

Gendering Global Mechanisms of Capitalism: Filipina Migrant Care Workers in Canada

Courtney Law

It is widely debated whether capitalism is ‘good’ for women. While some argue that the mechanisms of capitalism are gender neutral and have afforded women the same individual freedoms as their male counterparts, others contend that capitalism is a patriarchal system that only serves to exacerbate existing inequalities. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the intersections between capitalism and gender by using the analytical framework of World Systems Theory. The paper will consider the specific regulatory mechanisms of capitalism that affect the feminization of migration and the commodification of caregiving, as they are defined in the Washington Consensus. The case of migrant Filipina caregivers in Canada serves to highlight the impacts of capitalism and globalization on women whose experiences in the capitalist world system vary greatly. Several policies serve to regulate their roles in the capitalist market economy in the Philippines and Canada.

While the Philippines have policies to promote their ‘supply’ of Filipina labor, Canada’s policies are formulated to satisfy their ‘demand.’ This paper will consider the impacts of these policies at the state, individual, and international levels. While capitalism may alleviate poverty through the accumulation of capital, it irrefutably increases inequality, and the consequences of increasing disparity tend to be concentrated on women and other vulnerable groups.¹ In the world system of global capitalism, an increase in economic inequality is closely tied to the creation (or exacerbation) of political and social inequalities.

World Systems Theory emphasizes macro-level analysis as a necessary tool in the globalized world, as borders become illusory and capitalist

institutions saturate the global market economy. The theory identifies a global “power hierarchy between core and periphery in which powerful and wealthy ‘core’ societies dominate and exploit weak and poor ‘peripheral’ societies.”² According to this theory, the core is comprised of ‘developed’ countries, while ‘undeveloped’ countries make up the periphery. This analytical framework presents the system of the world as a scheme propagated by capitalist structures. Increasing globalization, facilitated by foreign investment and the integration of trade, perpetuates worldwide inequalities. Consequently, the peripheral societies are systematically constrained and they must endure developmental practices that reinforce their “subordinate” standing.⁴ This habitual destitution of the conventional periphery state prevents it from financing public welfare programs or committing to improve infrastructure. This being said, some states have improved “their infrastructure and [implemented] policies that encourage the key industries that seem the most promising in the world market.”⁵ In the Philippines, one of the key industries is the export of Filipina labor. World Systems Theory conceptualizes ‘commodity chains,’ in which a commodity is acquired for a cheap price in a periphery country and is consumed in a rich core country. Similarly, Global Care Chains have been created in the globalization of care work. In such chains, care is extracted from poor countries and consumed in rich ones. These chains are:

created as the migrating worker recruits another woman from a still poorer household to look after her own children. That woman may be a paid worker or an unpaid family member. As we go ‘down’ the chain,

the value of the care labor decreases until it is unpaid [...]. Thus, it is poor women and their children who bear the costs of a global shortage of care, through the loss and pain they suffer due to separation.⁶

As a result of this devastating process, wealthy families in Global North countries benefit from assistance, the supply of care, and the easing of balance between work and family at a low cost.

Another important framework is the Washington Consensus, which outlines the components of capitalism in this world system. The Washington Consensus refers to a collection of economic policy prescriptions that have received a 'consensus' from U.S. government officials as the optimal economic policies for countries to universally employ. Some of the main policies promoted by the consensus include: financial liberalization, unified exchange rates, trade liberalization, foreign direct investment, privatization, deregulation, and property rights.⁷ Many countries in the Global South, pressured to adapt to the neoliberal economic model outlined by the Washington Consensus, have employed such neoliberal policies.⁸ The Consensus encourages the Global South to integrate into the global market. Its mechanisms underpin the processes involved in the globalization of care work. Rather than state-provided childcare, this service is becoming increasingly privatized: "just as neoliberalism underpins labor migration for care work, it also underpins policies of reduced state spending on care services and rhetorics of family responsibility for providing and paying for childcare."⁹ As will be further exemplified by this case, the deregulation of financial markets tends to encourage market-based solutions for social problems.¹⁰ Additionally, privatization and deregulation have led to childcare being globalized by relocating poorly paid workers across the globe, as women's bodies and caregiving abilities are increasingly commodified.¹¹

