Globalisation Inscribed in Their Lives: the Case of Overseas Female Filipino Workers[1]

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The issues presented by international labour migration are complex and exist within the multiple levels of the globalized labour market; this can be seen in economically diverse nation states down to local communities, households and individuals. In our attempt to understand the Far East Asian manifestation of the globalized labour market, it is important to recognize the role of the Philippines, which is one of the world's leading labour exporting countries. The national statistics of the government of the Philippines are instructive: more than 750,000 Filipinos went abroad to work in 1998. Starting in the 1960's and into the 1970's the increasing demand for labour in the oil exporting Middle Eastern countries attracted hundreds and thousands of workers from the Philippines to work on infrastructure projects and in domestic services. Initially, in the 1970's, the government of the Philippines promoted labour migration as a 'temporary' measure to ease domestic unemployment and foreign exchange pressures; after more than a quarter of a century it is clear that the Philippines has developed a *non*-temporary labour exporting industry.

More recently, with the rise of the East Asian economies, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos, Thais and South Asians have found employment in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Taiwan provides an interesting example. As little as ten years ago there were virtually no migrant workers in Taiwan. In 1992 the government initiated the Employment Service Law to recruit workers from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Since then there has been a surge of overseas female Filipino workers (OFFWs) taking contractual employment in Taiwan as domestic workers and as line workers in electronics factories. In 1999 there were more than 65,000 OFFWs employed in Taiwan as domestic workers alone.

Currently, The Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) industry in general exhibits two prominent characteristics: an ever increasing number of women working abroad (Tyner 1994, 1996; Battistella, 1999), and the tendency of OFFWs to renew their contracts to lengthen their stay abroad (Battistella 1999).

Research Focus

Other studies have indicated that in the case of the Philippines, labour migration is strongly influenced by social networks (Tyner 1994; Tacoli, 1996). However, unlike OFFWs in Western Europe, those in Middle Eastern and East Asian countries depend on recruitment agencies that charge expensive brokering fees to the prospective OFFW. Thus Filipino women applying for work abroad pay a high price to secure manual employment that most local people shun. At the end of her contract, when the OFFW considers returning permanently to the Philippines, she will have to consider the possibilities of successful reintegration into her household and community.

Focusing on a population of current and former contract workers to Taiwan, primarily in domestic work, this paper is an exploration of the reasons that more and more Filipino women choose to seek employment abroad and of the social conditions that influence those choices. At the end of their contracts, in turn, what factors influence decisions to return home permanently or to seek new contracts abroad?

Data has been collected in fifty-three case interviews with present and former OFFWs. The interviews were conducted in the Western Philippines province of Iloilo and in Manila.

I consider here two broad groups: single childless women supporting primarily their families of orientation (15) and mothers primarily supporting their families of procreation (32), thus eliminating the few who were working primarily for themselves or for other reasons (6).

Framing the Question

Why do so many Filipino women seek work abroad? Given the objective lack of employment opportunities in the Philippines, the obvious answer is not wrong: they take work abroad to help their families overcome economic hardship. At the end of their contracts, they seek subsequent work abroad in order to allow their families to maintain newly elevated standards of living. This answer, however, requires elucidation. The migrant labour industry is extremely exploitative, the work is often difficult and demeaning (Phizacklea, 1983; Anderson: 2000), and the results of their efforts tend to be ambiguous at best: clear success is rare. These women are typically not destitute, indeed the initial costs, especially for a contract in Taiwan, tend to bar the destitute from participation. The need, in other words, does not seem great enough to drive these women away from their families into high risk and personally difficult ventures. We must therefore attempt to elucidate the social conditions for the decision to migrate.

