

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ANGARA LECTURES OF
THE FAMILY AND WELFARE CLUSTER:
FOCUS ON MIGRATION

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Abstract

This introductory essay serves to introduce the three papers that comprised the feminist research conducted for the research cluster, family and migration. The research was undertaken through the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies and the UPPEJA Research Fellowship.

THE THREE PAPERS in this cluster cover three approaches to the issue of the effects of migration on the Filipino family and welfare. The first by Grace Gorospe Jamon takes an empirical look through focused group discussions and individual interviews at the effects of migration on family relations. Narratives in this study tell the tale of children left behind and the fathers who ended up being the sole parent during the long periods of absence of their mother. The second, by Carolina Ruiz Austria reviews laws, national policies and national programs that are meant to ensure the welfare of labor migrants. My paper, argues for the introduction of the analyses of sexuality into migration research, especially as blindness to the underlying assumptions on sexuality tends to structure research findings and policy prescriptions regarding welfare and the family.

The papers limit their focus to families left behind by the mother for a number of reasons. One reason is that the cluster took on a gender analysis framework. Such a framework was born out of the personal standpoint of three members of the team and the expressed desire of a fourth member to explore gender issues. Regardless of personal preference, such a framework is called for,

in light of what literature cited by both Gorospe Jamon and Ruiz Austria calls “the feminization of migration.”

A major factor in that feminization, as my paper notes, is the increased number of job openings for reproductive workers (maids, nannies, entertainers) in richer societies. This is also why the cluster, while initially casting a wide view of the area, ended up limiting its purview to labor migration. Again, as statistics cited in Ruiz Austria’s paper shows, the Filipino migrant is a woman looking for work.

Other than this delimitation, the cluster chose to skip defining its views on “welfare” and “family welfare.” Ruiz Austria defines it for her purposes very briefly because she reviews state laws and policies related to migrants’ welfare. The decision not to enter into the theories and definitions of welfare and social protection arose mostly because of our review of literature. Namely, we did not find any significant, large-scale studies documenting the effects of migration on family welfare. The papers in this cluster cite data on economic benefits but also, as Ruiz Austria shows, the massive influx of remittances in the country has not necessarily translated into benefits for the communities and families of the workers.

Coronel and Unterreiner’s (2007) more extensive review of the literature comes to the same conclusion. They note:

While there appears to be massive evidence of economic benefits from migration, the social costs – to the worker and to the recipients of remittances alike, by gender and by age groups – are only beginning to surface in varying degrees in different surrogate indicators.

These surrogates include allegations that migration contribute to increased juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, psycho-social mal-adjustments, loss of self-esteem, early marriages, teen-age pregnancies, and family breakdown among children...

Presently, the available data on psychosocial impact of migration are anecdotal in nature (p. ii).

Our review also surfaced social protection frameworks (Opiniano, 2008) for migrant workers, and proposed mechanisms

that would begin to ensure that state policies could both protect and promote labor migrants at all stages of the migration process. Nonetheless the data, policies and mechanisms have yet to be put in place.

It is in this light that Gorospe Jamon's empirical work became necessary to the cluster's scholarship. We needed to see for ourselves, whether the small-scale studies would be replicated by our own observations. We also felt the need to approach the phenomenon with a gender lens, because the literature, especially as it relates to the effects of women leaving, is littered with gender stereotypes and moralistic prescriptions about women's (and men's) roles (Parreñas 2005). True enough, Gorospe Jamon's work confronts the stereotype of the "poor suffering migrant" and her "poor suffering family". Instead, it reaffirms what the few feminist studies point to: that there is both agency and victimization in the phenomenon.

Her work also points to the extremely dense and nuanced nature of the phenomenon of how families react to the absence of the mother, again challenging master narratives that would anticipate outcomes from stereotyped prescriptions of familial roles. It is also interesting in that it begins to explore issues of sexuality for the male partner who is left behind. On the other hand, the narratives do show that gender oppression continues to structure the outcomes for families. Gorospe Jamon's study shows that where families indeed challenge gendered prescriptions, they are more likely to minimize the detrimental effects of migration.

