

# **Right to Mothering**

## ***Motherhood as a Transborder Concern in the Age of Globalization***

June was an illegal worker when I first met her at a church in Taipei, Taiwan, in 1999. After working illegally for more than four years, she decided to return home to the Philippines. People at the church were assisting her with the deportation process. By the time I interviewed her, she had been away from home for almost 15 years. She first worked in Saudi Arabia for eight years and returned home only twice during that time. She later worked in Hong Kong and decided to go to Taiwan for the higher wage. She had to leave her first Taiwanese employers because of the exploitative working conditions. They confiscated her passport, forced her to labor 15 hours a day, and prohibited her from going out regularly. They had her sleep in the attic and locked her from outside at night, afraid that she might run away or steal things. She pleaded with them not to do that since she would have no way of escape should a fire break out. When she asked her recruitment agent in Taiwan for help, her agent threatened her with deportation. She finally decided to escape for her own safety.

Becoming illegal gave her much needed freedom. She could share an apartment with other Filipinos, visit the church weekly, and maintain regular social contact. She could choose her own employers, set her own fees for the service, and arrange her own schedules. It also came with certain price though. There was no guarantee that employers could be easily secured. She had to be constantly on alert, looking out for the authority. While she longed for social contact, she could trust no one for fear of being reported. June finally cried when she talked about the price her family had to pay with her working abroad. Working overseas and not seeing her children grow up was the only way she, as a mother, could raise and support them. "If I could do it all over again, I would not have left the Philippines." She ended our

conversation with this reflection on her long journey as a mother as well as an overseas contract worker.

June's story represents a unique tale of motherhood that merits particular attention in our contemporary era. We do not live in a globalized world connected solely through decentralized production processes, compressed informational networks, and unprecedented technological transformations. We also live in a close-knit global village connected through the labor, care, and emotions of Third World women, who migrate to perform care labor for upper- and middle-class women in advanced economies in both the North and the South. We subsist in a global economy in which uneven developments compel less privileged women to cross borders to care for other families in the foreign land, in order to support their own families back home. We carry on transnational family affairs through which a generation of children cared for by other women at home as their maids, nannies, and substitute mothers. For the millions of migrant women like June, the issue of motherhood is not about male dominance, the public-private dichotomy, unequal gender division of labor, double shift, or struggle for individual autonomy. For them, they cannot mother their children the conventional way because economic deterioration and family survival compel them to seek overseas employment. They cannot fulfill the idealized image of motherhood, i.e., the full-time stay-home caretaker, because labor-receiving states establish control mechanisms to regulate their employment within the borders of nation-states. In short, their fundamental concern is the deprivation of their right to motherhood. And the deprivation of their right to mothering is firmly institutionalized in state policy, legitimated through state rhetoric, and materialized by practices of individual employers and employment agencies.

In this article, I locate the discussion of mothering, law, politics, and public policy from the broader perspective of the globalization of care, specifically the implications of state policy to the mothering experience of migrant women care workers, such as foreign domestics and nurses. Global restructuring of care has raised questions about the different mothering experience for migrant women, as suggested by such terms as "transnational mothering" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997: 548), "commodified motherhood" (Parrenas, 2001: 73), and "fragmentation of motherhood" (Gamburd, 2000: 186). These divergent forms of mothering extant in the transnational social field contest the grand narrative of a normative motherhood predicated upon the experience of privileged women in dominant groups, both locally and globally. Through centering the experience of migrant women, I argue that, in the era of globalization, the critical analysis on motherhood needs to transcend national boundaries and be broadened to include the ramifications derived from the global restructuring of care. More importantly, I contend that motherhood should be reconsidered as an important transborder concern that entails a critical transnational perspective and a cross-border strategic alliance of local and global feminist engagements in the politics of motherhood.