While it is not unusual for women to work, it is not usual for women to spend extended periods away from their families

The economic explanation moreover does not explain the high level of participation of women relative to men. Again there is an easy explanation. The surge in women's participation follows a surge in job openings specifically for women, particularly in domestic and factory line work. This explanation, while not wrong, is inadequate, given gender roles in the Philippines. While it is part of a woman's traditional role to engage in productive as well as reproductive labour and to contribute to family income (Eviota, 1992; Shields et al, 1996), it is also her role to be the moral and spiritual centre of her own family of procreation, and that role requires her physical presence (Mulder, 1997). While her responsibilities include the economic management of the household and family affairs, it is primarily the men's role to earn income (Medina, 1991). My respondents repeated the social value that the husband should be the primary 'breadwinner' of the family, however virtually all the adult women were involved in income generating activities, often through cottage industries, both before and after migration. Medina presents the ideal role division of man as breadwinner, woman as homemaker as though it were actually the norm. Her own research, however, indicates that wives in fact contribute significantly to family income, often more than husbands, and that they have significant economic authority (Medina, 1991). While Medina presents this as a relatively recent change, other research shows that Filipino women, including wives and mothers, have always participated significantly in economic production (Eviota, 1992; Shields et al, 1996).[2] Still, the traditional expectation that the wife/mother will remain physically present to her husband and children remains strong. Writing as recently as 1992, Eviota could claim that migration was not an option for married women (Eviota, 1992). There are, moreover, continuing opportunities for men to work overseas, and roughly half of the Filipino overseas workers continue to be men. While it is not a departure from traditional roles for women to work, therefore, it is a departure for women to spend extended periods, sometimes years, away from their families. This departure in a large number of Filipino families is not explained by economic need alone.

The Project

What do OFFWs hope to accomplish through overseas work? What is the overall project and to what extent does temporary work abroad advance that project?

The women themselves speak more in terms of upward mobility than in terms of meeting immediate needs, and this is true even of the very poor who do manage to go abroad. '...so that our family can higher,' says Isabel 'but we are in the lower,' The women say that they work abroad to finance the educations of their children, siblings, nephews and nieces, to make improvements to their houses, and to invest in small businesses. Earnings are in fact used in these ways. An evident common concern is long-term security, for while few of these women are destitute, they are poor and their economic situation is precarious enough that the possibility of future destitution is a cause of anxiety. [3]

> You remember 1990's maybe have a drought in Philippines, everything is dry like that and we cannot produce anything. Then my children are growing they need to go to school. To go [abroad] I don't like also sister, but it's because we don't have anything anymore.[4]
>
> Catherine

Many do have immediate urgent needs, such as medical care for a close relative, but the overall project remains upward mobility and long-term security.

> My niece was confined in the hospital... so I need to go to find large amount of money in order to cover up the bill in the hospital.... I'm also planning to go back abroad; it is because I have no more. If I can stay here I can't save money...
>
> Sally

Almost all of the OFFWs said their work was directed towards meeting family rather than personal needs, families of orientation for unmarried women, and families of procreation (often families of orientation as well) for married women. We may say then that for most OFFWs, work abroad is a strategy within the project of achieving long term increased earnings and economic security for their *families*.

Evaluation

To what extent is the strategy successful? That question is not easy to answer. A necessary component of successful overseas work is that more income was generated than if the worker had stayed home. Considering broker's fees, costs,[5] and lost income from local employment, work in Taiwan became profitable only after about a year. Those whose employment was terminated after less than a year broke even at best. Some lost their previous savings; most were left with significant new debt, as they had borrowed money to pay advance fees and had borrowed for elevated household expenses against expected future earnings. A typical pattern is to pay about half the broker's fees in advance and the remainder through salary deductions, so that for the first several months, there are no remittances. Money may then have to be borrowed to cover the OFFWs lost local income. Of the 53 returnees in my sample 14 did not complete the first year.[6] In spite of first-time failures of this sort, many of these women seek new overseas contracts, seeing work abroad as the only hope of recouping their losses and of pursuing the family project of upward mobility. It is not uncommon to mortgage family farmland to raise the money for advance broker's fees, thus putting the family's basic means of subsistence at risk. Cases of repeated failure to realise sufficient earnings may quickly drive entire families to destitution. Temporary migrant work in Taiwan, then, is a high-risk investment undertaken by women and families who are unable to absorb the potential loss.