Ruiz Austria picks up this thread as well. Her review of state policies from a gendered perspective notes how these policies can reinforce mainstream views of women's roles and family forms and structures. She also points out where policies can have differential effects on men and women. Equally important, Ruiz Austria's critique highlights the failure of welfare and protection mechanisms. This is tragic because, as she notes, the country's economy is kept afloat by worker remittances and the bloated budgets of many of the government programs and agencies comes from the remittances and fees collected from migrant workers. Most importantly, Ruiz Austria examines the construction of citizenship and the state in the laws and policies she examines. She argues that the migration

phenomenon and the laws, policies and programs that seek to govern it loosen traditional concepts of citizenship and open the way for more progressive configurations.

My paper takes off from the insights and data surfaced in the papers of Gorospe Jamon and Ruiz Austria. My main argument is that there is a need to restructure research frameworks and policy prescriptions away from patriarchal and heterosexist assumptions about women and their families.

In order to prove the point that heterosexist and patriarchal assumptions about women and families prevented the formulation of better policies, I had to make policy recommendations that went beyond such assumptions. As my paper notes, while the recommendations are mine, they are buttressed by the data and insights presented by Gorospe Jamon and Riuz Austria.

Highlights are:

1) Training programs like the “pre-departure seminars” required by Philippine authorities should better prepare migrant women and their families by including re-socialization modules that set-up more egalitarian modes of sharing the housework. Parenting classes that include housework skills may be offered to husbands and other men folk and men’s support services that would bring together re-socialized men.

2) Increase social service spending for health and education which are important social protections. Education which socializes boy as well as girls into respecting and valuing reproductive and affective work is necessary. Access to adequate health care should include reproductive health care.

3) Attempts at bridging the gendered division of labor even in the families of receiving nations would be beneficial for both the foreign domestic worker and her female employer. The literature cites many instances of solidarity among women in sending and receiving countries that can work for their mutual benefit.

4) Using the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a starting point in order to: start a regional dialogue on migration and a mechanism for regional standards which can then be a starting point for collective bargaining with other regions; facilitate

transnational migrant support networks; institute mechanisms at the regional level that enforce court judgments and implementation of provisions for support for families left behind, especially those who have been abandoned; ensure access to health care, especially to reproductive health care, for migrants; begin training and educational programs for migrant women workers conducted within the framework of bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

5) Policy and juridical frameworks should be advocated at regional and international levels that grant recognition to migrant reproductive workers as a distinct category of worker with differing needs for protection.

6) Institute a Philippine policy of free entry without need for a visa for all nationalities.

7) Advocacy efforts on the implementation of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families should be linked to advocacies for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

8) Advocate a beginning set of universal rights and entitlements that define global citizenship.

As a final note, I should add that the team attempted to live up to our notions of feminist research. Given that the topic was assigned to the team, that the time was short and the objectives simple—this did not entail much sophistication on our part. It did however, true to our own recommendations, bring us pleasure. Research meetings were lively and collegial exchanges which we all looked forward to. Our sharings were scholarly, political and personal. We shared these aspects willy-nilly, knowing fully well that to delimit the personal and political to what was strictly related to the research, would have been a disservice to our scholarship.

Two members of the research team became seriously ill during the final part of the research. The two have since recovered, partly due to the support of the team itself which took this illnesses in stride and allowed space for the necessary nurturing of the self through illness. Luckily, at this point, we had our personal, political and scholarly terrains mapped. There was no fear that the individual

papers would come out disjointed as a result of our failure to meet during the penultimate stages of our work.

Finally, I must return to our advocacy for the rights of the Filipino migrant woman and her loved ones. As a research team, we are convinced of the need to foster a people-centered development model. If people could benefit from development, there would be no need for Filipinos to seek work abroad in order to assure family well-being and survival. This wish is echoed by the women migrants as well as the men and the children left they behind, who allowed us to tell their stories.

NOTE

I wish to recognize at this point, Himaya Tamayo, who served as the fourth member of the cluster. She did not write a paper but her work was invaluable.

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