

Long distance intimacy: class, gender and intergenerational relations between mothers and children in Filipino transnational families

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***Abstract** In this article I address transnational intergenerational relations between Filipino migrant mothers and their young adult children and examine how families achieve intimacy across great distances. I do this by identifying and examining the transnational communication methods Filipino migrant families use to develop intimacy, in other words familiarity, across borders. In my analysis, I address how political economy and gender shape the dynamics of transnational communication. By showing how economic conditions and gender shape transnational family communication, I provide a socially thick lens through which to understand the formation of transnational intimacy and emphasize how larger systems of inequality shape the lives of the children left behind by the global migration of women.*

Migration engenders changes in a family. This is particularly so in the Philippines where a great number of mothers and fathers emigrate to sustain their families economically. There are no reliable government statistics on the number of mothers and fathers leaving their children behind in the Philippines, but non-governmental organizations estimate there are approximately nine million of these children growing up physically apart from a migrant father, migrant mother or both migrant parents (Kakammpi 2004).¹ This figure represents approximately 27 per cent of the overall youth population. The formation of transnational households poses challenges to the achievement of intimate familial relations between migrant parents and the children they leave behind in the Philippines. In this article, I address transnational intergenerational relations between Filipino migrant mothers and their young adult children and examine how families achieve intimacy across great distances. I do this by identifying and examining the acts of transnational communication that Filipino migrant families use to develop intimacy, in other word familiarity, across borders. By transnational communication, I refer to the flow of ideas, information, goods, money and emotions.

Contemporary transnational households have a different temporal and spatial experience from the binational families of the past. New technologies 'heighten the immediacy and frequency of migrants' contact with their sending communities and

allow them to be actively involved in everyday life there in fundamentally different ways than in the past' (Levitt 2001: 22). For instance, transatlantic telephone services are more accessible and allow migrants to be involved in day-to-day decisions. This is also the case in the Philippines, where the rapid advance in technology is mirrored in the mobile phone industry. By 2002, the number of mobile telephone subscribers in the Philippines reached 15.5 million. The Philippines is reportedly the world leader in the Short Messaging Service (SMS) mobile phone market with 200 million messages handled by companies each day (Miranda 2003). Arjun Appadurai (1999: 230) succinctly observed, 'we are functioning in a world that is fundamentally characterized by objects in motions ... ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques.' In our world of flows, we increasingly inhabit postmodern spaces and experience 'time-space compression ... the speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us' (Harvey 1989: 240). This is the case with transnational family members. Although they perform daily activities across vast geographical distances, they overcome spatial barriers through the rapid flow of 'objects'. Due to advances in technology, information about family members can be received instantaneously and money can be transferred to urban centres in Third World countries within minutes.

Yet, the compression of time and space in transnational communication is not a uniform condition, but a varied social process shaped by class and gender. The experience of transnational communication can be distinguished by one's social location in the intersecting and multiple axes of social inequalities (gender, class, rural versus urban families, and so on) (Glenn 2002; Lowe 1997). For instance, transnational communication requires access to capital and its frequency depends on the resources of individuals (Sassen 2000). As Sarah Mahler (1998: 80) notes, 'maintaining more vigorous transnational ties remains quite formidable' for most of the working class Salvadorans who she met in Long Island. Additionally, time-space compression requires capital fixity. As Saskia Sassen (2000: 217) reminds us, it is not self-generative, but needs 'to be produced, and such a feat of production requires capital fixity, vast concentrations of very material and not so mobile facilities and infrastructures'. Transnational communication and the achievement of intimacy would thus be a greater challenge for migrants with families located in rural areas without the appropriate facilities and infrastructures. This greater challenge tells us that transnational families do not exist in a vacuum; social and geographical inequalities shape the quality of intimacy in transnational family life.

In this article, I address how political economic conditions and gender shape the dynamics of transnational communication in families where the mother is away. My discussion begins with a literature review on transnational families and then moves to an overview of my methodology and characteristics of sample. I then proceed to describe the transnational communication recognized by young adult children in such 'mother-away families'. My discussion considers the occupation of the migrant parent and examines how the conditions of migrant employment control transnational family life. It also considers geopolitics, taking into account how the regional development

of the area of residence controls transnational communication flows between migrant mothers and their children. Next, I examine how gender is constituted in acts of transnational communication, addressing whether they agree or disagree with the reorganization of the gender division of labour forced by the biological mother's complete removal from the home. By illustrating how employment conditions, economic conditions and gender shape transnational family communication, I provide a socially thick lens through which to understand the formation of transnational intimacy and emphasize how larger systems of inequality shape the lives of the children the global migration of women have left behind.

Transnational families

Various studies have shown that intimacy across borders defines transnational family life. Regular communication – whether through telephone calls, remittances, letters, voice recordings, SMS messages, photographs or visits – is part and parcel of everyday life in transnational families (Asis et al. 2004; Levitt 2001). Migrant mothers are simultaneously 'here and there'. In the pioneering essay by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) on 'transnational mothering', they establish that migrant women attempt to relay intimacy when they reconstitute mothering to not only encompass breadwinning but also to include nurturing from afar. Yet, we should remember that transnational mothering is not a one-way process. Still missing from the picture is the perspective of children as well as the sentiments of extended kin (Pessar 1999). We should not assume that the expansion of mothering to include breadwinning comes without conflict or even rejection by those being mothered 'back home'. Families are not homogeneous units, but instead 'women, men and children of different sexes do not experience their families in the same way' (Thorne 1992: 10).

