The Labor Brokerage State and the Globalization of Filipina Care Workers

Robyn Magalit Rodriguez

Filipina migrant workers in care-related occupations—domestic workers, nannies, nurses—are ubiquitous in core and newly industrialized countries throughout the world today. The liberal individualist premises of market discourses suggest that the overseas migration of these women workers is a result of individual decisions and actions facilitated by globalization’s encouragement of labor mobility. There are other factors at play, however, in Filipinas’ migration to countries as widely varying as the United States, Qatar, Canada, Malaysia, Italy, Singapore, and Taiwan. The Philippine state—acting as a labor broker—plays a critical role in producing, distributing, and regulating Filipinas as care workers across the globe.

From a macrostructural perspective, feminist scholars of globalization have argued that the rise of neoliberalism and the concomitant reduction and dismantling of social services by erstwhile welfare states, along with the entrance of more and more women into the labor force, have resulted in new kinds of demands for a wide range of care work around the world. These demands often arise in relatively more privileged countries in the world system, while the labor to fill these demands is located in poorer economies. Moreover, gendered understandings that define women as most suitable for performing care work continue to exist across the globe. What has emerged, according to Rhacel Salazar Parreñas is an “international transfer of caretaking” (2001, 62; see also Parreñas 2000). Consequently third-world women, including Filipinas, are increasingly finding themselves doing the care work—whether as domestic workers, child-care providers, or nurses—around the globe.

Other scholars have focused less on these broader macrostructural analyses and more on the peculiarities of gendered and racialized labor demand in specific national labor markets to understand the globalization of Filipinas. For instance, Rochelle Ball’s (2004) comparative study of the demand for nursing labor in the United States and Saudi Arabia finds that in the United States, demand for nurses has to do in part with American
women’s reluctance to go into the field of nursing, which they see as being very difficult (due to factors such as the reorganization of health care necessitated by neoliberalism as well as to Americans’ lack of health insurance). American women also see the nursing profession as limited in terms of opportunities for upward mobility. This lack of interest in the field creates the nursing shortages that Filipinas then fill. In Saudi Arabia, however, gendered ideologies that restrict local women from particular kinds of education and employment limit their participation in the labor market generally. Saudi Arabia has, hence, depended on the labor of foreigners, including Filipinas, to fill nursing jobs.

A number of studies have been especially focused on Filipina domestic workers and caregivers in different national contexts (see, e.g., Wong 1996; Constable 1997; Chin 1998). While set in very different countries, these studies of domestic workers, like Ball’s, generally examine the labor markets of labor-receiving states as well as employers’ constructions of domestic labor in order to explain preferences for Filipinas.

Although all of the research on Filipina migrants offers important interventions in understanding transformations in the global order and although these transformations affect specific national contexts to explain the worldwide deployment of Filipina migrants, it still cannot adequately explain why it is that Filipinas migrate and why they generally do so as care workers. The Philippines is certainly not alone in its positioning as a peripheral economy. Many other economies occupy similar or worse locations in the global order, yet they do not supply the world’s reproductive labor in the way that the Philippines does.

Macrostructural analyses of the international transfer of care, therefore, cannot explain exactly why Filipinas are doing a good deal of care work around the world. Although localized studies of Filipinas in different national contexts reveal that they are typically defined in socially marginalized ways that confine them to lower salaries and the status of racialized non-citizens, they cannot explain the racialization and gendering of Filipina migrants in remarkably similar ways around the world.

I suggest that to answer these questions requires a close analysis of the Philippine state in structuring the globalization of Filipina migrants. Indeed, it is precisely this sort of perspective that is missing in all of these accounts. While most scholars of Filipina migration agree that the Philippine government, since the institutionalization of labor export became a developmental policy in the 1970s, is important in facilitating the out-migration of workers, few studies have examined the practices of the Philippine state and therefore have not theorized its role in structuring Filipinas’ globalization. My work aims to address this gap in the scholarship
through a focus on the labor-sending state. Indeed, my work complements existing research by examining how the Philippine state, positioned as it is in the global order, negotiates labor demands as they are constituted in specific national contexts and by broader global processes.

