

Perspectives

2018

Article 2

7-1-2018

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Recommended Citation

Haley, Emily (2018) "Sending Love Home: The Effects of Global Care Chains on Economics, Family, and Agency," *Perspectives*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives/vol10/iss1/2>

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Sending Love Home: The Effects of Global Care Chains on Economics, Family, and Agency

Emily Haley

Globalization has allowed for an increasing interconnectedness of people all around the globe, but this comes at a price to the livelihoods of many individuals and traditional structures that attempt to remain unaffected from the influence of globalization. Issues like family relations and international migration are prevalent in the Philippines, where many women become migrant workers to support their families back home. These women take jobs in families as domestic workers, doing household chores and caring for the children while the mothers enter the workforce. This process is known as a global care chain, a term coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2002). Global care chains have led to the interactions of people from different parts of the world; the effects of these chains on international migration and family relations show a form of cultural differentialism, seen through economic and gendered relationships of those involved in these interactions. Globalization has caused changes in these relationships, with power being a main driver in the seemingly-perpetual cycle of these care chains. As long as the economies in these developing countries make jobs like domestic work in other countries more economically appealing, the cycle of international migration will continue to be the most reasonable option for those who can afford to do so.

International migration has been made much easier with the advancement of technologies. Ritzer and Dean (2015) discuss these trends, noting the different reasons migration may occur. The two areas attracting the largest numbers of immigrants are Europe and Asia (Ritzer and Dean 2015:264), areas that will be focused on in this paper. These areas are at the center of global care chains, with many individuals from Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines immigrating to countries like Hong Kong, Italy, and other places around Europe in an attempt to find higher

wages. These women find themselves working as nannies for families whose parents cannot afford to care for their children, due to both parents being in the workforce (Hochschild 2002).

The reason these women take on domestic care jobs in other countries is for the increased economic opportunities in the Global North comparable to their home countries. While migration from the Global South to the Global North is a reoccurring trend, migration has come to include higher levels of women today than ever before (Hochschild 2002:17). Many of these women are entering the international labor force because of the extreme wage gap between Global North countries and Global South countries. Parreñas's (2002) interviews of Filipino women in the 1990s found that women who migrated to the United States and Europe made less money working skilled jobs such as teachers, nurses, and clerical workers in the Philippines than they did when working unskilled jobs such as nannying in the United States and Europe (17-18). By making more money doing these unskilled jobs (upwards of \$1,400 a month in some places (18)), women of the Global South have migrated in higher numbers than ever before.

Today, many developing nations find remittances (money sent back from a family member to their home country) an important part of their growing economies. Technological advances have made sending remittances even easier, further encouraging the process of international migration (Ritzer and Dean 2015:268). Although remittances can provide these families with more money than they would be receiving if the women had stayed in their home country, their effects on international migration has had many unintended consequences on these families. Because the "choice" to leave their families is seen as a personal one, issues that arise are seen as personal, not social or structural, problems. These issues are especially prevalent throughout these individuals' family relations, both the relationships in the families left behind, as well as the families in which these women are entering for work (Hochschild 2002:21).

For the women who become domestic workers, many leave a husband and children behind. Their relationships with their family members becomes affected by this international migration in many ways. In many cases, children whose mothers are international migrants find it hard to have a close relationship with their mother while she is away and after she returns. A large portion of the children tend to push aside their emotional needs, and daughters sometimes find they have to step into the role of caregiver for their younger siblings in their mother's absence (Parreñas 2002:48). Although many children justify the financial benefits of these jobs as the reason for their mother's absence, it is still hard to accept the care and guidance from afar, especially when they do not think of their mother's migration as a sacrifice for their family's upward mobility (45-47).

For some children, their relationship with their mothers has changed from receiving their mother's love—which is now bought by the family their mother is working for for other children—to accepting commodities that their mother can give them (Parreñas 2002). Commodification has become a big player in globalization, which has allowed for the flows of both objects and people across borders. In this case specifically, the women from the Philippines exhibit the commodification of love in many ways. Their care is being commodified by the families for which they are working, and, because they are unable to be with their own families, they are forced to provide love for their own children through commodities, whether it be the remittances or objects they send or bring back. The players in this global care chain are trying to buy love, quite literally.