In addition, we still have to examine acts of regular communication and the ways transnational family members relay intimacy as social processes embedded in larger systems of inequality. We still need to consider further how gender, class and geography constitute the contours and gradations of intimacy in transnational migrant families. In this article I attempt to do so by examining the contours of class and the constitution of gender in practices of transnational intimacy in mother-away families. Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler (2003: 817) call attention to the greater need for research on the constitution of gender in transmigratory processes, including sending remittances, arguably a common strategy for engendering intimacy even if commodified, and interdependence in transnational families. As they ask of remittances, 'Who sends remittances and what stipulations if any are placed on their use? Who receives them and what power do they have, if any, over the amount and frequency sent? What effect does these [*sic*] seemingly economic relationship have on gender relations, on gendered divisions of labor?' More generally, Pessar and Mahler challenge scholars to do research that provides a gendered analysis of transnational migration – from the gender transformations that migration elicits, through differences of settlement between men and women to the ways institutional structures such as the state promote gender differences in movements.

My discussion on transnational communication heeds their call and at the same time builds from previous studies that situate transnational families in larger systems of race, class, gender and global inequalities. For instance, I continue the discussion of Linda Matthei and David Smith (1998) who construct transnational family formation as a strategy for negotiating racial inequalities. They document how Belizean migrants in Los Angeles protect their children from the racial and class tensions of inner city life by sending them back to their relatives in Belize. I also draw from studies that examine the negotiation of gender in transnational families (Goldring 1996; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 2000). Focusing mostly on 'father-away' transnational families, these studies show a nuanced process of unequal dependency between married couples. David Kyle (2000) notes, for instance, that Ecuadorian male migrants in New York and Europe consciously restrict the information they share about their migrant lives to their wives in Ecuador as a strategy of gender control. They use silence to mitigate the independence that women develop during their absence because it reveals women's lack of control over their sex and fidelity. In addition, other studies have paid close attention to the division of labour in transnational migrant families, many celebrating the expansion of non-migrant women's duties to include traditionally male responsibilities such as farming and lamenting the continued preservation of unequal gender divisions of labour in these families (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 2000). I build from these other studies to address the constitution of gender in the transnational communications that shape intimate relations between children and their migrant mothers.

Methodology

In this article, I draw from a larger project on the transnational family life of young adult children in the Philippines. In my larger project, I compare the gender division of labour, intergenerational relations and the role of extended kin in the lives of the children of migrant mothers and migrant fathers. I do so from the perspective of young adult children whose interpretations of their transnational family life I gathered by collecting one- to three-hour-long in-depth, open-ended and tape-recorded interviews. I had contained my interviews with 'children' to young adults who have spent at least five years of their adolescence in a transnational household and were still in a relationship of economic dependence to a migrant parent. In this way, I interview actual members of transnational families.

For my primary data, I conducted 69 interviews with young adult children of migrant parents between January and July 2000. I interviewed 30 children of migrant mothers, 26 of migrant fathers, and 13 of two migrant parents. In my discussion I draw primarily from the interviews with children of migrant mothers. To protect the anonymity of informants, I have used pseudonyms throughout. With only an intermediate knowledge of the local dialect, I held the interviews in Tagalog. Most responded in Tagalog, but some used a combination of Tagalog, English and the local dialect. I fully transcribed and then translated these interviews into English. A research assistant helped me translate passages in the local dialect into English.

By limiting my interviews to adults, I am assured of having gained the perspectives of those who have grown up in a transnational household and have had time to develop well-formulated thoughts and perspectives on the process of adaptation in the transnational family. The interviews with young adult children focus on their family life and relations, emotions and future goals for family life. The interviews do not seek to generate narrative recollections of childhood experiences. Instead, my queries on transnational family relations focus on relationships that young adults currently maintain with transnational migrant parents and do not look into divisions of labour in the past but those of the present. Yet, in interviews, children would often refer to their childhood to explain intergenerational relations in their families. During the time of my interviews, all the young adult children who participated in my study had yet to reunite permanently with their migrant parents.

Because my discussion of transnational intimacy relies mostly on the perspectives of young adult children in the Philippines and leaves out the perspectives of their migrant mothers, my picture of the caring work of transnational mothers relies on the narratives of those at the receiving end of transnational care. Moreover, my perspectives on intimacy are based solely on the feelings and sentiments of the children in the Philippines. How their mothers reciprocate these feelings is unaccounted for in my data. Recognizing these shortcomings, I acknowledge that children of migrant workers may overlook certain caring labours that their migrant parents deem to be important indicators of intimacy, affection and dependency. Despite this limitation, I consider the interpretation by children of parental caring acts to be a viable glimpse into their understanding of transnational life and intimacy. The perspectives of children in transnational families and the caring acts of migrant mothers, which they use as the definitive markers of transnational mothering, give us an insight into their gender expectations.

