TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND WOMEN ON THE MOVE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

ABSTRACT

Globalization processes have both accelerated the pace of international migration and diversified its streams, which this article specifically investigates by exploring the developmental impacts of feminized migration (with)in Southeast Asia. Through the twin-contexts of family and nation-state, it advocates a keener awareness of the gendered inequities involved in migration and calls for greater advocacy work.

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As the forces of globalization reconfigure the world, labour migration flows have quickened and their nature has changed. New streams of migration have evolved, rapidly transforming the lives of millions and their families whilst inextricably linking the fates of states and societies. Of concern, there has been a growing feminization of many of these flows as a result of changing production and reproduction processes worldwide. First, the globalization-led relocation of production activities from core economies to the low-cost periphery has seen the targeting of cheap, flexible female workers for factory employment in export processing zones in rapidly industrializing countries. Second, opportunities for commercialized reproductive work have motivated other women to migrate to become providers of domestic and sexual services.

Transnational flows of Southeast Asian labour migrants

The unprecedented pace and scale of economic, political, social and demographic change in Asia in recent decades has brought about a parametric increase in population mobility, with Southeast Asia emerging as an important scene of this development. Presenting migrant stock figures *to* and *from* Southeast Asian countries, Table 1 and Table 2 are indicative of this, showing how the region features as both "source" and "destination."

From the 1990s, there has been a noteworthy shift towards intra-Southeast Asian migration where less developed economies in the region supply surplus labour to fast-growing newly industrializing economies (NIEs) with labour shortages. Migration is thus intrinsically linked to development, as disparities in living standards, capital and labour supply and demand between these nations create the conditions for intra-regional movements. In Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore alone – three major destination countries – there was an estimated 1.3 million foreign workers at the end of 1998 from a number of different countries in the region and beyond.

Amidst these changes in migration flows from and within Southeast Asia, an important trend noted from the 1980s is that Southeast Asian women were increasingly prominent participants of contract labour systems. This "feminization of migration" is primarily due to the increasing demand for labour in the service and entertainment industries from the Middle East and Asia. In the Philippines and Indonesia, not only do women now comprise the majority of migrant workers, most are also employed as domestic workers (and entertainers in the Philippines' case).

Gendered migration, the family and the nation-state

Gender-differentiated movements are especially significant in societies undergoing developmental change, since these not only reflect gender divisions of labour, but also serve as a template for understanding socio-economic development. Its impacts will be examined below in two ways: first, how gendered labour migration has altered the way households and communities function, in terms of familial relations, the gender division of labour and the traditional balance of power in Southeast Asian societies; second, the way female migrants are (un)incorporated into the nation-state and the challenges of transnational civil society.

Feminized migration and impacts on the "family/household"

The "family" or "household" is becoming a vital unit of analysis in studies of migration impacts, for it is where migration dynamics are most keenly felt, and where roles are constantly reworked

Table 1
Stock of registered migrants *in* selected Southeast Asian countries

Destination	Year	Stock	Source
Singapore	2004	621,400	Orozco (2005)
Malaysia	2004	1,470,000	Bloomberg (2005)
Thailand	2004	1,269,074	Asian Migration News (May 15, 2005)
Philippines	2004	9,408	Go (2006: 5)
Indonesia	2004	91,736	Soeprobo (2005)

Table 2
Stock of registered migrants *from* selected Southeast Asian countries

Origin	Year	Stock	Source
Malaysia[a]	-	-	-
Thailand	2004	148,596	Chalamwong (2006: 8)
Philippines	2004	933,588	Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (n.d.)
Indonesia	1998	380,173	Nazara (2001: 225)
Vietnam	2004	67,447	Nguyen (2006: 7)

[a] Official records for emigration from Malaysia were unavailable.

amid changing familial circumstances. The increasing participation of Southeast Asian women in migration has only augmented the need for such a perspective, since women are oftentimes considered the lynchpin of the typical "Asian" family, which, in turn, serves as a traditional institution and bedrock of society. Women's increasing participation in various labour migration streams – resulting in their long absences from home – thus considerably raises the level of anxiety about the well-being of the "Asian family," and fuels increasing interest in what would become of it with Southeast Asia's development.

The detrimental social and emotional consequences reaped by "left-behind" families and dependent members, particularly when the wife/mother is the migrant, has often been highlighted in academic research. In Indonesia, for instance, a higher incidence of mental disorders among women and children, impeded school performance and socio-psychological development among children, and the abandonment of the elderly due to the dwindling "carer generation" have been documented. Yet, these effects are far from predetermined, but depend on the availability of support networks for left-behind families in maintaining resilient family lives. The migrants themselves can still contribute to the durability of the family also, by working actively to maintain a sense of connection with their children through long-distance communication, material goods and financial support. Notwithstanding, whatever the costs and triumphs, establishing and maintaining the family is in itself clearly a form of resistance against the circumstances.

