers’ families results from an awareness of the harsh realities of family separation. As mentioned, migrant women have adapted to these realities through transnational hyper-maternalism.

While emotional chasms can be alleviated somewhat through constant communication, migrant women can live with these realities but simultaneously desire improvements. My respondents felt that transnational hyper-maternalism can be empowering but also argued that the negative effects of the LCP on families merit attention. They were familiar with Filipino community organizations’ findings regarding the emotional pain felt by all parties during these situations and the stories shared by Filipino youth regarding adjustment difficulties. In fact, some of them have even participated in these studies so as to add to the Filipino community’s knowledge base on the adverse effects of the LCP on families. Of the fifteen women I interviewed, twelve are in the LCP and are waiting to be reunited with their children. Some of the women admitted to being ‘close’ to their children but were apprehensive about reuniting with their families. Among the many fears that they disclosed, they worried about their children’s difficulties in acclimatizing to a ‘new culture, new climate and new community’. One woman said that:

My children are unhappy to be separated from me and my husband. Still, they make do with visits and phone calls and keep me updated with their lives. They like living in the Philippines, with their grandparents and cousins. What will happen to them when they come here?

The three women who have reunited with their children in Canada conceded that family reunification was hard. One admitted that she got along better with her son when they were apart. All three women had problems running
the gamut from handling the racism their children faced from Canadian school
districts and from other children to dealing with their children’s low grades. All
three, however, remained optimistic:

Our family situation is [improving] slowly but surely. I think all families go
through a hard time when moving to a new place. But we’re not fighting as
much anymore. My daughter has made friends and got a part-time job. She is
saving her earnings [to] send [gifts] home.

There were decisive shifts in their relationships with their children upon reuni-
ification. Although it is premature to say whether other migrant women had
similar experiences, it was clear that all three women underwent a significant
adjustment period where they had to renegotiate their roles as mothers. In all
cases, pressing household demands encroached on their autonomy, with all
women observing that they had more time to themselves before their families’
arrival. They also described having to ‘train’ their families to assume respon-
sibility for domestic chores, which the women were initially saddled with,
along with the duty to financially provide for their households. Though they
assumed breadwinning and caregiving roles as labour migrants and took
pride in their ability to do so, they strongly felt that their families had to do
their share. When asked about their changes in perspective, they argued that
self-sufficiency and independence was key to survival, which they wanted
their children to learn. They felt that their circumstances differed beforehand
in that financially supporting their households in the Philippines while abroad
was easier, because their salaries could support an entire family, whereas sur-
vival in Canada required more money. Moreover, their caregiving roles in
Canada now also encompassed domestic duties for the entire household
whereas their role as carers prior to reunification was primarily emotive.
Despite being responsible for domestic duties prior to migration, their time
abroad alerted them to the possibility of egalitarian household divisions of
labour.

Beyond sharing responsibility for the household’s financial and domestic
needs, my respondents also saw that their roles as mothers included facilitating
their families’ adjustment to Canada. Witnessing their children’s daily
struggles to life in Canada, which in some cases led to tension in their relation-
ships with their children who blamed them for their present circumstances,
indelibly marked their experiences as mothers. Though they were aware of
challenges their children faced while living in the Philippines, their children’s
integration challenges were more traumatic. Thus, upon reunification, their
roles as mothers changed once again.

Because of their experiences with family separation and reunification, all of
my respondents chose to contest the LCP. Two of the women I spoke to became
leaders in migrant domestic worker and Filipino community organizations by
spearheading campaigns criticizing the LCP and its effects on migrant workers’
families. The rest of the women showed their resistance in different ways. Five of the women partook in political activities. They participated in ‘days of action’ with live-in caregivers that drew attention to the harms of the LCP, lobbied politicians and worked on joint campaigns with members of organizations like unions and migrants rights’ groups. Although some of their organizations campaigned exclusively in Canada, others waged campaigns in the Philippines, in international mainstream forums like the ILO and the UN and in grassroots international forums like the International Migrants Alliance and the International Women’s Alliance. Some women were active in these transnational pursuits, yet the majority of them were more invested in looking at ways to improve conditions in Canada because these have direct effects on their lives.

When asked about their motivations in being part of these initiatives, they responded by describing their dissatisfaction with the LCP specifically and temporary labour migration programmes generally. One respondent maintained that she ‘understands’ why it may be difficult at this point for families to be united under the LCP and admitted that:

Canada probably won’t change the LCP because other countries have programmes that are [worse] … Policymakers, tell us that at least Canada isn’t as bad as other places and that Canada lets us bring our children into the country after the programme. But maybe if we have enough [evidence showing that] the LCP has affected some people badly, maybe they can change it.

While they disagreed on how policies should change, their exposure to the difficulties faced by migrant workers and their families has convinced them that, at the very least, some accommodations have to be made. Their painful experiences with family separation and reunification led them to question the seeming inevitability of family fragmentation during migration. Two of them suggested that the LCP should be revamped to allow women and their families to come as permanent residents. They argued that making their entry to Canada contingent on working as caregivers for a specified period of time would be sufficient to ensure that the caregiving needs of Canadian families are met. Interestingly, one of them observed that:

It would benefit Canada to ensure the welfare of live-in caregivers and their families because we are future Canadian citizens. Since Canada wants immigrants to integrate, doesn’t it make sense for live-in caregivers and their families to be together? This will make it easier for us to adjust to life here and will make us better citizens.