I collected an unsystematic sample of research participants by using snowball referrals that began in four of the largest universities in one area of the Philippines. I identified interviewees by making classroom announcements and by visiting business establishments that students frequent near campuses. From my previous research on migrant domestic workers, I knew that one of the biggest investments that migrant parents make is in their children's education (Parreñas 2001). Hence, I assumed that young adult children who were raised in transnational migrant households would be well represented in a university setting. I collected interviews in both public and private school settings so as to generate a sample that is representative of diverse class backgrounds.

To ensure further the diversity of my sample, I also identified interviewees using non-university based networks of friends and relatives in the area. They constitute approximately a quarter of my sample. Still, almost all my interviewees were at some point enrolled in college with a handful, mostly children of two migrant parents, having dropped out of school. Although the majority of my research participants had completed some years of higher education, my sample is inclusive of diverse class backgrounds. This was made clear to me in my subsequent visits to their homes, which represented a wide range that included large three-storeyed structures, modest

bungalows, and bamboo huts. It was also supported by the vast range of jobs of migrant parents, which include domestic work, nursing, seafaring, and engineering.

From May 2001 to April 2002, I returned to the field so as to do follow up interviews with the young adult children of migrant workers as well as their guardians. Of the 69 young adult children, I was able to re-establish contact with 55 of them and 33 agreed to let me contact their guardians. I was able to interview 31 guardians of 28 children. I interviewed the guardians of 15 children of migrant mothers, while I interviewed guardians of 13 children of migrant fathers and two migrant parents. I use these interviews as supplementary data.

Characteristics of the sample

The Philippine government claims that women are less likely than men to leave their families. This assertion is based on government figures that indicate more than half of women migrants are unmarried (approximately 56 per cent). In contrast, figures show that the majority of male migrants are married (72 per cent) (Asis 2001: 31). Yet, we cannot assume that unmarried women are without children (Parreñas 2005). For instance, in the year 2000 female-headed households comprised 12.2 per cent of households in the Philippines (National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, 2004). Nonetheless, non-governmental organizations also insist there has been a rise in the proportion of married women going abroad. In 1999, non-governmental organizations estimated that 50.3 per cent of women migrants were either married, widowed or separated (Kakammpi 2004).

The transnational households of migrant mothers and fathers differ in structure; the former are embedded in a dense extended kinship network and the latter resemble modern nuclear households. The only difference between migrant-father transnational households and modern nuclear households is the temporal and spatial rearrangement brought by the father's work: instead of the father routinely arriving back home to his family at supper time, he comes back from work every ten months. Among the children of 26 migrant fathers, only two did not identify their mother as their primary guardian. All the migrant fathers except one have intact marriages. Almost all of them live in a household with their mothers and away from most of their extended kin. In contrast, the transnational households of migrant mothers rely on extended kin. For instance, close to half of my sample of migrant-mother families reside in their paternal or maternal ancestral home. Also, many migrant mothers are single mothers. Of 30 young adult children in mother-away families, 15 claimed to have married parents, five reported that their parents had separated after migration, and the rest were children of pre-migration single mothers.

Of the children of migrant mothers, most identify a female extended kin as their primary guardian. While 11 of 30 children identify their father as their primary guardian, all 11 of them also name one female kin as a co-guardian. Of these fathers, only a handful, according to the children, do any housework. This is not surprising considering that nine fathers in my sample had relocated and sought employment in other areas of the Philippines. Similar to the families of migrant mothers, two-parent-

abroad families rely on female extended kin for household maintenance. Of the 13 children in two-parent migrant households, only two claimed to have a male guardian (an uncle and an older brother) and the rest relied on a grandmother or an aunt.

In my study, the families of migrant mothers come from more varied class backgrounds than the majority of the stable middle-class families of migrant fathers, who are mostly seafarers or professionals in countries in the Gulf region. This is reflected in the occupations of migrant mothers. While the mothers of most adult children to whom I spoke are care workers, they include low-skilled, semi-professional and professional women. I spoke to 18 adult children of domestic workers and seven of nurses. Among the children of migrant mothers, I interviewed 19 from middle-class backgrounds. Many are children of domestic workers in other countries: Israel, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Notably, in determining class, I looked not at parental occupation but instead at the general level of educational attainment among extended kin, type of residence (for example cement house), family wealth (usually measured by land), as well as self-identification.

Among my interviewees, in the last decade the children (who are now young adults) spent very little time in a complete household unit. Distance of time and space suggest a challenge to the achievement of intimacy in transnational families. Among my interviewees, the standard length of separation is 13.79 years with fathers returning 9.81 times for an average length of a 7.57-week stay in the Philippines. This means that in more than a decade migrant fathers have spent approximately 74 weeks with their now young-adult children, whose average age is 20.68 years old. The average length of separation for the children of migrant mothers in my sample is slightly longer. Mothers of the children in my sample migrated on average 11.42 years ago and have returned 4.44 times for an average length of a 5.39-week stay. This means that in the last 11 years or so mothers on average have spent a total of 23.9 weeks with their children, who are now approximately 21 years in age.

Transnational communication

Migrant mothers do not abandon their children on migration. In their absence, they do not even pass down all their gender responsibilities to other family members left in the Philippines. Instead, they not only reconstitute mothering by providing acts of care from afar, but also often do so by overcompensating for their physical absence and performing a transnational version of what Sharon Hays (1996) identifies as 'intensive mothering'. They struggle to nurture their children from a distance. This tells us that migrant mothers feel responsible for the emotional security of their children after migration. In this section, I describe how mothers communicate with their children across borders, taking into account in my discussion how employment conditions, economic conditions and gender control transnational communication flows in migrant families.