Most OFFWs do recoup at least the broker's fees and other costs and go on to earn considerably more than they could have earned at home. It is common, nevertheless, for OFFWs who have completed their contracts and returned to the Philippines, their income flow cut off and their savings depleted, to say that they had worked for 'nothing'. In fact, a great many of them paid for significant home improvements, some replacing primitive palm-leaf huts with concrete houses stocked with modern appliances. Many purchased land, cleared old family debts, and paid for life-saving medical care for a parent. Children were sent to private schools, college educations were begun, status-enhancing fiestas were held. At the very least, their families, both orientational and procreative, enjoyed an elevated standard of living for a temporary period. The work, then, was not literally for nothing. What was most lacking, from the family perspective, was security, the ability to sustain higher levels of consumption, tuition for children to continue education at private schools or to complete college courses. Having purchased a house of her own and sent her children to private school for two years, Nancy, her savings gone, says:

> [When] I'm there in Taiwan I think... that it could not happen once again, my life before, but now it happen again.... Sometimes we eat not three times a day. In the morning and we have a problem how to--where we can get our daily needs?

If work abroad is part of a project of gaining upward mobility and security, then we would expect the savings to be invested in income generating activities. This is indeed the intention of

most OFFWs, and the nearly universal use of overseas income to pay for the education of younger close relatives is understood as investment in their future earnings. Actual investments, however, rarely yield enough to replace the overseas earnings. Nancy had invested her savings in a piggery,[7] but then had to sell the pigs to pay the title fee for her new house. Her remaining savings were invested in a fish vending business for her husband and selling AVON for herself. These scarcely generate sufficient income for subsistence. The only way Nancy can see to maintain her family's economic and social position is to work abroad for a few more years. Maintaining that position, clearly takes precedence, for Nancy, over the emotional strain on her children, herself, and her husband. Nancy's case is typical, first, in that the elevation of her family's standard of living was temporary, and second in the felt necessity of going abroad again.

Almost all of the OFFWs said their work was directed towards meeting family rather than personal needs

As with Nancy, after the standard three years abroad, very often there were insufficient savings for investments. Remittances had been spent on basic needs such as home construction/improvement, the purchase of small rice plots, appliances, and education. What savings there were, soon ran out and the conditions which motivated the initial migration had not changed. Those conditions may even have gotten worse in the sense that they now had the expenses of the new lifestyle--for example, private school tuition and property taxes. Even where there was enough to start a business, a piggery for example, businesses take time to begin turning a profit (pigs have to grow and to breed--and, meanwhile, to be fed), and the family continues to have daily expenses. If it took a year's work abroad to begin making money, it took an additional one to two years to take care of basic needs and to clear old debts so that money could begin to accumulate for future capital investments. The decision to work abroad for a few more years may then seem economically sound. Repeated tours abroad however typically did not produce the desired result.

There are several possible reasons for this, including patterns of investment that yield insufficient returns, the failure of the state to invest in infrastructure, and continuing lack of opportunity in the Philippines. Indications are that even the educations that are so highly prized do not in fact increase the future earning power of the students, except where the training is targeted to the international labour market.[8] It seems particularly difficult to accumulate sufficient investment capital. One reason for this is that as the work became profitable, rather than accumulating the surplus, OFFWs, would often consent to meeting the financial needs of a wider circle of relatives. A mother, for example, paying for her children's tuition, may agree to pay also for that of nieces and nephews. Savings were often given out in loans to relatives who were unlikely to have the means to repay the loans. OFFWs typically showered their families with expensive gifts and appliances, fiestas were held and daughters were given expensive debut parties. On several occasions, while doing fieldwork, I was invited by returnees to feasts and debuts that would have consumed the lion's share of their savings from working abroad.

Results of Work Abroad

It was rare, in my sample, for work abroad to lead to sufficient new sources of income. The typical solution to the need for continued income is for the former OFFW, or another family member, to go abroad again, and it seems to me that the continuing dependence on keeping family members abroad should be counted as a kind of failure. The results for the OFFW herself are more clearly unsuccessful. Unmarried women working to benefit their families of orientation, often end with no personal savings or property, and with having lost the opportunity to start 'normal' families of their own. From the individual standpoint, these women really did work for nothing. Married women working to benefit their families of procreation share in those benefits, *after* returning home. For the married OFFW however, land purchased and homes built are hers, in a way that they typically are not for the unmarried OFFW.[9]

Upon returning home, the more 'successful' OFFW finds that her family (either of procreation or of orientation) is enjoying an elevated standard of living. She may enjoy sharing that life for a while, but maintaining that elevated standard requires a continued elevated income. This is not simply a matter of maintaining a level of creature comforts to which other family members have become accustomed. Home improvements have been begun and require funds for completion, children have entered courses of study that require continuing tuition payments. The returned OFFW will typically go abroad again in order to supply the necessary income.

