



The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age

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BOOK REVIEW

The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age Valerie Francisco-Menchavez (*Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018*)

The Philippines' export of labour was institutionalised under its government's labour export policy back in 1972. With a total of US\$29.7 billion, the World Bank ranked the Philippines behind India and China in the top three remittance-receiving countries in 2015. For migrants, remittances are often deemed a way of caring for their loved ones, often in material form. But how do the migrants and their families mutually care for each other affectively, in a way that transcends temporal and spatial barriers? Francisco-Menchavez's book is an excellent account of how Filipino transnational families separated by long-term migration manage the "labour of care."

The focus of this book is on how Filipina migrants working predominantly as domestic helpers in New York City adopted communication technology to care for their families left behind in the Philippines and how those families engaged in reciprocal care. The introduction describes the background of Francisco-Menchavez's multi-sited, longitudinal ethnographic study. Narratives and qualitative findings from interviews and focus group discussions form the basis of the book. The author recruited 50 Filipina migrants for the study. A sub-group of 11 migrants formed the core of Francisco-Menchavez's field work, in which she interviewed the migrants and their families in the Philippines between 2009 and 2014. The majority of the migrants in the sample were undocumented and had lived abroad for between two and 25 years. Due to their undocumented status, many had not returned home for many years, for fear of not being able to return to the US and thus lose their jobs which had proven indispensable in providing for their families.

In Chapter 1, Francisco-Menchavez introduces her multi-directional care model of transnational families. Through the model, she argues that care work is not necessarily a one-way flow from the Filipina migrants to families left behind through remittances. Her model departs from the existing literature by emphasising that families left behind are not just passive recipients of care; they too, care for the Filipina migrants in their own ways such as by graduating with college diplomas, by taking over household responsibilities, and often simply by being responsive on social media. Essentially, Francisco-Menchavez's model shifts the focus of care work away from the migrants, which she defines as "decentering migrants in transnational care" (38). The author also stresses the pivotal role of extended kin networks in the care work of transnational families. In fact, an underlying theme of the multi-directional care model is that taking care of one another among nuclear and extended household members of the families left behind is equivalent to taking care of the migrants. This theme is evident in the interview transcripts throughout the chapter.

Building on the multi-directional care model, Chapter 2 examines the paradox of how technology is used to build intimacy in the face of long-term separation from migration. Aptly titled "Skype Mothers and Facebook Children," this chapter examines how Filipina migrant mothers used communication technology to be "present," in a more corporeal sense than phone calls could offer, in the lives of their children. They preferred Skype because of its visual register functionality; for them, just being able to see their children on a daily basis helped ease the separation. One of the migrant mothers succinctly put it as: "... internet is magic... keeps us together" (69). Francisco-Menchavez however, finds that the mothers abroad struggled with balancing being present and not being invasive. Their notion of care

work was to be present through Skype even though at times there were no actual conversations taking place; just being able to see and hear their children's daily routine was good enough. For the children, the simple acts of logging in on Skype and sharing photos on Facebook were how they expressed care for their migrant mothers. As with the issues of migrant mothers being too invasive through Skype, there were also issues of children setting privacy boundaries on Facebook.

In Chapter 3, Francisco-Menchavez focuses on the concept of communities of care – also referred to in the literature as immigrant social networks or chosen families – that serve as a crucial social fabric for the migrants, contributing not only to their practical needs, but emotional well-being as well. New Filipina migrants found these communities especially helpful in coping with separation, depressing winters and heartbreak – “they are the family I don't have here...They're more than friendships, more than a network of friends” (95). In caring for each other, Filipina migrants in these communities often drew from their own experiences of maintaining families from afar, being mothers to children left behind, working as domestic helpers under often exploitative conditions and being undocumented migrants along with its unsettling feeling of having to stay abroad indefinitely. Although many Filipina migrants regarded these communities of care as social capital and useful resources, not all of them were keen or able to participate; some did not want to get entangled with unnecessary gossip and some, juggling at least two jobs, did not have the time. Francisco-Menchavez notes that although the migrants had little choice in caring for their families in the Philippines the way they would have preferred, they could still invest in networks of fictive kin abroad for mutual support.

In Chapter 4, the author explores the range of emotions involved in care work of Filipino transnational families, focusing on the children left behind. Contrary to received wisdom, caring for someone does not always carry positive connotations of love, warmth and nurturance. Francisco-Menchavez points out that for the Filipino transnational families, care work typically ran the gamut of emotions, from unconditional love to outright resentment. Nevertheless, despite familial frictions, the migrants and their children still cared for each other, at least at a level where household functions could be maintained. Frictions often arose because of the different currency of care work. For example, migrant mothers caring in terms of pecuniary remittances and children caring by communicating with mothers. Francisco-Menchavez disentangles the emotions of the children left behind and their acts of care, developing a concept known as *sukli* or the reciprocation of care work (122), and challenges the idea that children are passive recipients of care. Just as mothers sacrificed by migrating for work, often without the option of returning home in the short term, children contributed to the emotional well-being of transnational families by doing their best in their studies and by being honest in communication.

The gist of Francisco-Menchavez's book is how Filipino transnational family members expressed care using communication technology, against a backdrop of institutionalised migration as a consequence of the Philippines being a labour brokerage state. Her book complements an emerging literature on transnational families' care work. Other notable books dealing with similar topics are Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla's *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life* (New York: Routledge, 2014), and Sondra Cuban's *Transnational Family Communication: Immigrants and ICTs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Francisco-Menchavez's specific contributions are in developing the multi-directional care model that takes into account different forms and directions of care work, recasting how children left behind actually contribute in caring for their migrant mothers, analysing care work by incorporating the roles of extended/fictive kin and immigrant social networks, and pushing the boundaries of ethnographic research methods through her use of longitudinal multi-sited ethnography and a participatory action

research approach to capture the dynamics of care work. Francisco-Menchavez calls for changes in immigration policies to allow for paths to legalisation; this way, migrants do not have to live with the constant strains of long-term separation in order to provide for their families. This book is definitely a must-read for scholars interested in the sociological aspect of transnational migration and for those interested in methodological advances in ethnographic research.

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