

GLOBAL CARE CRISIS Mother and child's-eye view

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An increasing proportion of the earth's population — 180 million people — move each year from one country to another. An increasing proportion of these migrants are women (Castles and Miller 1998, United Nations, 2002).¹ Of such women, an increasing number leave their families and communities in the weak economies of the South to care for the families and communities in the strong economies of the North. In such countries as the Philippines and Sri Lanka, female migrants outnumber male migrants, and many are young mothers. Once in the North, female migrants also tend to stay longer than male migrants do. Just as poor countries suffer a brain drain as trained personnel move from South to North, so too they suffer, we argue, a care drain (Momsen, 1999; Parrenas, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Hochschild, 2000). Both sexes contribute to the brain drain, but due to the power of custom in both sending and receiving cultures, it is overwhelming women who take a caring role from the country they leave and to the country they leave for.

Such women move in five main migratory streams — from Eastern Europe to Western Europe, from Mexico, Central and South America to the United States, from North Africa to Southern Europe, from South Asia to the oil-rich Persian Gulf and from the Philippines to much of the world — Hong Kong, the US, Europe, and Israel (Castles and Miller, 1998; Zlotnik, 2003). And much of this immigration is hidden from Western view. In the villages of western Ukraine, for example, the *Christian Science Monitor* recently reported:

Most of the adults in the mountain villages have made the crossing in order to work illegally in Central and Western Europe. But the price is high; a generation of children left behind with grandparents, and a region increasingly drained of its working population (Farnam, 2003).

Many factors *cause* people to have to — and to have to want to — migrate: stagnation or collapse of Second and Third World economies, political unrest, and enormous gaps between life as it is lived in rich and poor nations. Migration also has many effects, both positive and negative.

Until recently, labor migration scholars focused on males who took agricultural or industrial jobs in the North, remitting wages to wives and parents who cared

1 Co-authoring this analysis with me are Prof. S. Uma Devi, emeritus professor of Economics and Women's Studies at the University of Kerala and a consultant with the United Nations and the International Labor Organization, and Lise Isaksen, sociologist at the University of Bergen, Norway.

for their children in the South. Migrant man was economic man (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Scholars of female migration, meanwhile, focus on wives who joined their husbands in the North to reunify the family (Djamba, 2001), or on female solo migrants who move for work—women who today would seem to follow the male model. As Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo note, women increasingly fit the “male model” of migration (2003; 1994; Anderson, 2000; Khruemanee, 2002). Those who study women who migrate in order to work — that is, who follow this “male model” — often focus on the poor pay, long hours and sexual exploitation the female worker faces in the North (Anderson, 2000). Missing has been any inquiry into her relationship to her children or other family and friends left behind.

In this essay, S. Uma Devi, the Indian economist who conducted intensive research on which this paper is based, Lise Isaksen, sociologist at Bergen University, and myself, jointly focus on the missing piece — the family life of global working mothers. Migrant woman is economic woman, yes, but she is also family woman — and indeed migrant men should be considered men in their role as emotional fathers as well as economic providers (Anderson, 2000; Momsen, 1999).² But it is, Devi found, mainly women who feel responsible as primary caregivers, and who — despite extraordinary sacrifices — also feel most aggrieved and guilty about long absences from their children, and they who — from a global viewpoint — carry the personal burden of living a life of private struggle to overcome what should not be — an enormous gap between the global rich and poor.

Mothers in the Persian Gulf, children in Kerala, India

In 2003 S. Uma Devi and her assistant Ramji interviewed 120 people, twenty-two of whom were working mothers from Kerala — a state in the Southwest of India — delivering health care in the United Arab Emirate. Among these were six doctors, ten nurses, five laboratory technicians and one hospital cleaner. For each such migrant, Devi and Ramji averaged interviews with five family members back in Kerala — including children, spouses, parents-in-law, siblings and other care-takers. They interviewed the working mothers in the six Emirates of the United Arab Emirates (where 9 of the 22 lived alone) and interviewed their children and the kin who cared for them in Kerala, India. Out of the 13 children below the age of five, 7 lived with both parents in the United Arab Emirates. One child lived with the father and paternal grandmother back in Kerala. Two children lived with maternal grandparents and apart from both parents. Two lived with paternal grandparents, and apart from both parents. And one lived with another relative back in Kerala and not with parents or grandparents. Of the 9 adolescent children,

2 But it is in most societies, primarily women to whom children look as their primary figures of attachment, and among women it is primarily the mother. Among Filipino migrants, for example, over half are women (Erica *et al.*, 2003). Their median age is 29 and they have on average 2.74 children who stay back in the Philippines, and as research has shown, imagine a relationship with them (Morales, 2001; Parrenas, 2001, 2003).

4 tended boarding school in Kerala and five lived with their fathers. In no case did migration sever relations between spouses despite years of living apart, with occasional meetings.

Migration in Kerala has become an accepted way of dealing with a discrepancy between its strong system of schooling and its weak economy. As a state, Kerala has established a strong educational system, but its troubled economy cannot absorb many of graduates it produces. One “solution” to this discrepancy has been to export educated workers. One out of every five working adults in Kerala is or has been a migrant worker.³ One out of every ten of these migrants is a woman and many of these are mothers. In the Kerala study, the migrant mothers averaged two children each and visited their children, on average, once each year for a month.