In spite of the fact that overseas work seems to be counterproductive for the economic life of the OFFW considered as an individual, it is problematic to call it a failure because of that alone. The OFFWs themselves report that their project is not personal benefit, but the benefit of their families. Nevertheless, when we consider the level of risk, the ambiguous results for the family, and the personal impoverishment of some OFFWs, overseas work cannot be considered a fully successful strategy.

Factors in the ambiguous results of work abroad include the exploitative broker's fees, the use of potential investment capital for non-productive social purposes, and low yield investments. I add also the near absence of cost-benefit accounting. Few added up the expenses of migration and compared them to projected earnings, either in advance or as a follow-up evaluation. The same, for the most part, is apparently true in using savings to build up a family business. The same observation is made in Pertierra et al (1992).

We cannot neglect the emotional pain, or 'dislocation' (Parreñas, 2000), of women whose cultural identity is as the physically present spiritual and moral centre of the home. What compels them to choose estrangement from their children (or the opportunity to have them) in ventures that are so likely to fail?

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The Community Level

We have sketched out some of the ways in which at the family level, work abroad reproduces the conditions which necessitate work abroad. Other studies have shown that this reproduction occurs at the community level as well. Raul Pertierra, for example, has collected a series of studies on the effects of out-migration in Ilocos where there has been significant out-migration since 1906 (*Remittances and Returnees*, 1992). The patterns of investment of remittances have been nearly identical to that of my respondents in Iloilo. Investment is typically in traditional enterprises: land, piggeries, sari-sari stores (small variety stores), etc. There is an influx of cash, but the local economy is not diversified and there is little new production or increase in local employment opportunities. The resulting inflation increases the dependence on money, hence on employment outside the community. Following traditional investment strategies, those families that are able to, buy up more and more of the available land with which they can generate income through tenancy and cash crops. Overseas work, then does not increase available resources, but rather brings in the cash that enables a few families to monopolize existing resources. This increases economic stratification and forces more families to send members abroad and remit the cash that has become necessary for survival (Pertierra et al, 1992). These studies found no evidence of collective gain for the communities, nor that out-migration provided a basis for local development (Pertierra et al, 1992). Although it is too early for such processes to have fully developed in Iloilo, my observations suggest that it is likely. It must be emphasized here that part of the reason for the lack of innovative investments is an apparent failure of the state to invest in infrastructure or to research and encourage alternative investment activities.[10]

The Valorisation of Sacrifice

It remains to ask why, given traditional gender roles, so many women choose to seek work abroad when openings remain for men. A clue may

be found in President Aquino's pronouncement that Filipinos working abroad and sending money home were the 'new heroes' of the Philippines. According to Vicente L. Rafael, the Philippine construction of a hero is as a martyr, someone unjustly slain (Rafael, 1997). As a hero, then, the OFFW willingly exposes herself to the possibility of unjust suffering. While none of the OFFWs mentioned benefiting the nation as a motivation, their dialog was rich in the rhetoric of self-sacrifice for the sake of their families.

Filipino women voluntarily even eagerly, undertake what they themselves describe as sacrifice, where 'sacrifice' must be understood in its most Christian, most tragic sense. Self-sacrifice is a marker of personal worth and is a way to both moral and material fulfilment (Mulder, 1997). Self-sacrifice may even be felt to have an efficacy of its own: 'maybe God gave us those sacrifices cause he wants us to sacrifice more for our success.' (Carmen). Work itself, especially work abroad, is often glossed as sacrifice, 'before they [nurses] just sacrifice to go to Saudi Arabia,' (Evelyn). Lack of success may even be attributed to insufficient sacrifice: 'They become poor just like that they don't know how to sacrifice in order to be at the top,' (Carmen). Those who stay at home, in turn, also understand the women's migration in terms of sacrifice. 'The taste of ice cream was based on my mother's suffering.' (Christine). In the traditional culture, a mother's relinquishing her own comfort and convenience, and even neglecting of her own needs for the sake of others is valorised as sacrifice. Children understand their very existence as grounded in the mother's original sacrifice of giving birth and the mother is revered as the centre of a virtual cult. In that position she is at once totally intimate and the moral pillar of the universe to whom total loyalty is due (Mulder, 1997).[11] The family, we might say, finds its mystical unity in the sacrifice of the mother.