Remittances play a central role in transnational family maintenance. Mothers maintain intimate relations across borders by sending remittances to their families at least once a month. According to a Philippine government survey conducted between

April and September 2001, female overseas contract workers sent 14.4 billion pesos to their families with approximately 10 billion pesos coming into the Philippines through banks and 3.5 billion pesos through door-to-door remittances (National Statistics Office 2003). In addition, women sent money formally through agencies such as Western Union or informally through family and friends. Finally, women also brought cash home. In the same period of April to September 2001, return migrants brought home approximately 5.7 billion pesos and an additional 2 billion pesos was provided in-kind (National Statistics Office 2003). Not just a cash transaction, remittances are a means by which migrant mothers establish intimacy across borders.

Mothers remit funds in a variety of ways, for instance through bank deposits, door-to-door remittances, airmail (although rarely and usually limited to occasional gifts) and wire transfers. According to young adult children, mothers prefer to remit money through the maintenance of a bank account that she shares with her family in the Philippines and entrusts to one of her children. Forming multinational ethnic enclave operations, Philippine banks such as PCI, Equitable and RCBC operate branches in various locales of the diaspora and compete for the migrant clientele in areas as diverse as Gulf cities, metropolitan centres in the United States, and various urban locales in Asia. Migrants would deposit their earnings in these banks and give their relatives in the Philippines instantaneous access to their money via ATM machines. How much of their earnings migrants deposit in these banks or keep to themselves are usually unknown to the children. However, the amount is usually substantial, reaching at least 10,000 pesos for domestic workers and usually as much as 50,000 pesos for nurses.²

The management of bank accounts is one way in which migrant mothers stay closely involved with the day-to-day challenges of family life in the Philippines. They usually co-manage these accounts not with their spouses but with an older daughter whom they have entrusted with the responsibilities they have left behind in migration, or sometimes but rarely with female extended kin. None of the sons who participated in my study co-manage bank accounts with their migrant mothers. While many sons receive monthly remittances directly from their mothers, these funds were often designated for their own personal consumption. The responsibilities of sons did not extend to the well-being of other members of their family. Daughters, by contrast, often had to distribute their mother's remittances to other members of the family. Hence, in telephone conversations, mothers usually asked sons about their school performance, while with daughters, mothers enquired not only about their school performance but also about the well-being of other members of their family including their father and siblings.

Usually the eldest daughter co-manages the bank account, like 19-year-old Gaireen Guilleen, daughter of a domestic worker in Israel and a college professor who works on another island from his children. She casually informed me of her access to a joint bank account when explaining how her mother sends remittances:

[Of the 55,000 pesos we receive] we only spend 10,000 a month. The rest that my mother sends us, we do not touch it. We have our savings account, dollar

savings account. Then, when my mama tells me to get money, for example for a birthday, for my cousins, then she tells me to withdraw money and give it to my cousin and tell my cousin it is a birthday gift.

Notably, Gaireen and not her older brother is entrusted with their family bank account.

The maintenance of a joint bank account suggests that mothers entrust a great deal of responsibility to their daughters. In my study, children are more likely to control joint bank accounts than fathers and other adults. Yet, daughters more than sons are given access to them. And older children are more likely to co-manage these accounts than younger children. Access to a bank account potentially increases the decision-making power of a child over other members of the extended household, causing friction among those who feel that their authority has been subverted by the migrant mother's decision to give the money directly to their children. The allocation of remittances to daughters is indicative of the father's absence in day-to-day decision making. Many of the fathers of young adult children of migrant mothers in my sample work outside the home. Financially, they tend not to rely directly on their spouses. Moreover, they tend not to be involved with the management of the household. For example, eldest daughters or female kin and not fathers make the decisions about meals.

Yet, co-managing bank accounts does not just increase the power of young adult children over adult relatives. It also increases the responsibilities and workload of daughters. Indeed, it seems that eldest daughters feel that they have a story to share about the difficulties of transnational family life. In my voluntary sample, they constituted 16 of 30 children of migrant mothers who responded to my solicitations for interviewees. For those still in college, many expressed their concern over how their household responsibilities led to their deteriorating school performance. This is more so for families unable to afford domestic help, often the families of migrant domestic workers in other Asian and Gulf region countries. In general, controlling the purse strings in the family has long been a responsibility held by women in the Philippines, one that is not contested but instead maintained in women's migration as men are those not entrusted by migrant women with their remittances.³ In transnational families, migrant mothers still try to maintain their control over the family purse strings. They do this by extending their authority through their daughters whom, as I have noted, are more likely than other family members to receive and allocate women's remittances or share the control of a joint bank account with migrant mothers.

While upholding women's traditional role of controlling the purse strings in the family, the maintenance of a shared bank account also enables migrant mothers to redefine mothering to include breadwinning. Through the co-management of a joint bank account with an entrusted family member in the Philippines, a migrant mother can be immediately accessible to meet the material needs of her family back home. At the same time, she can yield power over how her earnings are spent by transmitting her decisions through her entrusted child. In the process, she ensures that her earnings

cover the needs of her children and at the same time are protected from the possible abuse of fathers and extended kin. However, daughters are not exempt from possibly abusing the remittances of their mothers. One interviewee admitted to cutting the food budget and spending the money on luxury goods such as designer clothes, perfume or jewellery.