The Philippine state has increasingly come to rely on the export of labor to contain the social, economic, and political dislocations that have resulted from its adherence to neoliberalism. The state takes advantage of labor demands engendered by contemporary processes of globalization to place its citizens in overseas jobs through a highly developed transnational migration apparatus. This apparatus comprises numerous government agencies based in the Philippines (including the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, or POEA), as well as in the Philippine embassies and consular offices around the world (e.g., International Labor Affairs Service, or ILAS). The task of agencies like POEA and ILAS is not only to address but also to create worldwide demand for Philippine labor. As one POEA official describes it, the migration bureaucracy is "an LMI [labor market information] institution, generating various statistical and qualitative data which deal with the temporary migration or contract employment of Filipino human resources around the globe."¹

Through this transnational state apparatus, research is conducted to determine broad, global demands for Philippine labor, while more focused research in particular countries examines which specific industries are experiencing shortages of labor and/or whether those particular countries offer visa categories that would allow Philippine migrants to enter for employment. Even as state agencies attempt to locate demand for Philippine labor broadly, they do, in fact, have officials specifically tasked to identify demand for different kinds of care workers. Indeed, I learned through interviews with an official in the POEA’s marketing branch that the POEA has “skills desks for special job categories including domestic helpers, shipping, construction, entertainers, and medical workers. These desks . . . are tasked with promoting the specific skills of Filipino workers.”²

On the one hand, the Philippines has a long history (since the American colonial period) of nurses’ out-migration and hence has long-established training and education programs that prime women to work as nurses and other kinds of care workers (see, e.g., Choy 2003). At the same time, the out-migration of better-paid, skilled workers guarantees the Philippine

¹ Ricardo Casco, Welfare and Employment Division official, POEA, interview by the author, June 2000, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
² Stella Banawis, interview by the author, June 2000, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
government higher remittance returns. Moreover, by training women workers, the state ensures that Filipinas possess some level of skill before departure, which placates Philippine civil society actors’ fears that lack of skills as well as their employment in gender-typed jobs expose Filipinas to sexual abuse and exploitation. On the other hand, my research on training and education programs for nurses and care workers reveals that these programs are also the channel through which the state attempts to discipline prospective women migrants to conform to acceptable norms around gender and sexuality. One POEA official commented that despite the fact that the United Kingdom was increasingly securing Chinese nurses while the United States was securing Indian nurses, she believed that “the Philippines is still top. Filipinas have a warmth and care that people like.”3 Training and education programs ensure that Filipinas will exhibit these putatively natural traits.

Because labor is less mobile than other kinds of commodities, in the sense that workers are subject to particular kinds of regulations (i.e., visa requirements), the Philippine state necessarily has to engage in diplomatic relations, both informal and formal, if it aims to continue to export labor to existing and new markets. The Philippines has a stake in initiatives taken by labor-importing states to introduce new visa categories that allow the legal influx of migrant labor into their countries. Moreover, it attempts to negotiate bilateral labor agreements with labor-importing states to help ease the migration of Filipinas. Hence, to “promote” or “market” Filipina labor, embassy and consular staff from the department of foreign affairs become important.

Formal bilateral relations such as labor agreements or memorandums of understanding have been a key mechanism by which the Philippine government facilitates flows of Philippine labor overseas. Labor diplomacy, as Philippine migration officials describe it, comprises the more formalized state-to-state relations the Philippine state engages in to develop markets for Philippine labor. By formalizing the transfers of Filipina workers through labor diplomacy, the Philippine state ultimately assents to host states’ gendered and sexualized forms of regulating Filipinas that require, for instance, women’s proof of marriage and mandatory pregnancy testing.

The Philippine government’s role in marketing Filipina workers and engaging in diplomatic relations with foreign governments is for the purpose of promoting the deployment of migrants both through Philippine-based private recruitment agencies and through its own government

3 Lorna Fajardo, Contract Employment Branch, POEA, interview by the author, November 2000, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
recruitment facility, the Government Placement Branch (GPB). In a marketing mission in 1998 to the United Kingdom, for instance, the Philippines explored the possibilities of deploying Filipina nurses to meet the demand for what is estimated to be fifteen thousand vacancies for nurses.