Overseas work does not increase available resources, but rather brings in the cash that enables a few families to monopolize existing resources

But in addition to the reproductive work of homemaking and childrearing, Filipino women have always been expected to engage in productive work as well (Eviota, 1992; Shields et al, 1996). That is to say, she is a primary economic agent as well as moral centre. Judging from the dialogue of my respondents, the cult of female self-sacrifice on the one hand and the importance of women's contributing to family wealth, combine to motivate and to justify overseas work for mothers.

The *Ate* Syndrome

Unmarried OFFWs report that they are working to support their parents and younger siblings. On the one hand there is a strong sense of repaying the sacrifices of the parents, through reciprocal sacrifices of their own. '...we [siblings] have to strive hard, to study hard because our mother works hard for us just to send us to school. So we have to do our best to give back what they have sacrificed for us.' (Christine) On the other hand there is a cultural institution that I call the *ate* syndrome (*'ate'* means elder sister). This is the practice, not unusual in human societies, of the eldest unmarried daughter taking on maternal responsibilities towards her younger siblings. Belen Medina says that they may become 'mother surrogates' (Medina, 1991: 128). The strength of the institution in the Philippines is brought out clearly by the OFFW phenomenon itself. Quite frequently, while the mother is working overseas, it is the eldest daughter that takes on the maternal role. Christine again: 'I should take a lot of responsibilities [as] an eldest daughter.' Remittances are often made directly to the eldest daughter, bypassing the father. In a maternal role, the *ate*, moreover, participates in the ideology of sacrifice towards her siblings. Among my respondents, an older daughter typically took work overseas in order to help her parents but continued working to help her younger siblings. Some spent many years working abroad to pay for their siblings', and subsequently their siblings' children's, educations, forgoing their own opportunities for starting families of their own. Alma, for example, began as a teenager doing domestic work in a local convent to help her impoverished parents. She later transferred to Taiwan. Now in her fifties, she has financed the

purchase of land, the construction of a mansion sized house, and college educations for her siblings. After more than thirty years, she is 'tired' and wants to come home. Both her parents and siblings, however, expect her to continue working to complete expansions to the house and to help pay for the educations of nieces and nephews. Though she is now beginning to have second thoughts about continuing her self-sacrifice, it is remarkable that she has continued to subordinate her own interests to those of her parents and siblings for so long. When I asked Alma's youngest sister, Marita, whose college education had been paid for by Alma's remittances, whether she would consider contributing to family income, she responded, 'That is [only] for *Ate* Alma.' The younger siblings, it seems, *expect* the older sister to take full responsibility as a matter of course, as a child expects food from its mother--and the *ate* accepts that responsibility. The *ate* syndrome, of course, is complex. Its subtleties and dynamics are, however, beyond the scope of the present paper.

Remittances are often made directly to the eldest daughter, bypassing the father

Applying the Capabilities Approach

Having laid out the general outlines of the OFFW phenomenon, I should like to construct an abstract model of the phenomenon using a subset of the Central Human Capabilities delineated by Martha Nussbaum in *Women and Human Development* (2000).