Possibly to deter such abuse, mothers attempt to micromanage their families across geographical distances. They do this through the monitoring of the financial expenditures of the family. We see this in the family of Barbara Latoza, a 19 year-old eldest daughter with 12 and 15 year-old brothers, who co-manages her transnational household with her mother in Taiwan. She does this by balancing their joint bank account. As she explains: 'I am the one who gets the money from the bank. After that, sometimes my mother calls and tells me how to spend it. She budgets it so that we could afford the household expenses and my tuition. Before I go to withdraw the money, she will call me and tell me what to do with it.' In addition to controlling the monthly household budget, the mother also makes use of the bank account to make her presence constantly felt by family in the Philippines with the purchase of furniture and household appliances. Barbara continues:

Before our sofa was not made of foam but wood. So she would tell me to get foam. Then before we did not have a washing machine. So she made me buy one for the house. She said that she wants to see a lot of things when she comes home. So sometimes I would go to my aunt. I would tell her that my mom told me to buy this and buy that. So I go buy it and then I send the receipts to my mother.

Why is it important for your mom to buy these things?

She told me that when she comes home, she wants to be reminded of the earnings she made abroad, that she gains from it here in the Philippines. She wants to see these things as a remembrance.

As in the case of Barbara's mother, bank accounts enable migrant mothers to imagine their life in the Philippines while they toil as domestic workers abroad. Perhaps this is a strategy they use for survival against servitude, one that emphasizes their temporary sojourn and eventual return to a life of middle-class luxury in the Philippines (Parreñas 2001).

To achieve some semblance of intimacy, migrant mothers, in addition to micromanaging household finances from a distance, also make regular communication part of the weekly routine of transnational family life. For instance, the mother of the 19-year-old Cheryl Gonzaga never fails to call her three children at three o'clock every Sunday afternoon. This routine has been in place since Cheryl's mother migrated 14 years ago and has yet to be disrupted by the relocation of her mother from one country to the next, beginning with Bahrain, then the United Kingdom, and most recently Hong Kong.

Although maintaining a greater level of involvement than her husband does with her children, Cheryl's mother also contributes a larger share to their household income. Once a low-wage worker, Cheryl's father now runs their family business – a fish pond located in another island – and returns only once a month to see his children. Comparing her parents, Cheryl exclaims: 'my mother pays for everything, all of our expenses. All of her money goes to us. Her money goes to us children and from Daddy we get nothing. It is OK when Daddy decided to give us something, but if not, that is OK as well. We do not demand anything from him.' As we can see from Cheryl's family, the work of migrant women expands to include breadwinning in migration while the work of the men left behind in the Philippines correspondingly shrinks. At the same time, women retain their nurturing responsibilities in the family, but men rarely assist them. Mothers both provide economically and nurture emotionally from afar while fathers are physically present but emotionally absent from their children's lives.

In contrast to my observations, other studies on mother-away transnational families have found men to be more intimately involved with their families (Asis et al. 2004; Gamburd 2000). In a recent study on the transnational families of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Singapore, Maruja Asis and her colleagues noticed that women's migration unavoidably facilitated the entry of men into the world of 'reproductive work' (Asis et al. 2004). Yet, they also noted that men rarely became full-time caregivers of children. This suggests that while women's migration may force men to do housework, they do not do so to the extent that it would free women, including migrant mothers, of nurturing responsibilities. Indeed, my interviews show that migrant mothers more than just 'communicate' but continue to nurture their children from afar.

The caring work of mothers usually does not go unnoticed among children, including Cheryl, who elaborates on this work by her mother. She says:

Sometimes she calls three times a week. Especially if one of us is sick (she and her two brothers), then she will call one day, then she will call again a day later. Sometimes she is busy. So she will only call on Sunday at 3 p.m. That is why we are all home on Sundays. This is when she checks up on us. She asks us if we are happy with our food. She is kind of strict. When it comes to our food and our health, she is strict. So it has been a couple of years since we stopped using MSG. We don't use that anymore because it is supposed to be bad for our health. ... With MSG, I get a headache. According to my mother, MSG causes it. She would know, because she is a nutritionist.

In addition to providing health advice, the mother also plans their menu for the week. She talks to her children about their school, teachers and activities outside the classroom. She even gives them advice on their school projects. Cheryl's mother undoubtedly continues to perform her role as 'mother' and tries to achieve intimacy in separation.