The construction of a sensitive topic

Devi’s first discovery was that the very topic of care for the children of migrant mothers seemed, to many of those involved, off limits. The topic was hard to talk about. It demanded great trust in the listener-researcher. Of necessity, the very issue of ease of conversation about migrants’ children became, for Devi, the first object of study. One reason for some anxiety about the topic is surely the fact that the Third World State, and First World employer, and often the migrant herself clearly want this global arrangement to work. Given the huge financial incentives, workers badly want the jobs abroad they have struggled so hard to obtain. Domestic workers migrating to the United States and Italy — interviewed by Rhacel Parrenas in the 1990s — had, back in the Philippines, averaged \$176 a month as teachers, nurses, and administrative and clerical workers. But, by doing less skilled though no less difficult work as nannies, maids, and care-service workers, they earned \$200 a month in Singapore, \$410 a month in Hong Kong, \$700 a month in Italy, or \$1,400 a month in Los Angeles. The Sri Lankan Moslem maids studied by Michele Gamburd (2000) and Grete Brochmann (1993) migrated to pay for basic food and shelter. Most lower middle class and middle class Philippina migrants studied by Parrenas and the medical workers studied by Devi, migrated to pay for school fees, better housing and to start new businesses (Parrenas, 2001).

For their part, the migrant’s children, spouse, parents, as well as such people as the mason who builds her new house and the priest at the village temple who receives a new donation want migration to work too because they benefit from it. Third World governments — that of Sri Lankan and Philippines for example — also gain enormously from the inflow of taxable hard-currency remittances. According to the International Monetary Fund, officially recorded remittances in 2005 exceeded \$232 billion — two-thirds of which went to residents in poor countries. Unofficially recorded transfers are estimated to be an additional \$116

3 Economic Survey, 2002, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, Government of Kerala, State Planning Board.

billion.⁴ Remittances make up 24% of the gross domestic product of Haiti, 22% of Jordan, and 16% of Nicaragua.

In the North, employers also welcome the badly needed care workers to fill the needs of aging societies with high female employment, and don't ask many questions about the family lives of such workers. In sum, many parties — the worker, the workers' kin, the workers' employer, the businesses that arise to train, transport, house migrants, the governments — come to have a vested interest in female migration and are less interested in hearing about the costs.⁵

But as Devi's research shows, there is a cost, and that cost can become — through culture — externalized. Many migrant mothers who were proud to work overseas, at the same time felt very badly about leaving their children behind. Relatives, teachers, and child advocates also expressed concern about such children. As a 2004 report of the National Statistics Office of the Philippine government concludes:

The country faces huge social costs to migrant families as a result of prolonged separation, the breakdown of families and the deterioration and underdevelopment of the psycho-social growth of their children (Ericta *et al.*, 2003: 10).

Apart from the alignment of interests in migration, talk about this "huge social cost" is difficult for another reason too: shame. Many migrant mothers face accusations of being a "bad mother" or a "materialistic person" and themselves feel anguished about long separations from their children. Indeed, Uma Devi's first discovery, in her interviews with the kin of Kerala female migrant mothers, was the "taboo" among the kin against talking about "how the children were doing". Mothers felt their departures as a sensitive, private issue, not as a private expression of a larger public issue.⁶

One final obstacle faces those who write about the children left behind — fear of the "misuse" of their findings. Feminist scholars who place, as we do, a personal value on the ability of mothers to work outside the home, fear that their findings will build the "maternalist" case for returning women to the home. Scholars who champion, as we do, the rights of migrants may also fear that scholarship illuminating the family problems of migrant workers could be used against them by nationalists of the North. Such fears are understandable and well founded. Even more important, however, is the more basic task of opening up a full conversation about the

4 International Monetary Fund Finance and Development (2005) by Dilip Ratha. See Ericta *et al.* (2003: 10).

5 Some economists dispute the economic benefits of remittances for the country's economy. Economists at the International Monetary Fund and Duke University argue, for example, that remittances are "wasted on big-screen TVs and faux-adobe mansions" instead of being invested in new businesses at home (Frank, 2001: 2; Wheatley, 2003).

6 Many social problems have a "shame wrap around". Homeless people are ashamed of being homeless. Poor people are ashamed of being poor. The imprisoned are ashamed of being in prison. In each instance, to different degrees, the victim is led to violate some norm for which they experience shame. But erased from the picture is the larger pattern which led to that violation, that shame in the first place.

hidden costs of female migration — both to advance various branches of theory — feminist, migration, work-family — and to influence global social policy.

Emerging research on migrant workers' children

Given these obstacles, the small but important line of research emerging to fill this gap is especially welcome. Early studies focus on the effect of departing fathers (Go and Postrado, 1986; Abella and Atal, 1986; Arnold and Shah, 1986) while recent studies increasingly focus on the effect of both absent fathers and mothers (Schmalzbauer, 2004; Parrenas, 2005; Aranda, 2003; Artico, 2003; Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). Some research focuses on children's education. Kandel and Kao (2001), for example, find that the children of Mexican migrants earn better grades in high school and can — given their parents' remittances — better afford to go to college than children of non-migrants. But, poignantly, compared to non-migrant children, the children of migrants are less likely to want to go to college.

Other studies focus on children's emotional well-being. In their survey of 709 Filipino elementary school children — average age of 11 — Battistella and Conoco (1998), for example, compare children who live with both parents present, to "father absent," "mother absent" and "both absent" children. Most children "show an understanding of the main reason for parents being abroad, that is, to add to the family coffers, and to improve their own education". But, they write, "most also view their parents departure with 'a sense of loneliness and sadness'" (1998: 228). Children living with both parents earned higher grades and a higher rank in class than children with absent parents. Compared to children with absent fathers, children with absent mothers were also more likely to say they felt sad, angry, confused, and apathetic.