### **Empire of care: race and motherhood in transnational era**

June could not return to the Philippines for short visits while working in Taiwan because of her illegal status. She finally decided to surrender herself to the police because her youngest son was using drugs and was having trouble with the law. Away from her children for years, she has missed their birthdays, graduations, and important events in their lives. To compensate, she turns all her caring attention to her employers' children, who often regard her more as a maid than as a substitute mother. Channeling her love to other people's children mirrors what Sau-Ling Wong (1994: 69) terms as the diverted mothering, through which the care labor of women of color is diverted to the children and families of employing white women, away from the rightful recipients based on kinship or community ties. In the contemporary world, diverted mothering has its transnational implications, linking localized social reproduction globally. As Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2000) discusses the ramifications of diverted mothering involved in the global commodification of social reproduction:

The commodification of social reproduction is bound on a global scale with the international migration of women and their employment in domestic work. Immigrant women from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, and various Caribbean nations, like many Mexican and Central American women, migrate internationally for work in commodified social reproduction. Many of them leave their children and other family members behind in their country of origin, assigning the reproductive work of caring for these dependents to family members and paid care workers. (161)

The issue of paid domestic labor has re-surfaced as one of the major themes for interrogation for feminist scholarship in recent years. This recent scholarly interest extends yet also differs from the previous feminist scholarship, for the nature, characteristics, and power dynamics in paid domestic labor can no longer be examined simply through the social psychology of interpersonal relations or the structural analysis of gender, race, and class within the confines of nation-states. The personal is no longer simply the political; the personal is the global. Centering the story of Third World mothers is important in challenging the dominant feminist theorizing in motherhood, which is often predicated upon the experience of Western, white, middle-class women. As Patricia Hill Collins (1994) problematizes the assumed universal applicability of feminist theories in mothering:

Feminist theories of motherhood are thus valid as partial perspectives, but cannot be seen as theories of motherhood generalizable to all women. The resulting patterns of partiality inherent in existing theories, such as, for example, the emphasis placed on all-powerful

mothers as conduits for gender oppression, reflect feminist theorists' positions in structures of power.... Shifting the center to accommodate this diversity promises to recontextualize motherhood and point us toward feminist theorizing that embraces difference as an essential part of commonality. (62)

I borrow the title of Catherine Ceniza Choy's provocative book "Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History" (2003) as the starting point for my reflections on the impact on Third World women's mothering experience of the globalization of care. Tracing the root of contemporary migration of Filipino nursing professionals to the United States to American imperialism in Asia, Choy powerfully terms this global inequality exacerbated through nursing migration as "empire of care" (3). Continuing the historical legacy of colonialism and imperialism, this empire of care is a form of extraction of care resources between the First and the Third World. As she critiques the rational choice approach that reduces Filipino nursing migration to individual agency: "the desire of Filipino nurses to migrate abroad cannot be reduced to an economic logic, but rather reflects individual and collective desire for a unique form of social, cultural, and economic success obtainable only outside the national borders of the Philippines" (Choy, 2003: 7).

Empire of care thus highlights the historical unequal relationship between states of labor sending and receiving nations in the global system. Grace Chang's (2000) study on immigrant domestics in the United States serves as a good example for us to examine the role of the state in sustaining the empire. She argues that the presence of immigrant women domestics in the United States results from the deliberate intervention of the state in the First World in order to continue the further exploitation of the Third World (3). This process of exploitation hinges upon the construction of immigrant women as welfare cheats and brood mares, thus resulting in the proposition and ratification of various anti-immigrants initiatives and the deprivation of their citizenship rights. As she maintains, "the goal of these laws and "reforms" is to extract the benefits of immigrants' labor while minimizing or eliminating any obligations or costs, whether social or fiscal, to the "host" U.S. society and state" (Chang, 2000: 11).

Empire of care, be it based on the labor of nursing professionals or domestics, illustrates the continual exploitation of the South by the North, albeit through a different form, and reflects a contemporary global politics constitutive of a "new world domestic order" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001: 1). This world reordering of social reproduction, with Third World women occupying the center stage in the global system, signifies an international racial division of reproductive labor (Parrenas, 2000: 560) and the racialization of national/transnational systems of care. Empire of care thus "creates not a white man's burden but, through a series of invisible links, a dark child's burden" (Hochschild, 2002: 27). The global system of unequal distribution of care pulls

migrant women away from “home” yet places them at “home” at the same time. It is exactly this paradox of their being home yet homeless that the divisive power of globalization, particularly in the intimate sphere, can be better understood. Further, the children of migrant women are in essence “motherless” amidst the latter’s homelessness. It is this tension between mothering one’s and other women’s children that best describes the predicament of mothering facing migrant women in the age of globalization.