The theoretical approach of regulatory capitalism also informs this case, as this social, political, and economic framework recognizes the role of regulation in creating, nurturing, and constraining capitalism, and emphasizes the importance of commodification as the chief feature of our evolving political, economic, and social structures.¹² Within the framework of regulatory capitalism, fostering processes of accumulation and commodification are among the primary roles of the state.¹³ Commodification is the process where there is a "transformation of non-wage labourers into wage

labourers" and refers to the overarching conversion of social relations to commodity relations.¹⁴ Understandings of commodification have extended from the characteristics of labour to broader discussions of human relations, where individuals in the capitalist system are all involved in commodity relationships. In the case of the globalization of care work, both caregiving and caregivers become commodities that can be bought and sold in the global marketplace at a low price.

All of these mechanisms of capitalism, interacting within gendered institutions, result in increasing globalization and the "feminization of migration." The feminization of migration recognizes that care work in the Global North is being transferred from local women to migrant women. Consequently, "disparities between these women deepen, while global stratification systems are reinforced, and the gap between the haves and the have-nots within developed countries as well as between poor and rich states expand."¹⁵ Migration itself has become a strategy deployed by individuals in an attempt to solve the larger problems of globalization by narrowing the Global North–South.¹⁶ The astonishingly high number of migrating women is a recent global trend.¹⁷ In many cases, female migrants have become the primary breadwinners for their families.¹⁸ From the perspective of the sending countries, this migration is a fruitful development policy; it reduces unemployment rates at home and accrues remittances from other countries.¹⁹ Receiving countries also benefit from this process, as they gain the low-priced work of migrants, which allows them to reduce labor shortages and allows the governments to evade creating costly public caregiving programs.²⁰ Globalization processes ensure that societies, governments, and states increasingly depend on working women. Consequently, "the necessary conditions of work and survival fall increasingly on the shoulders of low-waged, deprived, and exploited migrant women."²¹ Exploitation and dependency in the international system are intrinsically related to the feminization of migration and the globalization of the international job market.

The growing number of women in paid labor contributes to this increasing demand for care work, as the role of caregiving is continually delegated to women. This demand, created by capitalist structures, has resulted in the commodification of care work. Given the highly gendered aspects of care work, there has been a subsequent commodification of the female body. The internation-

al division of domestic labour is shaped by global capitalism in conjunction with gender disparity in the sending country and in the receiving country.²² Capitalism can be understood as “the system that defines a person in terms of commercial acquisition and exchanges,” and the patriarchy as that which “defines persons in terms of nurturing and being nurtured,” particularly regarding women’s role in society.²³ It follows that the proliferation of migrant domestic workers is incorporated within the wider process of capitalism, globalization, and the patriarchal social, political, and economic structures of our society. Globalization has affected the movement of migrant domestic workers by facilitating the movement of people around the world, in addition to the widespread diffusion of neoliberal ideologies which underpinned the state’s disregard for care provision.²⁴

Additionally, rising gender inequality in countries subjected to structural adjustment and global market integration has resulted in the “devaluation of women’s skills, gender discrimination in employment, [and] the increasing vulnerability of workers.”²⁵ The overlap of capitalism and patriarchal standards forces women to have two, often conflicting, occupations: “the woman who was a wage worker and an agent in a capitalist labour market was also a nurturing person who cared for others irrespective of profit or loss.”²⁶ This has led to a phenomenon called ‘care drain,’ which results from the “‘importation of care and love from poor to wealthier countries’ [which] leads to global redistribution or even a maldistribution of women’s care labor power.”²⁷ From this perspective, the role of economic rationality in global capitalism has valued care as a commodity in which children from the Global North who are born into wealthy families are eligible for, while many children in the Global South are deprived of care. Capitalism has ensured that care has been assigned an economic value, to be sold to the highest bidder.