In one of the few in-depth studies of what she calls "parenting from afar", Leah Schmalzbauer (2004) studied 154 Honduran among whom were 34 care workers living in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and 12 of their family members back in Honduras (and 6 more whose family ties had been severed). Both migrant fathers and mothers, Schmalzbauer discovered, worried whether their children truly understood why they left. In addition, she notes: "dissension within transnational families is common. The extreme occurs when migrants completely cut themselves off from their families at home" (2004: 28). In another study of children of migrant workers, Rhacel Parrenas (2005) compares the children of Filipino male migrants (usually raised by the child's mother) and female migrants (raised by their fathers, grandmothers, aunts or others). When *husbands* migrate, she discovered, wives usually assume the role of father and mother. But when *wives* migrate, husbands tend to stand aside from child rearing leaving childrearing to female relatives. In the end, Parrenas sensibly calls for Filipino husbands of migrant worker wives to face up to the challenge to child rearing just as their female counterparts have done.

Children in Kerala, working mothers in the Persian Gulf

Mothers who migrate from Kerala often experience a conflict, Devi found, between wanting to be an “ideal mother” and wanting to be a “community heroine”. By migrating these mothers are defying the prevailing local notion of an “ideal mother”. To be sure, the idea of an “ideal mother” differs from one ethnic and religious group to another within Kerala. Sixty percent of Keralans are Hindu, 20 percent Moslem, and 20 percent Christian. Thus, Keralan culture draws on many different cultural beliefs about motherhood. But all of them share a vision of the “ideal mother” as one who lives with her own children. The ideal mother may work outside the home during the day but she returns to her children in the evening.⁷ Thus, the cultural acceptance of shared care does not, in Kerala, automatically extend to an acceptance of the prolonged absence of mothers.

Keralans share an ideal of the joint household — in which elderly parents live together with their sons and their families but there is within the ideology of the extended household, an “inner ideology” of the mother-child bond. The “ideal mother” within the “ideal joint family household” is one who is physically present and the object of a child’s primary emotional attachment, while at the same time gladly sharing the emotional limelight with loving grandparents, aunts, uncles cousins and others. Both ideals — that of the extended household and the physically present mother — persist in the popular imagination, but less and less do they persist in reality. Mothers found themselves in a cultural cross-current of criticism and praise, disapproval (as “heartless” and “materialistic”) and approval (as heroically sacrificing and generously providing). Though few mothers had been criticized to their face, all of them were well aware of criticisms “going around”. At the same time, given the high unemployment in Kerala, many well-trained and able-bodied Keralans from both the middle and working class — even some who expressed criticism — wished for a chance to migrate. Migrant mothers and their kin also felt the negative gossip came out of envy for the larger homes, more lavish weddings, larger dowries, and educational opportunities migration afforded.

Despite her conflict (“shall I be an ideal mother or shall I be a financial success?”), the migrant mother did not feel alone. She was, she and her relatives agreed, following a *family* plan. She was making a sacrifice for the family.

Still, when speaking of their children in the interview, Devi observed that most mothers teared up or openly wept. Even mothers who had long been reunited with their children expressed anguish when they recalled the separation. A number of nurses worked for hospitals in the Persian Gulf with stringent leave policies for their pregnant workers. Most such hospitals allowed mothers 45 days post-partum leave for the birth of their infants. Thus, mothers would fly from the Gulf back to Kerala, give birth to their babies, stay for 40 days, and then return to their full time jobs back

7 The prevailing ideal in marriage also calls for co-residence and monogamy. Migration prevents the first, and strains the second. Although this was not a focus of the Kerala research, Parrenas found many husbands of Philippina long-absent migrant mothers setting up house with other women in villages apart from their own children (Parrenas, 2005).

in the Gulf. Many also continued working a year — and in a few cases, more — before they were able to see their babies again. Infants left by mothers at the age of one month can develop a wide variety of alternate attachments — depending on the personality, capacity to love, and consistency of care given by the surrogate caretakers. This study does not begin to do justice to that enormous variety.

But Devi was struck by some of the open statements by older children of migrant workers. Priya, a Keralian college student and the daughter of a nurse practicing in the United Arab Emirate, for example, said:

I want you to write about the human cost for people like us, to be apart for year after year. I'm living here in this hostel, and my classes are fine, but I can't talk to my mother. I can't tell her things. I can't see her face. I can't hug her. I can't help her. My mother misses me too. My mother will retire at some point, but how old will I be then?

Leela, another daughter of a nurse working in the UAE who lives with her father and brother in Kerala, had this to say:

I cannot go home even for weekends because my father is alone at home and in a traditional setting I would not go and live with him, when he is alone... You know you cannot discuss everything with your father. I wait for my mother's call every Friday, but from the hostel phone. Also, I cannot talk freely with her, because the matron [a nun] is always hovering around... My father is very strict, he has become more strict now and is very conservative... if I do anything non-conventional he tends to blame my mother for bringing me up the way she has, so I try to be very careful to see that my mother is not blamed. This is a big burden, which I would not have if she was here.

Many children spoke of envying friends who enjoyed the luxury of living with their mothers. When her mother left for a nursing job in the Gulf, Vijaya, now 20, also told of taking her mother's place in the household with her father and brother, and of envying the carefree childhoods of friends of non-migrating mothers. But, as she explained, she also envied them the sheer company of their mothers:

When I see my classmates accompanying their mothers to church or shopping, I miss my mother badly... Actually I need my mother now at this age. Anyway later they would marry me off and I would miss the opportunity of living with my mother. I miss her.