Migrant mothers achieve intimacy in other ways. Many rely on sending an SMS to communicate with their children on a daily basis. Some children even told me that they wake up to biblical messages from their migrant mothers every morning. They receive doses of 'my daily bread' as they called them. Sending text messages is one system mothers use to make sure that their children are ready for school in the mornings. Many are also like the mother of Cheryl Gonzaga and set up a routine of calling at particular times during the week. Other mothers send a *balikbayan*⁴ box every two months or so. In the boxes would be clothes, goods and toiletries such as soaps and lotion that they purchase for their children. Finally, many resort to dropping a letter in the post for their children during set periods of the month. For instance, some children told me that they know when they can anticipate a letter from their mother. This includes the 19 year-old Rodney Palanca, who knows to expect a letter from his mother – a nurse in Saudi Arabia – in the middle of each month. Rodney describes it as follows: 'I am excited to receive letters from my mom every month. I expect the letters to arrive on the 15th of each month. When it does not get there on the 15th, I worry by the following day. Then I cannot help but think that my mother must have forgotten about me.' These different forms of set routines enable transnational families to achieve semblances of intimacy. From set routines form expectations such as those expressed by Rodney and with these expectations come established standards of care for mothers to gain intimacy in the family.

Surely the achievement of intimacy brings rewards of greater closeness in transnational family life? The children who receive constant communication from migrant parents are less likely to feel a gap in intergenerational relations. Moreover, they are also more likely to experience 'family time' in spatial and temporal distance. As the 20-year-old Edriana Lingayen, whose mother works as a nurse in Saudi Arabia, explains:

Family time is a little expensive for us because it entails an overseas phone call. But there are times when my mother and I share a laugh. Like once she bumped her head on a glass door while in a hurry. She could not stop laughing when sharing that story. Then she asks after my boyfriend. That is what you can call family time.

Moments of intimacy achieved in a transnational terrain do not go unnoticed among the children of migrant mothers.

In fact, most describe their relationship with their mothers as 'very close'. For instance, the 22-year-old Ellen Seneriches, whose mother has been a domestic worker in New York for more than a decade, did not hesitate to describe her relationship to her mother as such:

We communicate as often as we can, like twice or three times a week through emails. Then she would call us every week. And it is very expensive, I know. ... My mother and I have a very open relationship. We are like best friends. She would give me advice whenever I had problems. ... She understands

everything I do. She understands why I would act this or that way. She knows me really well. And she is also transparent to me. She always knows when I have problems and likewise I know when she does. I am closer to her than to my father.

Although Ellen only lives three hours away from her father, she actually communicates more frequently with her mother and feels closer to her mother than to her father.

Class and economic development

Technological advancements surely benefit transnational families. However, they do not automatically guarantee a smooth flow of transnational communication. The social location of the migrant mother controls the access of families to different modes of transnational communication, for some have more limited choices because of their conditions of employment or because they have fewer material resources. In addition, the level of development in the area of residency also determines the quality of transnational communication. In this section I describe how class and economic development shape the flow of transnational communication in migrant families and distinguish between the quality of transnational family life of those with and those without the resources with which to communicate.

First, the type of occupation held by the mother usually dictates their ability to communicate with their children – a nurse can call more frequently than a domestic worker. For instance, nurses have the flexibility to call their children many times a week, while domestic workers can only usually call them once a week – often on a certain time during their day off. This is why domestic workers and their children usually have a set appointment to talk on the telephone each week. However, with advances in technology, more families are now able to communicate through cellular phones and send text messages to one another on a regular basis.

Second, the country of destination also determines the quality of transnational communication, especially for low-skilled migrant workers. Domestic workers in undesirable destination countries, for instance in the Gulf region, earn significantly less than their counterparts in desirable destinations like Canada, Italy, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In this latter set of destinations, migrant domestic workers earn more and consequently have more resources with which to communicate regularly with their children. Furthermore, in some countries, migrant domestic workers are without a regular day off or are restricted to one day off in a month. In these countries, migrant workers have less flexibility to communicate with their children in the Philippines.

Conditions of employment in domestic work also control the flow of transnational communication. The absence of an employment standard in domestic work sometimes leaves migrant mothers unable to communicate regularly with their families at home (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). This was the case for the mother of 18 year-old Floridith Sanchez during her six-year stay in Dubai. Without access to a convenient post office, the mother's employers also limited her to only one phone call to the Philippines every three months. The infrequent communication employers imposed on Floridith's

transnational family unavoidably damaged intergenerational relations, resulting in feelings of abandonment as well as emotional distance for Floridith. As Floridith complained of the time her mother worked in Dubai:

I felt like she did not think she had a family here in the Philippines. Sometimes she would not send money and I would think that she is just having a good time out there. She would not remember our birthdays. She would not call us. I was so mad at her. I used to think that it was probably better if she never came back here.

Fortunately, the relationship between Floridith and her mother has improved since her mother relocated to Taiwan five years ago. As Floridith explains, 'she just started calling us every Sunday since she started to work in Taiwan'. Floridith now understands that the circumstances of her mother's employment in Dubai had been the reason for the sporadic flow of communication between them.

Indeed, a 'power-geometry' (Massey 1994) has shaped the relationship between Floridith and her mother; Floridith, like most other children and family members in the Philippines, has mostly been at the receiving end of the flow of transnational communication (Asis et al. 2004). Access to cellular phones and internet services has enabled children to initiate communication with migrant parents. However, the ability of children to communicate is constrained by their minimal resources. For example, children frequently do not have enough of a credit load to send an international text message to their mothers abroad. Although they are in a better position to initiate communication with children in the Philippines, migrant parents also face material constraints that limit transnational communication (Mahler 1998).