Buying love has had many unintended consequences for all parties involved; not only do these issues affect the women who leave their countries to find work for families abroad, they also affect the families in which these women find themselves. The women whose families these migrants work for have been given the power of entering the workforce, something that has shaped the way in which they interact with their own children. They entrust the care of their children to

these migrant workers, who can end up spending more time with their children than they themselves do (Cheever 2002:31). Many of these migrant workers are even encouraged to redirect the love they have for their children onto the children they now care for (Hochschild 2002:23), although this can unintentionally cause strained relationships, both between parent and child as well as parent and migrant worker. This is referred to by some as the “attachment factor,” in which migrant women act as ““mother and father...so the kids get attached to you, because you’re the one who’s always there. Then the parents get angry”” (Cheever 2002:35). Giving affection to children then must be tread carefully, because too much affection can affect a migrant workers’ relationship with their employers, but too little can insinuate they are not doing their job properly. The line between too much and too little affection is often blurry, making it hard for workers to navigate this barrier.

Along with issues of attachment, traditional gender roles regarding housework and childcare as a woman’s job are reinforced as global care chains allow the responsibility of these jobs to skip over the men completely (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002:3). Even in the family of migrant workers, the care goes to “grandmothers, aunts, and fathers, roughly in that order” (Hochschild 2002: 21). Some of this can be explained by the fact that many of migrant workers are single mothers because their husbands have left or they have left their husbands, yet traditional gender roles play a large part into these rankings (21). In the case of Hong Kong, the number of female domestic workers compared to the number of male domestic workers shows stark gendering of these jobs, with the overwhelming majority of people in these positions being female (see Figure 1). These care chains, then, are not just an issue of migration from the Global South to the Global North, but are an issue of gender relationships, which can be seen in the lack of power these large number of women have in their roles.

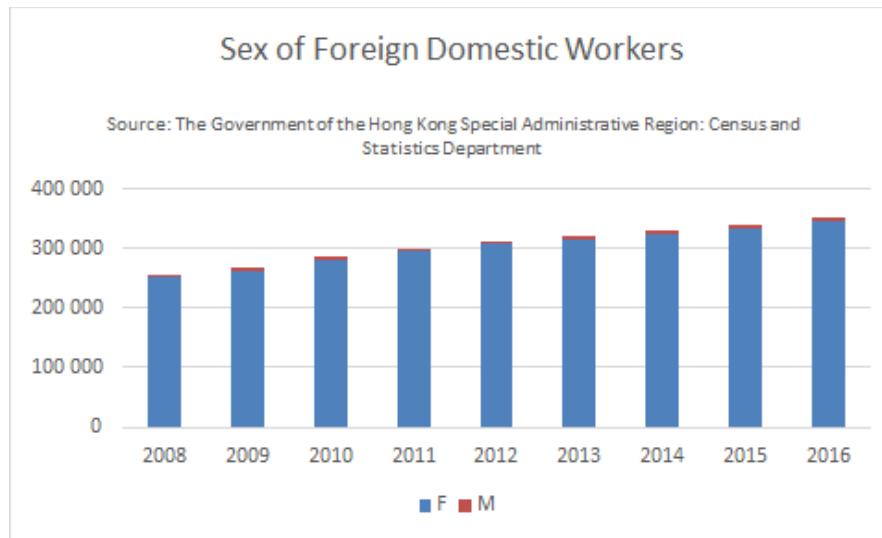


Figure 1. Total Domestic Workers by Sex in Hong Kong (2008-2016) (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2017)