Filipina migrant care workers are abundant in wealthy countries due to “globalization’s encouragement of labor mobility.”²⁸ The Philippine state sees the migration of its citizens as a transaction of commodified labour between the Philippines and Global North countries. The state functions as a labor broker, organizing the production, distribution, and regulation of Filipinas as care workers in the global marketplace.²⁹ Labor brokering is a developmental strategy deployed by regulatory mechanisms of capitalism:

The Philippine state has increasingly come to rely on the export of labor to contain the social, economic, and political dislocations that have resulted from its adherence to neoliberalism. The state takes advantage of labor demands engendered by contemporary processes of globalization to place its citizens in overseas jobs through a highly developed trans-national migration apparatus.³⁰

This apparatus is comprised of numerous government agencies based in the Philippines, including the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), and within Philippine embassies and consular offices around the world, such as the International Labor Affairs Service (ILAS). The task of these agencies is to address and create worldwide demand for Filipino labor.³¹ More specifically, the POEA “monitors recruitment agencies, monitors worker protection, and conducts [...] oversight of the overseas worker program.”³² Additionally, the Philippine state engages in labor diplomacy, which is compromised of the more formalized state-to-state relations the Philippine state engages in to develop markets for Philippine labor. The Philippine government’s role in marketing Filipina workers and diplomatic engagement with foreign governments to promote the deployment of migrants is done through private and public recruitment agencies.³⁴

Globalization has facilitated the movement of domestic workers around the world as neoliberal practices have the conditions which generate demand for and supply of domestic workers. Increasingly, states are acting like transnational corporations. They are continually “outsourcing labor, eliminating employment for their own citizens and nationals while securing workers from other countries.” Thus, “neoliberalism is creating demand for labor that states like the Philippines have been able to satisfy by facilitating the migration of its nationals to other countries.”³⁵ The strategic positioning of Filipinas in care-based occupations across the world is part of a pattern, as the Philippine government has historically positioned the role of Filipina women in the labour market for economic and developmental objectives.³⁶ Filipina migrant caregivers challenge traditional gender norms—supplying income for their families at home—while subsequently reinforcing them, as they are pressed to leave and find employment only to be delegated to the field of care or domestic work (characterized

by underpaid and undervalued labor) due to gendered institutions. The resulting commodification is one in which gender, nationality, and race mark women's bodies for particular kinds of work.³⁷ In the Philippines, increasing unemployment is "exacerbated by the state's aggressive pursuit of neoliberal economic policies." Hence, "overseas employment serves as the only means of survival for many women [...] the Philippine state draws on women's gendered and sexualized labor to bear the economic and political burdens of neoliberalism."³⁸ The Philippine state is involved with the promotion of female migration through labour brokerage, in addition to facilitating easier access to legally required permits, while also providing institutional support for women planning to migrate.³⁹ The dominant view of economic rationality sees the experiences of female migrant workers reduced to cost/benefit analysis by their own states, with inadequate attention being paid to the social repercussions of migration and the gendered division of labour.

Since the establishment of Canada as a colonial power, "domestic and caregiving work have long represented an accessible entry point into the labour market for women who may otherwise have limited opportunities to support themselves."⁴⁰ This history has prompted the increasing trend of transnational migration of women from the Global South to the Global North. In Canada, neoliberal policies that prioritize privatization are weakening the welfare state, largely through "cuts in free public-service provision."⁴² Thus, with a lack of care-focused public services, a Canadian demand for domestic work has been fostered. Canada, as a country of relative global wealth, has "chosen to avoid the expense of investing in their own public care infrastructure, choosing rather to maintain the migration of a temporary, exploitable workforce to address this need."⁴³ In Canada, care programs continue to be lacking in the public system, and despite women's increased involvement in the labour market, the official childcare system remains dependent on informal provisions (often familial) to account for the gaps and inconsistencies in the Canadian system.⁴⁴ Additionally, the Canadian government offers cash transfers to families in place of providing nationwide public childcare in order to "encourage the development of a particular form of home-based, often low-paid commodified care or domestic help, generally accessed privately through the market."⁴⁵