We should remember that the unidirectional flow of transnational communication that embodies many transnational families is embedded in an even larger system of political economic inequality between the First and Third World, as reflected in the employer's control over the ability of migrant workers to communicate with their families in the Philippines. As we see in the case of the employment conditions of Floridith's mother in Dubai, the 'power-geometry' in transnational migrant families can still render those family members (for example the migrant worker) who have more power to communicate to be fairly powerless to initiate communication.

Another structural factor controlling the flow of communication in transnational families, apart from the migrant workers' employment conditions, is the unequal development of urban and rural areas. Rural areas, including the one in which Floridith's family lives, sometimes lack the technological infrastructure needed for the flow of transnational communication. Some areas have no cellular phone coverage or even the infrastructure for a residential telephone service. Migrant families in these areas often have to plan and make designated appointments to communicate. This was the case for the family of Floridith, who explained: 'We did not have a phone at home. It is just now. We just got our phone this past year, but before she would call us at our aunt's house [in the city] every Sunday. We would go to our aunt's house and we would wait for her call.' The difficulties of transnational communication in

Floridith's family show us that political economic inequities unevenly constrain the flow of communication for migrant families in the Philippines. In contrast to families in rural areas, families in urban areas are more able to develop transnational intimacy with the use of technology. Access to transnational communication is clearly not uniform and shifts according to one's place in the uneven levels of development in the Philippine islands. Such inequities lead to unequal opportunities among Filipino transnational families to develop intimacy across borders.

Gender and transnational communication

As I noted earlier, the migration of mothers prompts the rearrangement of households and consequently the reconstitution of gender in migrant families. The physical removal of mothers from the home, coupled with their higher income contributions to the household, ruptures the order of gender in the Filipino family. In Philippine contemporary society, the notion of conventional family mirrors that of most other modern societies. The modern nuclear family with a breadwinner father and nurturing mother is the right kind of family (Medina 2001). Women nurture and men discipline. Mothers manage and budget households, yet they always manage to defer major decisions of the family to fathers (Medina 2001). Women can have jobs but not careers. Although women participate in the labour market, childrearing and other domestic responsibilities of women have not diminished. As the family sociologist Belen Medina observes, 'There is still the double standard view that women have jobs and not careers due to the constraint of domestic responsibility' (Medina 2001: 148). Likewise, fathers are unlikely to take up the slack caused by women's greater labour force participation. They still spend more time resting and relaxing than they do lending a hand in household chores (Medina 2001: 151). With women in the Philippines relegated to the home, the departure of mothers suggests a marked rupture of the gender order in migrant families. In fact, it is said that 'househusbands' are now an ever-present fixture in high migration sending regions of the Philippines (Asis et al. 2004). Yet, looking at transnational families through the lens of transnational communication indicates another story. It shows that women's migration does not initiate a complete shift in gender practices but instead results in a confluence of gender retentions and contestations in transnational family life.

Contestations of the 'normative gender behavior' (Fenstermaker and West 2002) more fitting of modern nuclear households unavoidably occur in the transnational families of migrant women. This is especially true among working-class families. A typical scenario in these families would be a mother who leaves behind a jobless or low wage-earning husband to care for their children in the Philippines while she slowly accrues the savings needed for them to obtain a cement house. Aggravating his displacement from breadwinner status is the fact that sometimes his wife would rather send her remittances to, or share a bank account with, their eldest daughter or her mother. This occurred in more than half the families I observed in the Philippines. As a mother became wary of her husband's drinking and womanizing ways, she protected her earnings from his vices by sending money directly to someone else.

Yet, migrant women's economic contributions do not necessarily prompt a reconfiguration of the family's gender division of labour. The men left behind, the so-called 'househusbands', rarely do housework. The earlier-cited Barbara Latoza for instance complains:

Ever since I was a young girl, I never saw my father care for us. When we were sick, he never did anything. It was always our mother who took care of us. Then, when my mother left, when she went to Malaysia, it was hard when we got sick because it was our aunt who took care of us. Sometimes it was our grandmother. I never felt or saw any care from my father. He never helped us.

In working-class families, other women usually took over the work left behind by migrant mothers. In middle-class families, fathers usually relied on paid domestic help.

Generally, I found in both working-class and middle-class families that women's migration reconstitutes the division of labour in the family but only to be split among women with the mother nurturing and economically providing for the family and the women left behind nurturing them. Fathers stay out of the picture, often avoiding any nurturing responsibilities by relocating to another island in the Philippines or, if around their family, by never asking about their children's emotional well-being (Parreñas 2005). Not surprisingly, children more often would rely on migrant mothers for emotional support before they would on their fathers. They also turn to other female kin before their fathers.

Yet, my interviews with extended kin indicate that caring responsibilities come not without resentment. The responsibility of caring for 'other people's children' (Wrigley 1996) potentially strains relations between women across nations as extended kin resent migrant mothers for saddling them with work that they see as 'not really their responsibility'. This sentiment had been repeatedly voiced to me by almost all the extended kin to whom I spoke in the Philippines, including grandmothers and aunts, most of whom sobbed during our interview. This resentment is not unknown to children. Many told me that they try to limit their dependency on extended kin by distributing the work of emotional care among them or by turning first to their migrant mothers. Rarely did children voice the option of turning to their fathers, even if they were in the same household in the Philippines, for emotional support and guidance during their growing years.