When Vijaya's mother was interviewed in the United Arab Emirate, she asked:

How is my daughter? I know she misses me. They call me everyday in the evening from the STD booth [an outdoor phone store, with a private booth]. She sometimes cries. I do too.⁸

Even in their absence, migrant mothers were a strong emotional presence to their children. Mina, the two-year-old daughter of a nurse in the United Arab Emirate,

for example, daily looked at a blue dolphin toy hung in the center of the living room. Her paternal grandparents encouraged Mina to play with it, reminding her “your mommy sent the dolphin for your birthday”. When it was decided to take a photo of Mina, her grandmother immediately dressed her in a frilly dress and brought her beaming into the living room. “Tell them who sent you this frock”, the grandmother coaxed Mina. Mina shyly looking down and holding her grandmother by one hand and putting her hand over her face replied in a whisper, “Ammachi” [“my mother” in Malayalam].

The memory of the missing parent was not suppressed, as can happen in the case of a bitter family rupture, a divorce, a suicide. Nor was the mother’s absence completely normalized as in the case of the absent sea-farer or soldier. Nor, again, was the role of mother fully absorbed by the grandmother or sister-in-law or father. Rather, a place was reserved in the child’s heart for a mother who was not there.

Children’s orientations toward their migrant mothers

At the same time, to varying degrees, children managed their private doubts about the arrangement. “Why”, older children recall asking themselves “did my mother leave me when the mothers of my school friends did not leave them? Did my mother have to leave, or did she want to leave? Or did she leave *me*?” Answers to these questions seemed to differ depending on their cultural image of the parent’s role. But the more the child was exposed to friends whose mothers had not left, the more the question arose. As one child of a migrant worker, now adult, put it: “I wondered why she couldn’t have stayed back or I couldn’t have gone with her. I still wonder.” She was managing doubt.

A few children, Devi found, had moved from doubt to distrust. They felt promised an emotional bond with their mother that had not, in fact, been sustained, and they felt betrayed. This may correspond to what psychologists call “empathic rupture” — the breaking of an empathic connection. The Head Master of a boarding school for children of migrant workers in Kerala, reported this:

Most of the children we have in this school have parents working in the Middle East. The children we have here range in age from 5 to 16. Many of them have lost trust in adults. They are very independent, but not always in a healthy way. They distrust adults.

8 In *The Tahitians*, the social anthropologist, Robert Levy speaks of whole realms of human feeling for which given cultures have few or no words. For emotions in the upper range of emotion — joy, happiness, euphoria — he observed, the Tahitians had many words. But for the lower range — sadness, regret, longing, depression — they had only one word — “sick.” Where there are few words, Levi reasoned, there is a cultural under-acknowledgement of feeling, an under-articulation of experience. In Malayalam too, there is no special word for a feeling many children in Kerala experience — “mother-envy”. For in the context of a highly educated population and stagnant economy in which the desirability of migration goes largely unquestioned, such feelings clearly exist, but with, so to speak, a cover over them.

Each relationship between child and migrant mother — like that between child and father — is unique. Not all children of migrant workers are sent to boarding school. Not all who do end up losing trust in their parents or in all adults. But the Head Master's comment points to an issue we know far too little about, a hidden price tag of global inequality.

Children find themselves in an “emotional commons” one in which there is a busy exchange of favors, large and small, by the adults in their lives. That is, they live in a community of kin, friends, neighbors, teachers, all of whom exchange favors with one another. This commons is governed by a complex web of understandings. Grandparents cares, for example, for a four year old child. The migrant mother pays a builder to build the house for a brother. The brother and his wife, in turn, stand ready to care for the grandparents as they grow older. The mother finds a job in the UAE for the brother's wife, and so the favor exchange goes on. Children face the task of figuring out their *footing* within this commons.

Is the care they receive from grandparents or aunts, for example, freely given as a gesture of love, or is it a way of “doing mother a favor”? Is this care offered out of commitment or out of desire, or in what measure each? Migrant mothers often sent caregivers personal gifts; in what sense, the children sometimes wonder, is this a “payment” for their care, or in what measure is it simply a gift? Is the child, he or she wondered, a welcome addition or a bit of a burden? Migration places large new demands on the joint family to care for migrants' children. In taking on this care — especially the care of very young children — kin often feel they are offering the migrant an enormous emotional gift, regardless of material returns. So, Devi discovered, both the migrant workers and their children often felt beholden to the caregivers. Some children reported feeling “like a guest” in the house, or like a “burden.” So some of the migrants' children tried to behave like little adults vis-à-vis their grandparents or aunts and uncles in the household, especially the older girls who tended to make themselves useful as little mothers to younger siblings. Thus, for some children, the emotional challenge was to manage an aversion to feeling like a “charity case”.⁹

The migrant mother was also forced to “materialize” love — to express through money and material gifts that which she could not express through talk and hugs. Thus, for the child, the arrival of a package of toys or electronic gadgets could mean, “Mother is thinking of me,” or “Mother knows what I like”.¹⁰ On the school playground in Kerala, a new toy often made a migrant's child at once a

9 Rhacel Parrenas, for example, found that relatives who cared for migrants' children often came to resent negligent fathers who either disengaged from their children's daily lives, or drank, gambled and carried on extra-marital affairs (Constable, 2003; Parrenas, 2005). Such male avoidance of care may express not simply a “traditional” reluctance to do women's work then, but a backlash at lost privilege. Kin must then add to their caretaking responsibilities the task of dealing with a husband-father who feels he has lost “his place”.