The Capabilities Approach was initially developed by Amartya Sen.[12] As an attempt to address the enduring problem of 'destitution in the midst of affluence', the Capability Approach is appropriate to the Philippines, a country classified by the World Bank as middle-income but in which there are high levels of inequality. 'Capability' refers to a person's substantive freedom to become the kind of person she chooses, and to do the kinds of thing she wants to do. Economic indicators, Sen argues, are inadequate measures of such freedoms. Thinking in specifically legal and political terms, Martha Nussbaum has formalised Sen's approach and has proposed a list of Central Human Capabilities that she insists are universally valid for human beings. A certain minimum level of each should, she argues, be guaranteed by states to their citizens (Nussbaum, 2000).[13]

Some basic features of Capabilities as conceived by Nussbaum are important to this paper. First, for any one of the Capabilities to fall below a minimum threshold is to be considered 'tragic' (Nussbaum, 2000: 71, 81). Second, although there are interactions among the capabilities, each has ultimate value on its own. This means that, below the minimum threshold, Capabilities may not traded off: the loss of a Capability is 'tragic' no matter how much another Capability may be increased in compensation. Third, there are two necessary components of every Capability: the personal ability to exercise the function in question, and the objective opportunity to do so (84, 85). Finally, following Kant's formulation, each person must be considered as an end (74). One implication of this is that the Capabilities of each member of a family are as important as the Capabilities of every other member or of the family as such: they may not be traded off among members. This is important, as it forbids 'hiding' the oppression of women, say, under the veil of a well-to-do (or, Capability rich) family. For Nussbaum, this means that states must guarantee the Capabilities of every *individual* citizen. Nussbaum goes so far as to declare that groups such as communities and families have value only for what they do for people taken individually (74). As a tool of social and cultural analysis this may be a weak point, especially in heavily communal/familial societies such as the Philippines.

For the purposes of this paper, we take a subset of Nussbaum's list of Central Human Capabilities, and those only in part. The Capabilities are (the numbering is from Nussbaum's list in *Women and Human Development*):

3) **Bodily Integrity** includes freedom of movement and security from assault (78).

4) **Senses, Imagination, and Thought** includes an adequate education, literacy, numeracy, and scientific training with the ability to use these to

'imagine, think, and reason'. Self-expression and creativity are included here (78).

6) **Practical Reason** involves the ability to set one's own goals and to plan means of achieving them (79).

10) **Control over One's Environment** includes the ability to participate fully in both political and economic life and to influence decisions that affect one's life (80).

Together these imply, among other things, the ability freely to plan and the opportunity to act in ways likely to succeed in achieving one's freely chosen goals. Such an ability would require personal rational and creative capacity, which for complex modern situations requires deliberate planning skills, literacy, basic accounting skills etc. This is supported by Capabilities 4 and 6. In rapidly changing situations where people must continually adapt and re-create themselves and their communities, these Capabilities would include a highly developed ability to imagine new approaches and solutions. The opportunity to act effectively, captured in Capabilities 4 and 6, would include access to the fields that influence one's life and the power to act upon them. It is evident that Practical Reason also requires an understanding of the situations and fields in which one acts. In complex modern situations, that includes adequate and accurate information as well as an understanding of the dynamics of the situations and fields. This is supported by the 'adequate education' clause of Capability 4, if we realize also that in a rapidly changing world, such an education cannot stop with formal schooling, but must be continually updated with new information.

Capability Evaluation

To what extent do OFFWs display the Capabilities? By their own reports they have a high level of Practical Reason (Capability 6). They set their own goals (upward mobility and economic security), formulate their own plans and act upon them (applying for and working overseas). The fact that, apparently on their own initiative, they go and come from work abroad, suggests a high level of Bodily Integrity (Capability 3) as well, in the sense of freedom of movement. On the other hand, the absence of cost-benefit accounting suggests a weakness in numeracy (Capability 4). The fact that most of these women have completed secondary or even tertiary educations, suggests that they do know basic arithmetic, yet they do not apply that knowledge. This, in turn, hints that numeracy is not taught in a way that lends itself to imaginative application to the world in which these women must live, again a failure of Capability 4. There is indeed evidence that the schools give a view of the world, local, national, and global, that is inaccurate and possibly deeply misleading (Pertierra et al, 1992).

The apparent lack of imagination in the uses of income, both in patterns of investment and in non-productive expenditures further suggests a weakness in Capability 4 and in an understanding of the dynamics of capitalism. The patterns of investment, however, must also be understood in terms of the failure of the state to create opportunities. This, together with the empirical fact that work abroad does not appreciably contribute to either local opportunity or to the level of community resources (Pertierra et al, 1992) suggests a weakness in Capability 10 (Control over One's Environment).