By emphasizing how household stability allows people to be more productive members of Canadian society, she established the crucial linkages between the domestic (private) spheres and the political and social (public) spheres. Because it is not only live-in caregivers and their families who are negatively affected
by family separation and reunification but also Canadian society, which would have to shoulder the social, economic and political costs associated with the difficulties faced by live-in caregivers and their families in adjusting and integrating to life in Canada, migrant women argued that changing the LCP benefits all parties. In making these connections, it becomes clear how migrant women’s civic activities drew attention to the harms their families experience in the domestic sphere, which in turn encourages consideration of policy alternatives.

Not all civic activities are oriented towards policy change. The other women I interviewed resisted the LCP by taking part in activities that do not directly engage with the state but rather engages Canadian society. Specifically, they attended and testified in conferences and meetings that exposed migrant workers, Filipino community members, policymakers, NGO activists and the Canadian public to the effects of the LCP on migrant workers and their families; they were part of Filipino community and/or church-based support networks that help migrant domestic workers and their children cope with separation and reunification; they sought and provided counselling services for live-in caregivers feeling lonely and isolated; some have even participated in community performances that allowed them to ‘act out’ their experiences as migrant domestic workers.

An example of how migrant women channelled their identities as mothers and as migrant workers for political purposes can be seen during the Mother-of-the-Year contest that was organized by the Association of Filipino Women Workers in May 2011. During this event, migrant domestic workers told their life stories. Most performances exposed their ‘hidden’ hardships by showcasing the emotional turmoil associated with migration, with various women highlighting the challenges of migrating abroad and meeting maternal responsibilities as a single mother, their fraught relationships with their children and their resilience. In all cases, transnational motherhood became a politicized act. All of these performances emotionally resonated with the other migrant domestic workers in the audience, helping both performers and audience members to feel connected. Because of the public nature of these performances, all participants felt that their experiences were publicly validated. This may not necessarily translate to tangible improvements in their lives, yet having an event that put migrant mothers’ experiences front and centre gave migrant mothers political recognition. At the very least, having a Mother-of-the-Year contest that acknowledged that migrant women are good mothers despite being physically separated from their children encouraged a discursive shift in conceptions of ‘good mothering’ and may allow us to question what ‘good mothering’ constitutes.

The women in my sample saw these activities as being cathartic. In ‘being there’ for other live-in caregivers through support networks, counselling groups and performances, they were able to combat the societal indifference to their needs, underscoring their resilience. In publicly acknowledging the commonalities of live-in caregivers’ experiences – particularly their

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experiences undergoing family separation and reunification - they affirmed that the ‘personal is political’ and forced recognition of their situations.

It should be noted that differences exist between the women on ways to rectify the harms posed by LCP, and on solutions to the problems faced by migrant women and their children. Some of the women sought reform through policies that gave migrant domestic workers and their families landed status upon arrival. Other women felt that the LCP itself should be abolished because it allows for the continuous availability of ‘captive’ labour whose needs are repeatedly ignored. Despite these differences, however, everyone sought improvements.

Taken collectively, their efforts show that migrant domestic workers resist imposed family separation by drawing attention to their experiences under the LCP and by seeking to change the programme. In this way, they contest the image of migrant domestic workers as being subjugated and docile.

UNDERSTANDING COMPLIANCE AND RESISTANCE

Gender analysis explains the feminization of migration by highlighting the macro- and meso-level factors that make female migrants desirable. Sending and receiving states see them as compliant workers and citizens because they are their families’ primary caregivers. To some extent, these impressions are accurate. Abysmal economic circumstances in their home countries compel migrant women to seek employment abroad because the best way to ‘show care’ is for them to financially provide for their families.

Working abroad, however, does not mean that migrant women reneged on their caregiving responsibilities, which they meet through transnational hyper-maternalism. Specifically, they used communications technology to oversee decisions made within the household and to monitor and supervise their children. While constant contact was not a substitute for physical proximity, transnational hyper-maternalism enabled ‘mothering across borders’ and met societal expectations concerning the need for maternal care. It interrogates the belief that migrant women are universally oppressed with children who are suffering by showing that migrant women are not ‘absent’. Migrant mothers adapt to their circumstances by showing care in the best way possible; they are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of their situations but ultimately feel that their decisions to migrate and to become transnational mothers were beneficial. Like most other women, migrant women negotiate the ideals and practices of motherhood. Thus, there is an added layer of complexity to their situations that is not captured by mainstream and academic depictions of the pain and enslavement caused by labour migration. Seen in this light, transnational hyper-maternalism affirms the stereotype of superior female caregiving. Nevertheless, transnational hyper-maternalism also allows women to expand gender roles, since migration alters the sexual division of labour and, within it, women’s roles. Such an expansion of gender roles also
increased migrant women’s feelings of independence and empowerment, which in turn bolstered their activism. Though my respondents dealt with family separation and reunification in ways that simultaneously questioned and reified maternal expectations, they all believed that there were alternative arrangements needed. By partaking in a range of political activities, from actively lobbying policymakers, to participating in subversive ‘Mother-of-the-Year’ contests, to giving counselling to other live-in caregivers, migrant women show their resistance to the conditions imposed by the LCP. They overcome the ‘tragic linearity’ that dominate accounts of migrant women and show their agency when facing structural inequalities.

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