10 In this sense migrant parents and children are subject to the same materialization-doubts as absent or divorced fathers. An 18 year old daughter of a divorced father interviewed for a previous study told Devi: “every time I talk to my dad on the phone, the conversation begins, ‘Do you need money?’ It's as if he thinks that's all he could give me.”

prince and an object of pity, for it meant both that one's mother was absent, but also that one's family was richer than non-migrant families. The socially upheld meaning of a remittance or gift was: "I am devoted to your welfare." But many also interpreted gifts as guilt offerings, as ways of saying "I'm sorry" or "Here is this gift instead of me." Some children of absent parents continued to feel ambivalent about gifts they'd received from parents even many years later. For example, Divya, now twenty-six, had grown up separated from both her parents who worked in the Gulf in order to accumulate a large dowry for her in the form of a "Gulf house" (the name given to large, upscale houses built with remittances). With this dowry Divya, indeed, married well and now raises her newborn son in this house, still never having opened the small gifts her parents' had sent her during their long absence. As she told Devi during the interview, "My parents sent me many glamorous pens and pencil boxes from the Middle East. But I never used them, even now 20 years later. I've never used them."

The children of Kerala migrant workers thus faced a number of emotional issues related to the departure of their mothers; the management of sadness at the lost company of one whose emotional centrality remained *in absentia*, envy of children with resident mothers — and this despite an official acceptance of the trade-offs of migration — doubt about why a mother "had to" leave, and an aversion to "being a burden" to surrogate caregivers. They also developed a sensitivity to the meaning of material gifts, since they were offered, as one mother explained, "because I couldn't be there in person".

The migration of these mothers also led to shifts in the family system and the community beyond it. Although other research has uncovered stories of ruptured relations between wives and husbands, and even between parents and children, Devi came across no such stories in her Kerala interviews (Schmalzbauer, 2004). Migration did not divide the community between the migrating rich and the non-migrating poor, as in some countries, for most families at each occupational level had one migrant contributor to the family coffers. At the same time, it created cross-currents of envy (of the migrants' money) and criticism (of the migrant's maternity) through communities of kin and family. It also unsettled the "footing" of children throughout the migratory system; for if the mothers of *some* children could leave, then *other* mothers might also leave as opportunities opened up. Most important, migration stripped away the patterns of care that *would have taken place* — between a woman and her child, her husband, her parents, her neighbor, her friend, her temple had she not had to migrate.

Devi's fieldwork opens a door into a large world of unanswered questions. At the very least, it suggests a strong basis from which to argue that there are vitally important emotional — and not simply economic — realities unfolding with the feminization of migration.¹¹ While children have in the past and still today do miss their migrant fathers, in most Third World cultures, the export of care work

11 We need highly sophisticated research comparing children of migrant mothers with those of non-migrant mothers, and children of migrant fathers. We also need work comparing children who experience various kinds of non-parental care.

involves the export of women. Given local tradition, at least in Kerala, the export of women removes those who have been central in the care of children.

Transfer of care capital or “externalized cost”?

The nurse who leaves her children in the care of relatives in Trivandrum, Kerala, India, while she cares for patients in Dubai on the Persian Gulf is part of a “care chain”. But how do we conceptualize this care chain? Should we understand it as the transfer of “care capital” — like a transfer of social capital from one family and nation to another family, workplace and nation? Or is it best understood as an “externalized cost” — that is a cost that is not counted as a cost. If so, what kind of externalized cost is it? Are we to see it as a theft of a potential caregiver? Or as the erosion — or distortion — of a “life world”, to quote Jurgen Habermas (2001), a socio-emotional “commons” within which the capitalization of care goes on?

We can speak of migration as leading to a transfer of a migrant’s care capital — caring skills — from South to North. But this transfer calls at the same time for new kinds of exchange — between migrants in the North and kin in the South — of social capital. The already over-stretched metaphor of “capital,” we argue, both illuminates one small part of the picture, and obstructs our vision of the bigger picture. So a brief word about “social capital” is in order. The concept of social capital draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), Pierre Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), James Coleman (1988), Robert Putnam (1993; 2000) and it has been applied to migration by Alexandro Portes (1998).¹² Putnam defines social capital in a variety of ways — as the number of a person’s social contacts, as the sum of one’s organizational memberships and as the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from these contacts and memberships (2000: 19).¹³

A bit more useful for our purpose is Alexandro Portes’ definition of social capital as the accumulation of “social chits”. People with many chits are high in social capital, and those with few, are low. As Portes notes, “... social capital [is] primarily

12 Following Putnam, the Dutch labor economist, Irene van Staveren (2000) makes a well-meaning, but we feel misguided, attempt to apply the idea of social capital to the realm of domestic care. As she puts it, “through mutual gift-giving in the care economy, mainly shouldered by women, ... social capital accumulates” (2000: 12). Citing the classic study by Richard Titmuss on blood donation (1971), she observes that gifts freely given often get the job done more “efficiently” and with lower “transaction costs” than services paid for (van Staveren, 2000). As van Staveren notes “...the more human capital (say a particular skill) is used, the faster it accumulates: practice increases returns to skills... Similarly for social capital: the more social capital (say the bonds in a neighborhood) is used the faster it accumulates... so, the value of social capital is generated in the care economy through the complementary caring characteristics of the goods and services produced. This leads to increasing marginal returns, in analogy to the increasing returns of human capital.” (2000: 12)

13 Actually, Putnam is confusing on just this point (2000). While he sometimes refers to “social capital” in the way the metaphor suggests — as the property of an individual. Other times he seems to be referring to social capital strictly as the attribute of a collectivity.

the accumulation of obligations from others according to the norm of reciprocity” (1998: 7). The normal exchange of social chits in families or communities differs from pure economic exchange, he argues, in two ways. In a pure economic exchange, we borrow money and we repay money. The *currency remains the same*. In the exchange of social chits, we give in one currency but repay in another. Again, in a pure economic exchange, if we borrow money, we pay it at *a specified time*. In the exchange of social chits, we leave open the time for repayment.