### **Motherhood, nation, and the global system of female labor: comparative cases**

June’s story, particularly the structural constraints placed upon her ability to mother from abroad, also raises the question of the nation in relation to the asymmetrical distribution of care labor in the global arena. The racialization of Canada’s and Taiwan’s immigration policies provides good examples for our understanding of the linkage between the project of nation building and the institution of domestic service. In the case of Canada, women from Europe constituted the major source of labor supply prior to the 1950s. White British women, “sought after for their future or potential roles as wives and mothers of the Canadian nation” (Arat-Koc, 1997: 54), were recruited with the goal for their permanent integration within Canada “as nation-builders and civilizers” (Arat-Koc, 1997: 54). The demographic composition among foreign domestics shifted during the 1970s when an increasing number of foreign domestics from the Caribbean and the Philippines started entering Canada. Immigration regulations were thus modified to accommodate this demographic shift as a result. Foreign domestics from the Third World were and continue to be constructed as undesirable others and unsuitable for inclusion as citizens of Canada. Canada’s immigration policy thus creates a process of racial formation and racialization through which women of different national and racial identities experience discrepant integration within the Canadian society. This process of racial formation and racialization also structures their disparate access to citizenship rights. The uneven enjoyment of citizenship rights among these women workers thus contributes to hierarchies of citizenship, both nationally and globally. As Arat-Koc (1997) states:

Immigration policies and practices have been key mechanisms in regulating the racial/ethnic composition of immigrant domestic workers and determining the status, conditions, and autonomy of those who have been allowed in. Through immigration policy, membership in the Canadian nation and state, and access to citizenship rights, have been regulated. Access to citizenship rights has been facilitated for domestics of the ‘desirable’ race/ethnicity, while made difficult or inaccessible for those of ‘undesirable’ racial/ethnic backgrounds. (56)

Similarly, the importation of foreign labor and foreign domestics also

poses challenges to the formation of nationhood in Taiwan. Domestic service became a state-sanctioned legal occupation with the ratification of Employment Service Law in 1992. Since then, domestic service and foreign domestics became subject to Taiwan's immigration control and the regulation of its foreign labor policy. For the past decade, domestic service in Taiwan has become a racialized field, inundated with women from Southeast Asia. Foreign workers from Southeast Asia are generally seen as undesirably different, and their entry is deemed to unleash social ills, such as crime, disease, and prostitution. To prevent their permanent settlement, the state has adopted intrusive practices for stringent control, such as the prohibition of pregnancy and marriage, the proscription of family reunion, and the constricted freedom of association, residence, mobility, and employment. These practices, often in violation of migrants' human rights, institutionalize the exploitability of migrant workers, migrant women in particular. They also contribute to the formation of "racialized boundaries" (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992: 2) that constructs fictionalized borders between Taiwanese nationals and foreign workers. While Taiwan's foreign labor policy reflects foreign labor's relationship to the nation-state, the regulation over migrant women's reproductive and sexual decisions demonstrates the particular impact on migrant women of gendered and racialized nature of state policy. The state realizes its racial/nationalist project in shaping the composition of citizenry through controlling migrant women's sexuality, reproduction, and motherhood. As Anthias (2000) elaborates on the role of women in the reproduction of the nation:

In all societies, women of different groups are encouraged to reproduce the nation differently and some are encouraged to 'grow and flourish' whereas others are seen as undesirable. For example, in many Western societies ethnic minority women's fertility may be seen as a threat to the nation, involving demographic and nationalist policing and ideologies (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989) and the use of depopulation and sterilization techniques against some (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992). Indigenous mothers who give birth to many children (termed polytechna mothers in Cyprus) may be rewarded whereas migrants and their descendents in this situation may be subjected to policies and discourses of inferiorization. Although women are members of collectivities they are subjected to different rules and experience them differently. (32-33)

The above comparative descriptions of Taiwan and Canada illustrate the similarity shared by two different sociopolitical contexts in the nexus of nation building and national/global restructuring of care. They highlight migrant women's precarious position in terms of their human rights and citizenship entitlements, both locally and globally. Therefore, the linkage among racial formation, gendered practices, nation building, and global restructuring of care

cannot be ignored.