But children could not turn to their mothers for emotional comfort and support if they were without access to transnational communication, which in turn tells us that transnational communication is a mechanism by which gender conventions are retained in the transnational families of migrant women. Indeed, technological advancements have enabled migrant mothers to nurture their children across great distances. Children often say that mothers are 'always there' for them. Mothers stay abreast of children's activities 'to make sure that her going abroad was well worth the sacrifice', as one child told me, and as the earlier-cited Cheryl Gonzaga further explained, to express her love. As Cheryl states:

When my mom writes, that is what she tells me ... Hugs and kisses. I love you. I miss you. All the endearments that a child could think of. It's like that. We are inspired and I do not feel she deprives me [of emotional care]. We don't feel that she gives her work greater importance than us. We feel that we are important to her because she works outside the country for us.

Mothers rightfully express their love across great distances. Yet, as I noted, by nurturing across great distances, migrant mothers also inadvertently go against the reconstitution of gender initiated by the institutional rearrangement of the family in women's migration. Acts of nurturing unfortunately counteract the gender transformations initiated by women's reconstitution of mothering to include breadwinning. This is only the case because of the continued rejection of caretaking by men. Because it is done in the context of the father's rejection of the caring responsibilities in the family, mothers reinforce conventional gender norms when maintaining the responsibility of nurturing the family. As such, transnational communication has ironically become a mechanism for the retention of gender norms and a force that impedes the reconstitution of gender practices engendered by transnational mothering.

In its retention of gender norms, transnational communication places the families of migrant mothers in a no-win situation. Despite rapid advancements in technology from instant messages to email correspondence, transnational intimacy does not provide 'full' intimacy to the family. The joys of physical contact, the emotional security of physical presence, and the familiarity allowed by physical proximity are still denied transnational family members. Because the household arrangement in mother-away transnational families inherently prevents migrant mothers from nurturing their children up close, children of migrant mothers consequently have difficulty accepting their transnational household arrangement.

Again and again children describe the nurturing provided by transnational mothers as 'not enough'. This feeling of dissatisfaction is notably aggravated by the stronghold of the ideological belief that mothers are the proper nurturers of the family and the view that mothers should nurture their children from up close. Voicing her childhood shortcomings, the daughter of a domestic worker in Hong Kong, Phoebe Latorre, exclaims: 'she should have been around when we were growing up. She should have been the one taking care of our needs'. With these expectations, shortfalls in family life are bound to trouble the children of migrant mothers, regardless of the tremendous efforts that mothers put into the achievement of intimacy in the family via transnational communication. Only a reconstitution of gender ideology among the young adult children as well as a shift in the gender practices of fathers would get the transnational households of migrant mothers out of a 'no-win' situation.

Conclusion

Transnational families inhabit postmodern spaces. Communication across vast geographical distances occurs instantaneously. Most migrant mothers call at least once a week, many have chosen to share a bank account with family members in the

Philippines, and finally most urge their children to call or email them if ever in need of love, guidance and security. By 'being there', mothers attempt to achieve a semblance of intimate family life across borders. In this article, I looked closely at the various forms of transnational communication that tie migrant mothers and their children not only to establish the maintenance of close familial ties in mother-away transnational families, as other scholars have done (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), but also to examine the constitution of gender in transnational communication and the difficulties of communicating from a distance. Looking at the challenges of transnational communication provides another lens through which we can examine the social inequalities that determine transnational family life.

Migrant families do not have uniform access to the resources needed to maintain intimate transnational relations. Indeed, working-class families have fewer means of maintaining a smooth flow of transnational communication, increasing the risk of feelings of abandonment among these children. Moreover, contestations of gender in mother-away families aggravate the dissatisfaction of children over the insufficiency of transnational mothering. Mothers contest the myth of the male breadwinner but retain the myth of the female homemaker. This paradox unfortunately impedes the reconstitution of gender caused by the greater income contributions of migrant women to the family. It establishes the limits of the gender reconstitutions spurred by women's migration and at the same time suggests an added challenge that migrant mothers face in maintaining intimate transnational family relations with their children in the Philippines.

In sum, the technological revolution in communication has not benefited transnational migrant families uniformly as differences in contours of transnational communication exist across class and paradoxes of gender emerge to aggravate the difficulties of transnational family maintenance. Bringing out these processes offers us a more socially thick lens for understanding transnational family life.

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Notes

1. Kakammpi, a non-governmental advocacy group for the children of migrant workers, also gives the more conservative estimate of 5,847,000 children. The larger figure is an estimate

- generated by a coalition of migrant-based non-governmental organizations based on the distribution of overseas workers with households according to geographical location and average household size of three children per household.
2. Ten thousand pesos is approximately US\$ 200.
 3. While one could argue that women's control of the purse strings in the family reflects a certain degree of power and autonomy granted Filipino women, feminists in the Philippines have argued that in the context that most household incomes do not sufficiently cover daily expenses of families, this responsibility of women is in fact a burden. In contrast, male privilege frees men of the stress and worry over household expenses (Medina 2001).
 4. Balikbayan means return migrant. Remittance agencies that cater to the Philippines also offer cargo services in the diasporic community. Cargo packages from the United States would take on average one month to reach the Philippines by sea and one week by air and from Asian countries they would take on average two to three weeks by sea.

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