Between migrant mother and caring-giving kin there is an exchange of social chits. A favor is freely given (the relatives care for the child), but is also eventually repaid (the mother pays various expenses and gives various gifts). For example, the migrant health worker Sujatha asked her sister and the sister’s stepdaughter Prithi to care for her six-year-old daughter Anitha. Sujatha sends money for her daughter Anitha’s upkeep and education. She also pays for her sister’s medical treatment and for Prithi’s education. Sujatha also sends Prithi golden ornaments as gifts. Note that Sujatha does not send simple checks but, rather, designates a purpose for money, making the transfer more personal (this is often but not always done). Prithi is hoping that one day Sujatha will be able to find her a job in the UAE. But as Sujatha told Devi, “I know Prithi expects me to bring her over to Dubai, but if she comes [to Dubai], who would look after my daughter Anitha? So I don’t want to help bring Prithi here now.” In this case, giving one chit prevents receiving of another.

As for other migrant families, what was an informal exchange of chits, an expression of the principle of reciprocity, comes one step closer to a market exchange. This is not because money is in every instance depersonalizing. Rather, one of two patterns emerges. First, either another woman comes forward and becomes, emotionally speaking a primary attachment figure, or a mother remains that figure but material gifts come to symbolize her presence. In the first instance, the mother is marginalized, and others take her place. In the second instance, material symbols come to substitute for socio-emotional ones. There is no sharing of dinners, birthday celebrations, no daily conversation, no visual or physical contact. In this instance, children, as well as their care givers, can come to experience *money as a substitute* for shared experiences and love. Paradoxically, as such, it can even loom larger as a *symbol* of love even as it can, at the same time, also depersonalize and commodify love.¹⁴

14 The accumulation of chits between Sujatha and Pritha, implies a hidden inequity between Sujatha and the other player in the game — the employer in the North. Sujatha comes to her employer unencumbered by children: Pritha, half a world away, is invisible to her employer in the North. But her care-giving is utterly necessary to liberate Sujatha for her 50 or 60 hour weeks of childcare in the North. Were Sujatha to “hire” her sister’s stepdaughter, for example, it would be seen as necessary to add the cost of that childcare to the wages Sujatha is paid in the North. That cost might be passed on, in turn, leading to raised costs of medical services in the Middle East. But because the exchange of social chits is invisible, Sujatha can’t “cash in”. The employer in the North doesn’t see the need to pay. This is an argument of displaced cost: the caretaker back in Kerala is absorbing a cost the Northern employer should rightly pay. The idea of social capital — like that of costs of reproduction, in the Marxist framework — illuminates this inequity.

At the same time, the capital framework inhibits us from appreciating — and thus theorizing — the *communal* world in which children and their chit-exchanging mothers and relatives actually live. It therefore hides yet another, yet more basic inequity, access to an integral *collectivity* that gives a social chit meaning in the first place. The idea of social capital leads us to imagine that social chits are individually owned and therefore independent of life in a community. It is as if one person could put capital in their suitcase, get on a plane and go. We are led to forget all the favors, the chits, that *would have been exchanged and would have enriched the community had the person stayed*. Social chits — gifts, favors, kindnesses — operate in, derive from, and are sustained by family and community and are nothing whatever outside them.

As the socio-linguist George Lakoff argues, in his book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), every metaphor implies a cognitive frame, itself based on assumptions about reality. Social capital is part of the same cognitive frame as material capital, that is, money. It describes what a migrant mother or child *has, not* who she *is*, as defined by participation in a social whole.

If family and community are absent from the picture *as basic social units* to begin with, there is nothing there to be distorted, strained or eroded by a Third World “care drain”. To put it another way, we can’t see the effect of pollution on the ecology of the lake, if we only focus on each individual fish. Similarly, social chits operate in, derive from, and are sustained by family and community.

Only with concepts true to their collective context can we understand the feelings of doubt, sadness and envy Keralan children report. Migration, we argue, can, in Polanyi’s and Giddens’ sense, “disembed” social chits and *turn them into* social capital. But this is not a process we see — or appreciate the cost of — if we assume that they are — and only are — social capital to begin with.

Finally, the concept of capital (social or care) turns the camera’s eye away from children, and from the split family context as children experience it. It leads us to gloss over that of a child’s relational world which is not exchangeable, unalienable, and the feelings in response to that relational world - including feelings of anguish, doubt, envy, and sadness.¹⁵

We propose, then, another concept which focuses the camera’s eye on the very way migration disembeds relationships of family and community, shifting the terms on which it is based away from chit and toward capital. South-North migration of mothers over long periods of time, we argue, attenuates, distorts and sometimes ruptures the socio-emotional commons (Tronto, 1993; Rowe,

15 The concept of social capital, let us hasten to add, was not originally designed to obscure the human cost of global migration. On the contrary, those who first added social capital to the conversation about Third World development and care, did so with the idea of adding a human touch to the economic discussion of money, bridges and factories and the like. Paradoxically though, “the human side” was introduced in such a way as to obscure it. The market metaphor has nonetheless been making its ways through social science through what we might call the “capital series.” The series begins with material capital, and extends to human capital (Coleman, 1988), social capital (Putnam, 1995; 2000), emotional capital (Nowotny, 1981), and pugilistic capital (Wacquant, 2004).