It is possible that the educational curriculum stunts the imagination as well as giving an inaccurate picture of the world. In particular, the heavy emphasis on values education (Mulder, 1997) presents a world in which all will be well if personal morality is attended to. As Mulder points out, structural and systemic factors are overlooked (Mulder, 1997). One of my interviewees, a secondary school teacher confirms this impression. With proper 'values education', she claims, both individuals and the nation will prosper. Those values are:

> ...industrious[ness]... good manners and right conduct, good values in life... [Adults fail] because they did not [as students] make use of their times their efforts, the sacrifices of their parents.

My point is not that there is anything wrong in these values in themselves, but, first, that in ignoring structural issues this approach gives an inaccurate picture of the world in which the students will live as adults. Good manners and hard work alone do not meet the challenges of rapidly changing situations, and the emphasis on respect for parents' sacrifices, suggests a conservatism that

may resist creative responses to objective change. Indeed the emphasis on personal morality as the solution to both personal and collective economic problems may encourage individuals to perform even more rigorously the roles they already had, without stopping to wonder if aspects of those roles have become dysfunctional.[14]

It is probable also that prospective OFFWs are denied adequate information about work abroad. While the Philippine government requires that all pertinent information be given, brokers may give that information in ways that are formally accurate but misleading in fact. For example, they may bury relevant information among overwhelming amounts of irrelevant (though accurate) information or they may emphasize the size of the salary while de-emphasizing the fees and other costs.

> ...filipinas who went in Taiwan suffered a lot, because they [the agency] did not follow. They promise a lot, but when we go to Taiwan it is different...
>
> Rosie

It is possible that the educational curriculum stunts the imagination as well as giving an inaccurate picture of the world

> ...some broker only wants to get money to [from] the employer... then they said only to us just sacrifice that is the way...
>
> Cory

Capability 10, control over the environment, seems to be particularly weak. Whether due to inadequate knowledge, imagination, or lack of objective opportunity, temporary work abroad, together with patterns of investment and spending patterns, appear simply to reproduce (at a higher level) the conditions which necessitated the migration. This impression is confirmed not only by the frequency of repeated migrations, but also by the Pertierra et al studies of Ilocos referred to above.

Certainly the common refrain, 'I have no choice', suggests a feeling of powerlessness over the conditions that drive these women away from their families.

Are Capabilities enhanced by temporary migration? Although I cannot answer this definitively on the available evidence, the preliminary answer, in most cases, would seem to be 'no'. This is indicated first in the perceived necessity to go abroad again and again, which is connected to the apparent reproduction of the initial social conditions driving migration. Even where the OFFW gained an increased business sense while abroad, that capacity is rarely put to use once back in the Philippines, suggesting that while the personal component of a Capability may have been enhanced, there is little objective opportunity to exercise it. Shifting focus for a moment to the beneficiaries of OFFW remittances, even the educations of siblings, nieces, and nephews, which figure so largely in the motivation to work abroad, apparently do little to enhance either the recipient's earning potential[15] or skill in negotiating the business world. Again, the same result was found in Ilocos (Pertierra et al, 1992).

The Surrender of Capabilities while Abroad

What is clear is that there is a significant loss of Capability for the OFFW while abroad, and here we consider additional items on Nussbaum's list of Capabilities. The working and living conditions of Filipino women migrant workers, especially as domestic helpers, are well documented. While conditions in Taiwan may be better than in some countries, freedom of movement, and hence Bodily Integrity (Capability 3), is more or less severely restricted, even for factory workers. There is virtually no Control over One's Environment (Capability 10), as the women are under constant threat of being sent back to the Philippines if they do not cooperate fully with the given conditions. For domestic workers, Affiliation (Capability 7) with other Filipinos is sometimes denied. For all OFFWs in Taiwan there are no 'protections against discrimination on the basis of race, sex... religion... or national origin.' (Nussbaum, 2000: 79) also part of Capability 7. The 'emotional labour' (Hoschchild, 1983) of pretending always to be happy denies Capability 5, Emotion.