### **Motherhood, citizenship, and transborder concern**

The institutionalization of migrant women's ultra-exploitability raises fundamental questions about their lack of citizenship rights and entitlements. First, it illustrates that violence facing these women is not simply the result of individual acts of abusive employers; instead, it derives from state control and regulations. It is exactly the differential citizenship statuses, i.e., citizen vs. non-citizen, between native employers and foreign domestics that legitimate employer-employee power asymmetry. Migrant women's status as non-citizens calls attention to the state's realization of nationalist/racial projects through the regulation of their sexuality, reproduction, and motherhood. In other words, they face structural as well as intimate violence.

Second, the regulation of migrant women's sexuality, reproduction, and motherhood points to their disparate meanings for women differentially positioned along national and global hierarchies. Empire of care speaks to the reality that migrant women from the Third World are deprived of their right to determine their sexual activities, reproductive choices, and motherhood concerns because of the intimate surveillance in both private and public spheres. This reality calls attention to the necessity to expand the definitions of citizenship rights and entitlements to include the particular experience of migrant women in the aspect of sexuality, reproduction, and motherhood. In other words, migrant women's individual and collective rights to these central facets of human existence complicate sexual, reproductive, and family politics in national and global terrains.

Third, the experience of migrant women also problematizes linear and evolutionary conceptions of citizenship development. Upper- and middle-class women in labor receiving nations, as a result of the advancement of political and socioeconomic rights, are able to enter the workplace and gain visibility in the public sphere. However, their entry depends neither upon the redistribution of household labor within the private sphere nor upon the recognition of care as socially valuable work in the public sphere. The global unequal distribution of care has enabled female employers to resolve their individual needs for childcare without making demands on the state. Their participation in the public sphere hinges upon the stunted enjoyment of civil, political, and socioeconomic rights of women from less developed regions and nations. As Abigail Bakan and Daiva Stasiulis state (1997):

For the Third World non-citizen in search of First World citizenship, gaining access to social rights—particularly 'the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security' (Marshall 1950, 78)—commonly supersedes entry to civil and political rights. Thus, to gain certain social rights such as access to adequate health and educational services, citizens of the Philippines or Jamaica exit their home countries and,

in so doing, forfeit a range of regionally and nationally defined civil, political, social, and cultural rights. These forfeited rights may include the rights of land ownership, associated with citizenship and residence in less developed countries. They also give up certain social rights, such as the right to live with one's children and other family members, the right to freedom of choice of domicile, and access to networks of support in the provision of health care, child care, food, and so on. (45-46)

In other words, the stunted enjoyment of citizenship and human rights by contemporary migrant women has coincided with the gradual expansion of rights for citizens of marginalized groups within receiving nation-states. This paradox illustrates the necessity to reconsider motherhood, from the standpoint of migrant women, not only as an issue of choice but also as that of right.

### **Conclusion: from the choice of motherhood to the right to mothering**

The reemergence of paid domestic labor as an important issue for feminist scholarship speaks to the missing revolutions in feminism in materializing equal distribution of care both within and across national borders. Indeed, the privatization of care provision illustrates the state's appropriation of women's care labor, migrant women in particular, and the gendered/racialized nature of national/transnational systems of care. Rather than challenging the devaluation of women's work and that of care as a whole, the availability of migrant women's care labor enables labor receiving states to deepen the privatization of childcare and evade the commitment to the collective responsibility for social reproduction. Migrant women's care labor serves as a cheap solution for the inadequacy of public provision of care in labor receiving nations. Their mothering experience speaks to the simultaneous de-nationalization and re-nationalization of motherhood as well as the maintenance of empire of care in the age of globalization.

Empire of care heightens the nexus between the local and the global. It speaks to the necessity for building alliances within and across national borders and for the joint pursuit of local and global justice for multiple forms of equality. It also points to the urgency of collaborative local and global feminist interventions in the pursuit of motherhood as a transborder concern. From the perspective of migrant women, it is not the choice of motherhood but the right to motherhood/mothering that is in jeopardy in the transnational era.

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