

Review - Globalization, Labor Export and Resistance

Written by Agnes Khoo

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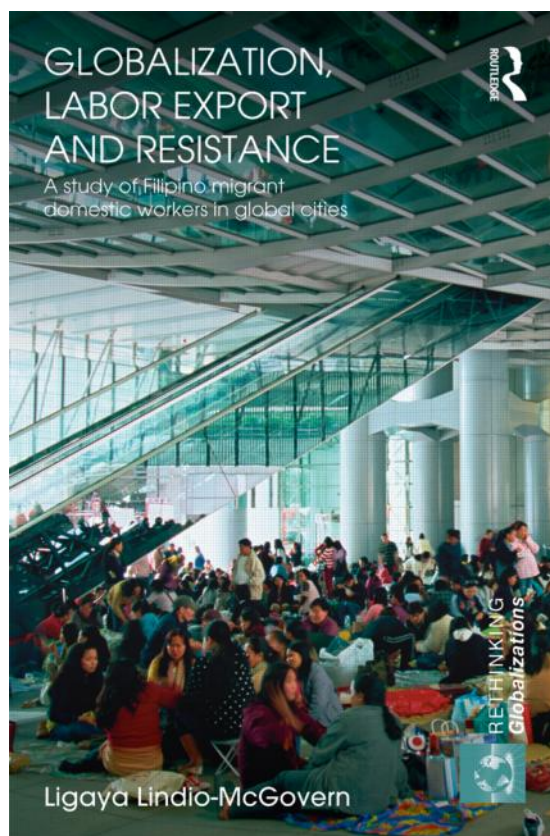
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Globalization, Labor Export and Resistance – a Study of Filipino Migrant Workers in Global Cities

By: Ligaya Lindio-McGovern

New York: Routledge, 2013



This book is a rich resource for those interested in migration, gender or development studies; also for studies on neo-liberal globalisation and its impact on third world countries. It also adds to the ongoing debates about transnationalism and related issues of identities, space, belonging, resistance and solidarity.

Using the Philippines as her subject of study, the author has successfully drawn on the experiences of Filipino women domestic service workers in global cities such as, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vancouver, Rome and Chicago in theorising the complex "... intersectionalities of gender, race, ethnicity and nationality" (pp. 3). Based on her extensive fieldwork in these cities, interviewing and working with Filipino domestic workers and migrant rights organizers, the author has developed a discourse that is not only theoretically but also politically relevant because she sees her research not only as an academic exercise but also as her political engagement (pp. 5). Using composite research methodologies that are feminist, action-oriented, participatory and inductive, the author affirms the importance of

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reflexivity in her research by making her political position and her relations vis-à-vis the subject of her enquiry transparent at the outset. It is thus, an honest, committed and professional piece of work that aims to provide a “multi-voiced space” (ibid) for the migrant women domestic service workers whose voices, are more often than not, suppressed by the very same power structures that keep them in their place.

An Alternative Conceptualization of Neo-liberal Globalization through Migrant Women’s Experiences

The author has offered an alternative conceptualization of neo-liberal globalization by highlighting the exploitation and marginalization of a particular class of women from the Global South. Despite the fact that many of these women are highly educated and skilled, the labour export policy of the Philippine government has turned them into cheap export of transcendent labour to service the Global North, as part of the *globalization process of reproductive labor* (pp. 4). She traces this process to the legacy of colonialism in the Philippines whose economy has been impoverished by the extraction of the country’s rich natural resources by foreign powers and the servicing of foreign debts through the brain-drain of its human resources to foreign lands. The structural adjustment programs which entail the privatization of essential services imposed by the World Bank and IMF have crushed the Philippine economy that can only have been kept afloat by the foreign remittances sent by its citizens working abroad as maids, nurses, seafarers, construction workers, entertainers, sex workers, engineers, professionals, NGO workers and managers. The author has debunked the myth of these migrant workers as ‘national heroes’ and considers the women domestic service workers in particular, who often find themselves working in isolated, overworked conditions; deprived of their human rights as ‘modern slaves’.

Her research has highlighted the high personal costs which these women pay as nannies, cooks and cleaners for women in the affluent economies of East Asia, Europe and North America. Costs which are hidden from public statistics such as, the loss to the economy as a consequence of the brain drain of an educated and skilled workforce; the generations of Filipino children who have grown up with absentee mothers; the marital breakups due to long periods of separation between couples; the sexual, physical and psychological abuse these women suffer as a result of draconian rules and regulations imposed by the receiving/host countries and so on. By putting the experiences of these women at the centre of her enquiry (pp.10), the author’s analysis of the exploitation of these women by both the receiving countries and their home country illuminates the gendered nature of today’s neo-liberal globalization (pp. 9).

Circuits of Power and Circuits of Resistances

However, the book does not only see these women “who occupy the bottom ranks of the stratified global labor market” (ibid) as victims but also as women with their own subjectivity. They are agents of change in their individual and collective resistances; in self-help and in solidarity with fellow migrant workers. Through her bottom-up approach in research and analysis, the author has successfully highlighted the personal as political and vice versa, as well as the connection between the personal and the global.

This book is organized thematically into 9 informative chapters. It begins with a chapter on methodological and conceptual frameworks that outlines in detail, the nature of neo-liberal globalization and its impact on the people in the Global South through the experiences of Filipino migrant women workers. This is followed by a theoretical framing of how by commodifying these women’s reproductive labour, their lives have been enmeshed in the “interlocking circuits of power” (pp. 19), which underlies the interconnectedness of the policies between the sending and receiving countries, the profiteering of the employment agencies and the exploitation and abuse by the employers, respectively (ibid).

