The Hidden Class Divides in Children of Global Migration

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In her book *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes*, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas examines how Filipino families with at least one parent working outside of the Philippines negotiate gender roles within their families, with a particular focus on how the children of migrant parents feel about their parents’ migration. Through interviews with the young adult children of migrant parents, the parents themselves, as well as community organizations, Parreñas creates a detailed picture of how the nuclear family, which consists of a breadwinning father (“the pillar of the home”), nurturing stay-at-home mother (“the light of the home”), and their children has been idealized in Filipino society, and also how transnational families are largely stigmatized for failing to meet this standard.\(^1\) Parreñas also argues that despite the potential to transform gender boundaries that comes with the formation of transnational families, these families mostly uphold the roles of the father as provider and disciplinarian and the mother as the nurturer, and that the children of migrant workers uphold these gendered expectations of their parents.\(^2\) Although she does an excellent job of proving her thesis, Parreñas’ work lacks a detailed analysis of how class differences also impact gender relations and perspectives in transnational families. In particular, she does not provide much analysis of how class impacts gender role flexibility, how class creates a global chain of care, the class difference present in the quality of transnational nurturing, and how the middle-class ideal contributes to the formation of transnational families.

It is evident in *Children of Global Migration* and other literature about transnational families that class differences in transnational families have a large impact on relationships within these families and how divisions of labour are established. For example, in lower-class mother-away transnational families, gender divisions of labour were strictly adhered to, with fathers often refusing to provide care for their children or take on household work. These fathers felt that their role as the “pillar of the home” was threatened by their wives earning more than them and thus refused to take on work that they considered to be “feminine.”\(^3\) Fathers who solidified their role as the provider of the family before their wives’ migration were more willing to take on “motherly” jobs after the mothers had left.\(^4\) Because they had already provided their families with houses and


\(^2\) Ibid., 6.

\(^3\) Ibid., 98-99.

\(^4\) Ibid., 100.
money for their needs, the fathers felt secure in their masculinity and were therefore more willing to take on feminine roles. Thus, gender roles are more flexible within upper-class homes because fathers do not feel the need to prove their masculinity as they have already asserted their masculinity through their ability to provide for their families.

Parreñas’ book also describes the impact that class differences in gender roles have on the daughters in mother-away families. In middle and upper class families, families can afford to hire domestic workers and as described above, often also have fathers helping out with household work. Therefore, daughters in these families often feel less pressure to do the domestic work in their families, which leads to a better quality of life for them and thus a better relationship with their migrant mothers.\(^5\) In contrast, daughters of mother-away transnational families who cannot afford to hire domestic workers are expected to take on the reproductive work of the household with the father often not helping at all. This has a negative impact on these daughters’ quality of life, such as lower grades in school, and often resentment towards their migrant mothers.\(^6\) Thus, class clearly has an impact on how daughters of migrant mothers view the fairness of the responsibilities they are given and the attitudes they have towards their mother’s migration.

In her book, Parreñas briefly describes the experiences of single mothers who migrate to provide for their children, and she mentions that a large portion of the mother-away families in her sample are headed by single mothers. The overrepresentation of single mothers among women who migrate is a reflection of the lack of support provided to single mothers and a reflection of the stigma against these women. This stigmatization can clearly be seen among the extended kin that care for their children while the mothers work. These family members often accuse the single mother of being an “embarrassment” to their families and are resentful of the fact that they are caring for their children.\(^7\) With no father to assist in the care of their children, and female kin that have a negative opinion of them, single mothers are expected to be everything to their children. This leads to a situation where migrant single mothers are stigmatized both for being a single mother and for being a migrant mother - they are simultaneously stigmatized for being in dire circumstances and for migrating in response to these circumstances.