With the dispersal of the family due to migration, remittance flows often feature as an important link between family members located in both "source" and "destination" countries as well. This is significant given that the act of sending remittances of earnings back home is frequently an integral part of the strategy behind migration in Southeast Asia. While remittances generally constitute a valuable economic contribution to sustaining the family's basic necessities, their long-term effects, mitigated by kin obligations, are more contentious. In some cases, the extended family helps to utilize migrant remittances for business investment purposes, thereby facilitating wealth creation for left-behind kin; other households, however, remain trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty even upon the receipt of remittances. It should also be noted that not all members of the left-behind family benefit equally from remittances. In many parts of Southeast Asia, the privileging of male over female offspring often means that the income sent back by young women migrants are channeled to their brothers' education or migration, excluding the women from similar opportunities for self-improvement.

But for the female migrant, mobility may be seen as a means of female empowerment, especially if increased participation in wage employment, more control over earnings, and greater participation in family decision-making are attained. However, while such spaces for resistance, disruption and emancipation are possible, migration may still leave gender asymmetries largely unchanged, sometimes even deepening women's subordination. While women migrants, through their work overseas, could theoretically learn skills which they can then bring back to their own countries and households, de-skilling often occurs instead in female migration streams flowing from developing to developed economies. One well-documented case is the employment of thousands of university-educated Filipino women in domestic work in countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In short, the relationship between migration and *improved* gender relations is clearly a moot point, with the position of migrant women improving in some cases, while worsening in others.

Gender-differentiated migration may also lead to altered gendered divisions of labour within the left-behind household, negotiated along the lines of age, gender and the relationships among household members.

Table 3
Composition of migrants in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore

	Indonesia	Philippines	Thailand	China	Bangladesh	Burma	Others	TOTAL
Thailand	-	-	-	-	-	75,091	15,381	**90,472**
Malaysia	490,550	14,828	7,222	-	224,609	-	37,501	**774,710**
Singapore	100,000	60,000	60,000	46,000	-	-	184,000	**450,000**

Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2002.

While the migration of male heads may lead to women and children performing tasks traditionally done by men, including agricultural work, the migration of women does not necessarily see men taking on the responsibilities previously assumed by women. Hence, when women respond to the economic pull of new feminized migrant labour streams, they leave gaps in household work which are often picked up by other female family members. Yet, women who are "left behind" in the source area from which *men* migrate may find themselves taking on a wider range of roles and responsibilities, becoming more involved in decision-making processes. In contrast, while being left behind may give women more authority over family governance, it also increases their domestic burdens and overall workloads.

On another front, while migration may lead to the expansion of women's roles beyond that of "nurturer" to include that of "provider," the personas of migrant women as daughters, sisters, mothers or wives may not be suspended while they are away, as they continue in these roles transnationally. Indicatively, migrant women oftentimes do not see themselves as replacing any male member of their families economically or otherwise, or deemed their status vis-à-vis men's as being enhanced by their sojourn. Clearly then, while the question as to whether migration is a strategy of empowerment for Southeast Asian women yields mixed conclusions, it is unlikely that there would be any significant change in women's identity as lynchpins of the family anytime soon.

The unprecedented pace and scale of economic, political, social and demographic change in Asia in recent decades has brought about a parametric increase in population mobility, with Southeast Asia emerging as an important scene of this development.

Feminized migration, the nation-state and civil society

Increased mobilities in a spatially fluid Southeast Asian world and the feminization of migration present a range of challenges to the national policies of both migrant-sending and receiving countries. With labourers ceaselessly moving in and out of these territorial regimes, nationalisms on the part of Southeast Asian countries have also been re-ignited to strengthen or reconfigure the nation-state. Often, in clarifying the relationship between transnational communities and their "host," "mainstream" societies, the notion of the migrant "other" is used in the nationalist discourse of the established.

In exploring the links between transnationalism and nation-building projects, feminist scholars have raised crucial issues of nation, state and citizenship, arguing that gendering and racializing of migrant flows have complicated citizenship definitions. Today, citizenship is no longer a clear-cut relationship linking a single state and an individual, but a negotiated relationship shaped by ideologies of gender, race and class operating within and beyond national levels. Being differentially incorporated into the employment and citizenship framework in destination countries, women transmigrants thus often find themselves accorded few citizen's and civil rights, being trapped within patriarchal notions of "women's work" and "women's place."