The GPB is the agency that foreign states deal with to secure migrant labor for government-to-government hiring. Rather than allowing private recruitment agencies access to potentially huge foreign government clients, the Philippine state positions itself as the provider of labor for these government labor contracts. According to Fely Romero, “when there are foreign diplomatic dealings and foreign labor officials request labor of the President, the GPB steps in. We can’t recommend private recruiters.”

The state sees itself as being a more ideal provider of migrant labor to foreign governments than private recruitment agencies because the transfer of labor between governments is a diplomatic matter. Furthermore, the state ensures that workers are properly trained and certified and offers convenience for foreign governments, which are spared the effort of trying to locate appropriate recruitment agencies.

The GPB had twenty foreign government clients in 2000–2001. The biggest demand from these clients, Romero indicates, is for medical personnel in government hospitals. The GPB also has some private-sector clients. In addition to the ones mentioned by Romero, the GPB provides physical therapists to the United States and information technology workers to Singapore. Today, the GPB has twenty-eight government clients (POEA 2003, 16).

The fact that the GPB has so many government clients suggests that there is a dimension of state privatization that is seldom noted in the scholarship on labor migration. States, like business corporations, are increasingly outsourcing labor, eliminating employment for their own citizens and nationals while securing workers from other countries. Neoliberalism is creating demands for labor that states like the Philippines increasingly fill by facilitating the migration of its nationals to other countries.

Filipinas’ positioning as care workers around the world is ultimately a consequence of the ways in which the Philippine state has historically drawn on the labor of Filipina women for developmental aims. As Jan Jindy Pettman argues, “the commodification of women’s bodies for multinational space and work on the global assembly line is not removed from the transnational circuits that deliver women’s bodies across state borders

---

4 Fely Romero, interview by the author, July 2000, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
5 Ibid.
for domestic and sex work. In both cases, it is not only gender which marks women’s bodies for particular kinds of work, but also processes nationalising and racialising gendered bodies, especially the body of ‘the Asian woman’” (1998).

Labor brokering as a developmental strategy, similar to other strategies of development engaged in by the Philippine state, such as export-oriented production or tourism, relies on particular representations of women’s labor. Filipinas’ construction as caring, docile, meticulous migrant care workers abroad is congruent with their construction as caring, docile, meticulous factory workers or workers in the tourism industry in the Philippines. These constructions of Filipinas can, furthermore, be tracked to earlier colonial histories that mobilized Filipinas’ labor as nurses for the U.S. colonial administration’s own aims. Their labor during the American colonial period required their travel abroad. Women’s international migration to work as care workers or even “entertainers” in the contemporary moment is an extension of their employment in the Philippine labor market.

Export-oriented production and tourism within the Philippines prove to be unable to absorb the unemployment and underemployment that are exacerbated by the state’s aggressive pursuit of neoliberal economic policies. Overseas employment serves as the only means of survival for many women. At the same time the Philippine state draws on women’s gendered and sexualized labor to bear the economic and political burdens of neoliberalism. By brokering workers, the state is ensured of a steady influx of remittances and is able to contain social upheaval, at least temporarily, as more and more people, women and men, fight for more just alternatives to globalization.

Department of Sociology
Rutgers University

References
Ask people to describe a migrant in South Africa, and, as in many parts of the world, they would probably describe a man. Reflecting the long history of male circular migration to work in South Africa from the rest of southern Africa, he would usually be imagined as traveling alone. But, in this imaginary (especially if imagined as white) he might be accompanied by a wife and even by children as part of his luggage. More often, though, his partner is imagined waiting at home for him to return from his workplace in another country. However, gendered imaginaries of migrants are more than pictures of the mind, and in South Africa the place of male and female cross-border migrants in the national imaginary, both past and present, is complicated by South Africa’s racially exclusionary past.

For the majority of South Africa’s history, only white people were allowed to immigrate to the country. However, notwithstanding these restrictions, from the late 1800s South Africa used the wider southern