2002; Polanyi, 2001 [1944]).¹⁶ The concept of the commons focuses our attention on the very “for-itself-ness” of family and community.¹⁷

We are looking, as Marx and others have, at inequity, at the gap between haves and have-nots. But what is there to have or not have is a commons. That is, what is missing from the capital/market view — is the opportunity to live as part of an integral whole — a family and community. One thing that makes a whole into a whole is being together, seeing each other, talking directly, physically touching — in a word, co-presence. We can imagine a family gathered around a table, or a community celebration as expressions of a socio-emotional commons.¹⁸ Clearly, there are many other bases for a commons, material and non-material, existing in the past and today — though this discussion falls beyond the scope of our essay.¹⁹

But the commons can become “fodder” for the market.²⁰ Indeed, it is our thesis that just as the market eroded the commons in 18th century Europe, so the market of the North is eroding the commons of the South today. Looking at the growth of market capitalism in Europe, various observers noted that the market relied on — and then, in a sense, used up — pre-existing non-market social ties based on trust and mutual commitment (Durkheim, 1984; Polanyi, 2001 [1944]). As Durkheim noted, contracts were first based on pre-contractual solidarity. To lend money, tools or labor to a neighbor, a man relied on a culture of trust and the watchful eyes of an embedded community. From this original basis, contracts, courts and jails were derived. But once established, these impersonal mechanisms tended to undercut the trust,

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- 16 Theorists of the commons, for their part, offer us two pictures. One is a positive picture — a commonly shared set of resources or relationships — for example the simple facts of trust and co-presence of mother and child. Here the emphasis is on sharing a sense of in-commonness. The second is negative — a commonly shared set of resources which people, each thinking of their private good, ultimately abuse (Harden, 1995). Here we extend the first picture.
- 17 To be sure, individuals on both sides may betray a shared trust. A parent may fail to share her earnings. An aunt may neglect her nephews. But these acts are tacitly understood as betrayals of a trust that was strongly valued, reinforced, collectively shared, non-fungible, and deeply rooted in time and place. This was the taken-for-granted social fabric within which migration took place, and to which — as the interviews so poignantly show — it did harm.
- 18 Some commons are temporary and emergency-based (as in response to natural disaster), others establish expectations of long term reciprocity.
- 19 Most commons of which we speak are based in reality but many are based in fantasy. Many migrants forced off the land into the city, or out of their country into another, look back with longing and nostalgia at the community of their dreams back home. Indeed many migrants wax lyrical about the folkways of the communities they left behind back in Estonia, Tunisia, Uruguay. As whole villages have been emptied out by migrations, the idea of an “imaginary” commons emerges to absorb the yearning for community. But the discontent of the displaced, and its resulting — often retrograde — nostalgia is out of public view. Indeed, it may be that it is when a desire for community is suppressed, an imaginary commons tends to arise as the object of yearning. This yearning then becomes a tool in the hands of conservative forces. This is because, in the brave new world of the market and capitalized self, these yearnings have nowhere else to go. The point here is that this entire scenario is hard to grasp if we only see the world through “market eyes.”
- 20 To World Bank economists, indicators of social capital are also seen as a sign of “good prospects” for foreign investment in the Third World. But little analysis is devoted for how immigration erodes the very community and family life — the social capital — they see as the “missing link” in economic development (Harriss, 2001; Fine, 2003; Woolcock, 2001).

which had been based on primordial ties (Fevre, 2003: 3-7). In *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi argues much the same thing (2001 [1944]). Speaking of the market in 19th century European society, Polanyi noted:

...a principle quite unfavorable to individual and general happiness was working havoc with his social environment, his neighborhood, his standing in the community, his craft; in a word, with those relationships to nature and man in which his economic existence was formerly embedded. The Industrial Revolution was causing a social dislocation of stupendous proportions, and the problem of poverty was merely the economic aspect of this event (2001 [1944]: 129).

For Durkheim and Polanyi, both society and the market existed in the same place, Europe. But the relationship between them changed from one time to another, roughly from 1800's to the 1900's.

In the global migration of women today, we argue, a different form of the same process is taking place. Only now, the places are different and the period of time is the same. Now the market of the North is indirectly eroding the social solidarities of the South.

Mothers are still mothers. But children forget what they look like. Mothers make great sacrifices for their children but the trust concerning that great sacrifice has been undermined. Absent mothers leave for their children's sake but children manage private, often profound doubts about why, in fact, their mothers left. Just as man's relationships to man and nature were disembedded in Polanyi's quite general terms, so we suggest, the relationship between parent and child is "disembedded" by migration. This happens "in" the family, but family theory per se is missing a picture of both the context — the backstage of globalization — and the process by which that context disembeds relations between parent and child. It is when we introduce the idea of a "commons" that we see how the distorted and eroded family ties of the South support the market of the North.

In addition, if the early European commons were sustained mainly by men, the commons we describe here are sustained mainly by women. In a sense, global economic circumstances have "thrown off" migrants from their Third World commons, even as they continue to contribute materially to it. For the vast majority of migrant mothers of Kerala, Thailand and Latvia would far rather work at adequate jobs near their families than at jobs far from them. To be sure, migrants are "choosing" to migrate, but only in the limited sense that 18th century European peasants "chose" to seek jobs in the margins of the expanding cities of the day. Similarly, most migrants see themselves as using their remittances (the market) to better their families (the commons). But over their heads, so to speak, a more powerful process is simultaneously at work — the distortion and erosion of the Third World commons. Indeed, as whole villages in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Kerala, Latvia, and the Ukraine, are emptied of mothers, aunts, grandmothers and daughters, it may not be too much to speak of a desertification of Third World care-givers and the emotional commons they would have sustained had they been able to stay.