Parreñas’ book also discusses another way that class differences impact gender perspectives in transnational families: transnational nurturing in mother-away families. Migrant mothers are expected to continue nurturing their children from abroad by maintaining constant

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\(^5\) Ibid., 111.
\(^6\) Ibid., 110.
\(^7\) Ibid., 117.
contact with their families back in the Philippines. If they fail to do this, their children perceive the lack of contact as “abandonment”. However, Parreñas does not mention in her book that class impacts how often contact between migrant parents and their families in the Philippines can occur. As Parreñas mentions in her other work on transnational families, the frequency of contact depends on factors such as the migrant parent’s job and working conditions. Women working as domestic workers have less contact with their families because they work long hours and receive low wages. Therefore, they can usually only call home on their weekly day off, both because they have no other time off and because they cannot afford frequent international calls. Their employers may also control how and when they communicate with their families. On the other hand, women working abroad as nurses can call home more frequently due to more flexible working hours and higher pay. Therefore the class status of migrant parents, particularly migrant women, impacts how they perform their nurturing role and influences their children’s assessment of their mothering.

In addition to creating household divisions of labour, class differences also have a role in creating more global divisions of labour. The global “chain of care” results in care work being passed down to women with less and less privilege. Middle and upper class families in the Global North hire domestic workers from the Global South to do the care work in their households, taking advantage of labour migration programs in place in many countries that receive large numbers of migrant workers. The women who migrate to fill these positions pass on the care work in their own families either to paid domestic workers in their home countries or to female extended kin. In either case, the women doing the care work in the home country of the migrant mother do not have access to resources that would allow them to migrate for work. This leads to a gendered and classed hierarchy where care work is repeatedly passed down and devalued. Other literature on the chain of care has pointed to the fact that migrant mothers prefer entrusting female relatives with the care of their children because they believe that domestic workers in their home countries would not care for their children adequately. This is a similar to the views of the

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8 Ibid., 127.
10 Ibid., 329.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila, “‘I’m Here, but I’m There:’ The Meaning of Latina Transnational Motherhood,” Gender and Society 11, no.5 (1997): 559-560.
employers of domestic workers, who often view the care work done by the worker as inferior to their own care work.\textsuperscript{14}

Besides providing their children with basic necessities, health care, and education, the migrant parents that Parreñas spoke to also often cited the desire to build a house or provide other material aspects of a middle-class life for their children as reasons for migrating.\textsuperscript{15} They also cite their hope of providing their children with a better life. This reasoning is influenced by ideologies that encourage consumerism and promote middle-class family as the ideal life. Thus, a paradox emerges where families must disrupt the ideal of the nuclear family to gain the ideal of middle-class family life. Parents migrate in hopes that the move will be temporary and that when they return to their home countries, they will have a middle-class nuclear family life, thus satisfying both ideals. In other words, they see transnational family life as a stepping stone to having a more comfortable life that satisfies gender norms.\textsuperscript{16} The children in transnational families also see their parents’ migration as a way for their parents to provide them with a middle-class gender normative life in the future. Indeed, children of transnational families often talk about their dreams for a life that resembles Western notions of middle-class life including a large house, a car, and material luxuries.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, the gender boundary crossings that often come with transnational family life are seen as a temporary sacrifice to ensure middle-class status in the future.

*Children of Global Migration* is a thorough study of how gender ideologies shape the way transnational families are viewed both in the public and private spheres. Parreñas does an excellent job detailing how transnational families maintain the gender division of labour and how children are negatively impacted by their continued expectations of the “ideal” nuclear family. However, the book lacks a strong analysis of how class differences both in the Philippines and globally impact these gender expectations of migrant parents. By not exploring issues such as the differences between lower and middle-class families’ gender role flexibility, class differences in the maintenance of transnational nurturing, the role of the middle-class ideal in creating transnational families, and the global chain of care work in-depth, Parreñas misses the opportunity to further strengthen her analysis of gender relations in transnational families. Nonetheless, *Children of Global Migration* is still an excellent book for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Parreñas, *Children of Global Migration*, 70.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Rachel Silvey, “Consuming the Transnational Family: Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers to Saudi Arabia,” *Global Networks* 6, no. 1 (2006): 34.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Leah Schmalzbauer, “Family Divided: The Class Formation of Honduran Transnational Families.” *Global Networks* 8, no. 3 (2008): 341.
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anyone who wants to explore how the gender division of labour impacts families in a global context. However, those looking for a more intersectional analysis of this issue should supplement this book with other literature on transnational families.

Bibliography


Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette and Ernestine Avila. “‘I’m Here, but I’m There:’ The Meaning of Latina Transnational Motherhood.” *Gender and Society* 11, no. 5 (1997): 548-571.