One of the most important parts of global care chains is the use of power to perpetuate them. The use of power is exhibited by the host countries in many ways, both through the bosses' relationships with the workers and the perception of workers by the general public. This play of power seen by many of these women from the Philippines is both cultural and economic. Domestic workers are normally put under strict conditions by their bosses who patrol their looks from areas such as their hygiene and bodily appearances to their clothing, forcing them to wear uniforms to denote their lower status as a maid (Constable 2002:116-117). Cultural differences also play a large role in these guidelines. In Hong Kong, many workers were told they should lose weight due to the difference in cultural values in Hong Kong and the Philippines. In the Philippines, chubbiness is a sign of good health and attractiveness (Constable 2002:131). By attempting to control the women's food intake, employers are asserting their power over their workers' own culture.

Many domestic workers also find protest from their host countries due to the lives they attempt to build in these new places. The Journeyman Pictures (2012) documentary *Maid Wars* chronicles the experience of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and their lukewarm reception by native Hong Kong residents. While there are support groups in Hong Kong advocating for these workers' rights, many of the Hong Kong residents stand by saying the nannies should not call Hong Kong their home because for many in Hong Kong, the relationship of these workers to the country is viewed solely as economic. Although Hong Kong's economy has been greatly aided by these workers, whose influx has allowed Hong Kong women to enter the workforce, their presence is only seen as temporary and easily replaceable by any other maid. By being expendable, these women have been made into commodities themselves, and the countries they enter have made no place for them in their society besides for work. This is another way Hong Kong residents exclude these women from their culture and make sure they do not plan on settling. For these women to take on these jobs and reap as little benefits as possible, many of them are put in situations where they would not want to stay permanently. For these women, a lack of agency becomes a powerful tool to prevent any plans of long-term stay (Journeyman Pictures 2012).

The issue of global care chains is a prime example of the intersectionality that exists in global social problems. These migrant workers' statuses both as women, as well as minority populations, affect the ways in which they interact with the families for which they work. Although some bosses attempt to create friendships with their nannies, the majority of them reaffirm in many ways the lack of power these women have through their interactions by policing their appearances and free time (Constable 2002). While women in the Global North have increased their agency in the job market, it has come at the cost of the agency of many women from the Global South. To

look into changing these structures, one has to see how structural inequalities and a mutual need for work in both developing and developed countries has led to the creation of global care chains.

Globalization has allowed for the creation of global care chain based on a mutual need of both parties involved. The changing economic structures in both countries allows women from the developed countries to enter the workforce (Cheever 2002:31-32), which creates a need for childcare. In the developing countries, this need for childcare and domestic work presents an opportunity for women to raise their families' financial standing in rates much higher than could be done in their own country (Hochschild 2002:17-18). With these jobs providing more money than work in their own countries, they seek these opportunities in an attempt to better their family's social standing. This chance at social mobility comes at a compromise, however, in the form of family structures. Although many women who are abroad hope funding their children's education will allow them to escape the global care chain, countries with an economy that cannot provide for its people will force those who can to look elsewhere for work. In the case of those who can get an education, the chance for the brain drain—where these educated people leave for other nations that want to capitalize on their abilities—is high (Ritzer and Dean 2015:19). This continues the cycle of international migration as a means of economic gain, with the only difference being the destination of these individuals.

Global care chains exhibit the ways in which many social issues become interrelated throughout the globe. The mass migration of women from the Global South has caused many countries like the Philippines to become reliant on the remittances these women supply, making it seem that these care chains have no end in sight. Women who leave their home countries often do so while leaving children and spouses behind, causing strained family relations to be a common side effect of these global care chains. These women have come to show their love through the

money and commodities they send back to their families as their own love is received by children that are not their own. The agency of female migration from one country to another is often diminished by the strict relationship these women face in their work countries; economic incentive keeps women migrating, while cultural differentialism and backlash from the countries abroad keep them from bringing their families and settling in these countries. Yet, the chance as upward mobility is what drives many of these women to continue working abroad at the sacrifice of their relationship with their children. As long as these opportunities remain for women, global care chains will attempt to improve the quality of life for those involved, for better or for worse.

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