In Asia's rapidly industrializing nations, female transnational migration is furthermore concentrated in domestic services to fill the reproductive labour gap left by local women absorbed into paid work. Brought in to perform supposedly low-skilled work, migrant women are thus admitted as transient contract workers, rather than subjects of civil society. In Singapore, a range of policy measures have been implemented to ensure that these migrants can gain no permanent foothold in the nation's geobody; these include tying the validity of their work permits to specific employers, preventing family formation and settlement, prohibiting marriage to Singaporeans, and immediately repatriating the worker if she is found pregnant. By virtue of being a "foreign female domestic," therefore, not only is the "maid" in Singapore excluded from participation in public spaces but her physical invisibility also signals her exclusion from notions of citizenship and civil society.

It is precisely such policies ensuring the transience of female foreign bodies in the receiving nation-state that, in turn, reinforce the permanence of transnational family forms among them. With little chance of sustainable employment in her home country where she is a citizen, and even less likelihood of becoming an immigrant-turned-citizen in the country of employment, the migrant domestic worker is locked into unending circuits of transnational care, affection, money and material goods in order to sustain the family across borders. In Asia, where the notion of turning immigrants (except the highly skilled) into citizens is unthinkable, marriage to a national of the host country thus presents the unskilled contract worker with the only opportunity of obtaining secure residential permits, and addressing the shame of domestic work through new national affiliations.

These rules of marginality and "otherness" which operate to keep transmigrant contract workers in their place are moreover refracted through the gendered lenses of the host nation. Consequently, in comparison with their male counterparts, female migrants often find their bodies subject to a more oppressive disciplinary regime, their skills further devalorized, and their spaces even more circumscribed. In Japan, for instance, research has shown that while male migrant workers in construction and manufacturing are often discussed in terms of labour policy, immigrant women working as entertainers are instead framed in terms of morality and policing. This asymmetry further deepens, and naturalizes, the lines of gender inequalities already patent in the host country, even as such transnationalisms fail to transcend the ideological gender bases upon which nationalisms are built.

As for the possibilities of transnational activisms, feminist scholars have been generally wary about overstating their potential. In the first place, activisms, even if transnational, are often rooted in particular local contexts. While transmigrant women may build for themselves new roles and political spaces, it is also clear that through continued connections with their homelands, networks and traditions, they may (re)create the same patriarchal structures in their new homelands. Another challenge lies in the difficulty of performing gender politics locally while tracing the vital connections between different activisms across times and spaces. Such a conception points to the expansion of transnational resistance to a global scale where new alliances between migrant, feminist and other organizations may be envisaged. Yet, if indeed these advocacy networks promise new supranational forms of activisms and political spaces, it is likely that they will continue to have to grapple with the tensions between national and transnational politics.

Conclusion

In Asia's context, it is clear that the gap between male and female mobility is rapidly closing, with female migrants even outnumbering males at times. The issues and challenges that this entails have not been adequately addressed by structures of states, trade and political institutions, and other organizations in civil society. There have thus been strong calls for relevant organizations to collaborate in order to devise rules and mechanisms that would promote a more equitable apportionment of migration's benefits and costs, as well as more resilient protection regimes and safety nets to, particularly, assist vulnerable female migrants.

As a starting point, migration policy in Asia needs to be better informed by stronger research efforts to clarify and valorize the developmental impacts of female migration. This is crucial given that the scale and significance of female migrants' economic contributions have often been underestimated. Beyond this, the negative aspects of female transmigration can only be ameliorated by the concerted efforts of a range of institutions and actors, including politicians and bureaucrats in both sending and receiving countries. These actors must not only show strong political will to carry out much-needed reforms to ensure that the issues feature prominently on both national and international agendas, but also engage in regional dialogue and collaborative agreements which would look beyond economic benefits to the overall welfare of the migrants and their families.

It is also important to see to it that civil society support and vigilance – such as from NGOs, women's groups, labour organizations, think-tanks and churches – are strong and vibrant in partnering with governments and ensuring policy implementation. Involving NGOs also usefully helps surface different perspectives and widen our understanding of the issues involved, while providing avenues to encourage active networking among female migrant workers, thus allowing them to participate as active agents in advocacy work. This has, moreover, the potential to take on transnational dimensions as female contract workers form transnational alliances to negotiate for rights and better working conditions.

Finally, it is crucial to remember that a number of issues embedded in Southeast Asian women's migration go beyond the reach of migration policy. Such areas include social development programmes, such as health care, family law – including domestic violence prevention – and labour legislation and enforcement to minimize the commodification of unskilled migrant women's labour. At the heart of the dilemmas that beset socio-economic development and women's mobility and vulnerability, is hence the need to valorize women's reproductive work, to respect their personhood, to eschew gender stereotypes, and to work towards greater equality in gender relations in what are still largely patriarchal worlds in the region.

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