In this chapter, I have found the author’s conceptualisation of “labor market segmentation” to be particularly useful. According to her, this segmentation is one of the outcomes of the “globalization of domestic service work” (pp. 36). It has transformed the “transnational division of female labour” to benefit labour-receiving countries by reinforcing inequality in these countries that is “based on gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, and class” (ibid) because the middle and upper class women and men are supported by “educated migrant women from poorer countries” who as a result,

“experience downward occupational mobility and segregated in low-paid, low prestige domestic service work that

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local citizens generally shun" (ibid).

This has in turn, reinforced division among women along lines of class, nationality and race globally, which has also weakened the solidarity among women that could have strengthened "the global women's movement toward global social justice" (pp. 36).

Furthermore, she conceptualizes another outcome of the globalization of reproductive labour as the "transnationalization of the household" both in the receiving and the sending countries that largely benefits the former (pp. 38). While the former benefits from the provision of care for their young, old and needy by these transnational women workers, these women's very own households are deprived of their care due to their transnationalism (ibid). This in turn, necessitates a form of 'care chain' wherein these migrant women will hire poorer women back home to care for their young while they care for the young of their foreign employers (ibid). According to the author, such *transnationalisation* of households in the receiving and sending countries can only be "maintained by the creation and reproduction of a class of women whose reproductive labor can be appropriated with low wages" in both locations (pp. 39).

The author is unequivocal about the fact that the

"globalization of domestic service work reinforces the subordinate position of the Philippines and Filipino women in the global political economy. As labour receiving richer countries increasingly privatize social reproduction, it is the Philippine society that is made to subsidize this privatization"

and it is the women who bear the brunt of the social costs (pp. 40). Despite this, "labour export is failing to abate unemployment, underemployment, and job insecurity in the Philippines" (ibid) and consequently, these migrant workers are trapped in a perpetual cycle of migration for work because they cannot find employment upon their return. Thus, they form a cheap, global floating workforce for global capitalism.

Nevertheless, it is not all doom and gloom as the third part of the book shows how these circuits of exploitation are "counteracted by circuits of resistance" around the world (ibid). This part of the book is further divided into eight chapters highlighting the resistances organized by these women and their support organizations in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vancouver, Rome, and Chicago, as well as in the home front respectively. These individual case studies are particularly useful to those who are less acquainted with NGOs, community groups, advocates and the broader social movements that are at the forefront fighting for migrant workers' rights, locally and internationally.

The Diversity of Migrants Calls for a Nuanced Analysis of Differences

Whilst the author has described in some details the key organizations and groups that she has worked with or interviewed, she could have also discussed other migrant organizations which may not share her analytical framework, strategies or her envisaged solutions to the problems of migrant workers. By doing so, the unevenness and diversity among migrant workers, their needs and aspirations can be better nuanced. The motivations for migration are often varied, complex and sometimes even contradictory. Thus, migrant workers who have different needs or motivations to migrate will make different choices. The author has indeed confirmed this in her case study of Chicago wherein the Filipino migrant workers there felt the least need, as compared to those in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Vancouver to be organized politically. The difference, according to the author lies in the fact that the former is in a stronger legal position as workers, to change employers and to negotiate their terms of work whilst their counterparts elsewhere cannot do because of unjust laws imposed by their host countries. The differentiated conditions in which these migrant workers find themselves influence their responses and motivation to organize or be organized. These differences would have given a more nuanced and open-ended analysis of the dynamism and complexity of this floating world community that has become the lifeline of the Philippines economy.

The Intersectionality between Domestic Service Workers, Sex Workers and Brides of Foreign Spouses

The author has not included sex workers and Filipino women who choose to marry abroad in her research even

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though they are as globalized as their counterparts in domestic service work and in some cases, no less vulnerable or marginalized. Due to their absence in this research, we have also missed an essential dimension of the ongoing debate. There is intersectionality between these three groups of women that could have made a more nuanced analysis of the subject. By excluding these women who are also large in numbers, we are missing out on how they cross boundaries or move between the three categories. By interrogating it, we may uncover other dimensions of these women's subjectivity and agency, as well as their marginalization and vulnerabilities that go beyond domestic and care work.

Lastly, the book concludes by surmising the research into a theoretical expose that is also policy-oriented. Whilst it clarifies what the author considers to be the most effective measures in overcoming the challenges faced by migrant workers, this chapter rings of a finality that does not seem to allow space for further discussion and debate. Perhaps, a more open-ended approach that raises questions without necessarily giving the answers may encourage further discussion. Migration is a fluid, evolving process that changes with changes in the global and local structures. In other words, the constant in migration can only be the movement of migrating. Migrants and migrant workers as a global community, is not only diverse and dispersed, it is also very changeable and adaptable to changing conditions and circumstances. Henceforth, the migration debate is necessarily an open-ended one because for as long as migration continues, the process can only give rise to more questions than answers. It is in this constant search for answers that will enhance the lives and protect the rights of migrant workers worldwide.

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Agnes Khoo is currently a Visiting Research Fellow researching on Chinese migration to Africa at the University of Leeds, UK where she has also taught East Asian Studies. She was an inaugural faculty member for Sociology at the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh. Having worked in international and regional NGOs in Asia and Europe, mainly on Asian women workers issues before obtaining her PhD. at the University of Manchester, UK and being a permanent migrant herself, she has maintained her activist and academic interests in migrant workers' issues. She has translated from Chinese into English language, an award-winning book about the lives of Filipino, Indonesian and Vietnamese migrant workers, as well as foreign brides of Taiwanese spouses entitled, "Our Stories: Labour and Migration in Taiwan" by KU-Yuling.