Still, the predominant view perceives caregiving

as an issue for the private sector. Migrant caregiver programs have responded to these demands for domestic labour and caregivers. As the demand for care work increases, countries like Canada, with care structures that rely on the market for care-workers, have enacted policies such as Canada's Caregiver Program, which enables "a cheap flow of migrant labour to meet the demand."⁴⁶ The Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) facilitated the migration of caregivers to Canada from 1992 to 2014.⁴⁷ This program required migrant caregivers to provide their care work while living at the place of care provision, "often in the private home of their employer, with a closed work permit tied to one specific employer."⁴⁸ Forced cohabitation with employers—a major component of the LCP—made domestic workers particularly vulnerable in cases of exploitation in the workplace.⁴⁹ This program promoted the transfer of care responsibilities from Canadian women to economically disadvantaged women from marginalized ethnic groups.⁵⁰ Canada changed the program in 2014 from the LCP to simply the Caregiver Program (CP), wherein the workers are no longer required to live in their care recipient's private residence. While the removal of the live-in requirement saw a shift to some sturdier protections for the workers, the blatant power imbalance "between a Canadian employer and an employee whose immigration status is dependent on their work contract precludes the idea that [this] negotiation [...] would take place on even ground."⁵¹ This program still minimizes the agency of migrant caregivers, treating them as commodities rather than human beings that deserve equal access to labour rights.⁵²

Along with the rest of the world, migrant caregiving work is highly feminized and racialized in the Canadian context, as the majority of migrant caregivers working within these programs are from the Philippines.⁵³ These programs perpetuate global inequalities based on racialized, gendered, and economic discriminatory mechanisms. Migration under a temporary foreign worker program, like the Canadian example proves, increases the vulnerability of migrant caregivers, whose precarious status within Canada constructs an unfavorable state of dependence on their employers.⁵⁴ This power dynamic is reminiscent of the Philippines' dependency on Canada. Domestic workers and caregivers are excluded from the standard labour establishments of Canada's provinces, resulting in a reduced standard of protection.⁵⁵ This process of hiring migrant

caregivers allows “upper-middle-class, professional women of the rich countries [...] to ‘use their class privilege to buy themselves out of their gender subordination.’”⁵⁶ Women in wealthy countries have evaded domestic servitude by passing it down to another group of oppressed women. The liberation of elite women, who can break through glass ceilings and “have it all,” is only made possible by the care work of masses of invisible women.⁵⁷

The international division of care labour is shaped by global capitalism and gender inequality in both the sending and receiving countries.⁵⁸ The World System impedes the Philippines from sustainable economic development in their own country, thus keeping them in the ‘periphery,’ trapped in a situation of dependency. This perpetuation of inequality is exemplified by the migration of Filipina caregivers to Canada. As a poorer country, the government of the Philippines encourages migration to wealthier countries through various governmental agencies and its pursuit of neoliberal economic policies designed to accumulate capital. With high unemployment and low wages at home, many Filipina women have been forced by circumstances to migrate, to provide for their families from afar. As the gap between the Global North and South continues to increase, female migrants from the Global South must take on care work to support their families. As migrant workers continue

to be employed by prosperous Canadian families, it can be inferred that the privileged women who hire migrant employees “seem to consent to this gendered, unequal, hierarchical job division [...] and bring with it a globally racist division of labor between women.”⁵⁹ While women from the Global South must leave their families and home to care for Global North families, relatively privileged families in Canada obtain higher standards of living.⁶⁰ Severe social and economic inequality is the basis of the existence of caregiving as an occupation.⁶¹ This context reveals that some aspects of capitalism can benefit women economically. Capitalism allows women from the Philippines and Canada to become the economic providers for their families. However, capitalist states have privatized caregiving, commodified love, created global inequalities in the distribution of care, reinforced gender norms, treated women as commodities of trade, and continued to exploit inequalities in the international system. The perceived benefits of capitalism are achieved at the expense of women who are exploited, undervalued, and vulnerable to oppression and abuse. Capitalist structures forced many migrant women to seek employment on foreign soil, separated from their families and their home, only to be dependent on their wealthy employers. Interpretations of this situation as being ‘empowering’ for all women are grossly inaccurate.

Notes

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