In the end, the impact of the global care crisis varies, we argue, depending on the circumstances of each caregiver and child. In Kerala, Devi found that within the outer ideology of the Indian joint-household was an inner ideology of the mother-child bond, and this informed each child's experience of her mother's absence. Other cultures may produce other experiences. But what are the growing number of circumstances? What are children feeling? Researchers need to find out. For whatever the case, this arena of research raises the issue of what we can do to reduce the hidden injuries of global capital. At the very least, we can call for arrangements by which children and perhaps other caregivers can follow mothers to their new place of work. More basically, we can call for measures to be taken by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and NAFTA aimed at reducing the economic gap that motivates much migration to begin with.

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Resumo/ abstract/ résumé/ resumen

Crise global do cuidar: a perspectiva da mãe e da criança

As trabalhadoras migrantes enviam dinheiro que ganham em casas ricas no Norte para as suas famílias pobres e de classe média no Sul. Enquanto o dinheiro caminha para o Sul, o trabalho do cuidar caminha para o Norte, criando um "défice de cuidados" no Sul. No entanto, ouvimos com frequência a história emotiva de quem recebe cuidados no Norte e a história económica dos prestadores de cuidados no Sul. Recorrendo a estudos recentes sobre filhos de trabalhadores migrantes na Costa Rica, nas Filipinas e em Kerala, na Índia, exploramos o processo através do qual estas crianças são cuidadas e as provas emocionais que têm de superar com muita frequência: gerir a incompreensão da ausência da mãe, a tristeza por essa ausência, a inveja das crianças com mães não migrantes e a ambivalência relativamente aos presentes materiais. Muitos — tanto no Sul como no Norte — ocultam a experiência dessas crianças, consideram-na normal ou discutem-na como matéria privada da moralidade da mãe. Mas o défice do cuidar, entre outros factores, é um prejuízo trágico e oculto que resulta da nossa incapacidade social para encontrar melhores formas de distribuição da riqueza do globo.

Palavras-chave globalização e cuidados pessoais, mães migrantes, crianças, prestadoras de cuidados.

Global care crisis: mother and child's-eye view

Female migrant workers send money they earn in affluent homes of the North to their poor and middle class families in the South. As money flows south, caring labor flows north, creating a "care drain" in the South. Yet, we often hear the *emotional* story of care recipients of the North and the *economic* story of care givers from the South. Drawing on recent scholarship on the children of migrant workers in

Costa Rica, the Philippines and Kerala, India, we explore the many ways in which such children receive care, and the emotional tasks they often face: to manage doubt as to why one's mother left, sadness at her absence, envy of children with non-migrant mothers, and ambivalence about material gifts. Many — in both the South and North — suppress the children's experience, normalize it, or discuss it as a private matter of a mother's morality. But the care drain is, among other things, a tragic hidden injury that results from our social failure to find better ways to fairly distribute the wealth of the globe.

Key-words global care, migrant mothers, children, caregivers.

Crise globale des soins: le point de vue de la mère et de l'enfant

Les travailleuses migrantes envoient l'argent qu'elles gagnent dans les belles maisons du nord à leurs familles pauvres et de la classe moyenne du sud. Tandis que l'argent circule vers le sud, les soins maternels circulent vers le nord, créant un «déficit de soins» dans le sud. Cependant, on entend souvent l'histoire émouvante de ceux qui reçoivent les soins dans le nord et l'histoire économique des prestataires de soins dans le sud. À partir d'études récentes sur les enfants des travailleuses migrantes au Costa Rica, aux Philippines et à Kerala, en Inde, nous avons étudié le processus par lequel on prend soin de ces enfants et les épreuves émotionnelles qu'ils doivent souvent surmonter: incompréhension de l'absence de la mère, tristesse causée par cette absence, jalousie à l'égard des enfants dont les mères ne sont pas migrantes et ambivalence vis-à-vis des cadeaux matériels. Beaucoup — aussi bien dans le sud que dans le nord — cachent l'expérience de ces enfants, la considèrent normale ou en parlent comme d'une affaire privée de la moralité de la mère. Mais, entre autres facteurs, le déficit de soins est un préjudice tragique et caché qui découle de notre incapacité sociale à trouver de solutions mieux adaptées à la répartition des richesses sur la planète.

Mots-clés mondialisation et soins personnels, mères migrantes, enfants, prestataires de soins.

Crisis global del cuidado: la perspectiva de la madre y del niño

Las trabajadoras emigrantes envían dinero que ganan en casas ricas en el Norte para sus familias pobres y de clase media en el Sur. Al mismo tiempo que el dinero va para el Sur, el trabajo del cuidado se dirige hacia el Norte, creando así un "déficit del cuidado" en el Sur. Sin embargo, oímos con frecuencia, la historia emotiva de quien recibe el cuidado en el Norte y la historia económica de quien cuida en el Sur. Recurriendo a estudios recientes sobre hijos de trabajadores emigrantes en Costa Rica, en Filipinas y en Kerala, en la India, exploramos el proceso a través del cual estos niños son cuidados y las pruebas emocionales que tienen que superar a

menudo: administrar la incomprensión de la ausencia de la madre, la tristeza por esa ausencia, la envidia de las criaturas con madres no emigrantes y la ambivalencia en relación a los regalos materiales. Muchos — tanto en el Sur como en el Norte — ocultan la experiencia de esas criaturas, la consideran normal o la discuten como asunto privado de la moralidad de la madre. Pero el déficit del cuidado, entre otros factores, es un prejuicio trágico y oculto, producto de nuestra incapacidad social para encontrar mejores formas de distribución de la riqueza global.

Palabras-llave globalización y cuidados personales, madres migrantes, niños, proveedor/a de cuidados.