The OFFW, in other words, surrenders Capabilities for the sake of her family. The question is: is such a surrender 'tragic' in Nussbaum's sense?

If the surrender of Capabilities is involuntary, clearly it is tragic, even if temporary. However the women report that their decision to work overseas is voluntary, and I found no case in which a woman was directly coerced into going overseas.[16] Nussbaum, however, considers some Capabilities as so important that individuals should be prevented from surrendering them. People, for example, should not be permitted to contract themselves into slavery (Nussbaum 2000: 94). The loss of Capabilities while in Taiwan is, in some cases, so great as to be called 'tragic', for example, in cases where the worker was forbidden to leave the place of work, and even locked in when the employer was absent. Of course we must recognise that the surrender of Capabilities is temporary. However, I would suggest that a sufficiently long period of Capability deprivation is functionally permanent. It is not uncommon for women, driven by the need to migrate again and again, to spend ten or fifteen years working temporary jobs in a variety of countries under conditions of severely restricted freedoms of movement, affiliation, etc. In these cases, Capabilities may literally be permanently lost, for example reproduction (Capability 3), and local earning power (employers strongly prefer younger women and it is virtually impossible for a woman beyond her mid-twenties to secure an entry-level position). Emotional and affiliative skills may be damaged as well. But also, ten or fifteen years of one's life is, in some sense, a lifetime. One does not come back to the same place--one is older, her friends, family, children, and husband are all different. Those years abroad were real and the young woman that she was does not recover those lost Capabilities: the young women that she was no longer exists. The loss of Capabilities for an extended period then, even if voluntary, should be considered 'tragic'.

Adaptive Preference Interpretation

But is it reasonable to suppose that so many women would so readily, even eagerly, submit themselves to tragedy?

Nussbaum deals with the anomaly of people's voluntarily surrendering Central Capabilities (or, more properly, of not wanting them in the first place) by invoking 'adaptive preferences' (Nussbaum, 2000: 112ff). Roughly, to say that someone has an 'adaptive preference' is to say that her perceptions of self and world have been so skewed by circumstances, especially her cultural upbringing, that she says and believes that she prefers things that she does not genuinely prefer, or that she would not prefer if she were aware of other possibilities. Said negatively, she prefers *not* to have things (like Capabilities) that she would prefer to *have* if they were available and she were aware of them. An adaptive preference, then, is a sort of socially induced neurosis, something no one in her 'right mind' would really want. It is important to emphasize that an adaptive preferences is not a preference for something that is against one's own best *interests*. Nussbaum wants to preserve the freedom for people to choose, within limits, *against* their own interests. She also wants to avoid the charge of paternalism: people should be free to form their own preferences and to live accordingly, whether or not social and political planners think that those preferences are good for her. The point is rather that preferences themselves can become distorted.

It is tempting to interpret OFFW behaviour in this way, and to say that the valorisation of female self-sacrifice, both in the mother and the *ate*, has blinded these women to their 'real' preferences, which would be more self-interested, and driven them to sacrifice Capabilities for their families.

Yet it seems extraordinary to say that no one in his or her right mind would (or should) sacrifice everything for his or her family. While the principle of 'each as an end' may be universally acceptable, to take it so far as to say that families as such have no intrinsic value flies in the face of (possibly universal) human sentiment. Certainly the Filipinos, both men and women, would find such a sentiment nearly incomprehensible, an inversion of common moral sense (cf. Mulder, 1997: 18ff) and I can see no reason for foisting Nussbaum's version of individualism upon them. While I do recognize that the concept of adaptive preferences has utility, and may even have some relevance here, I believe that OFFW behaviour requires a richer explanation.

I can only hint briefly at such an explanation here.

A Cultural Interpretation

It is, I think, well within the spirit of the Capabilities Approach to take local culture seriously and in a fundamental way. Indeed if the ideal is that people should have the substantive freedom to be the kinds of people and to do the kinds of things they want then local culture must be taken seriously: it is only in terms of our cultures that we formulate wants.[17] We therefore may reformulate our statement of the OFFW project: Work abroad is a strategy within the family's project of upward mobility and long-term security *in the context of the local community.* As in Nussbaum and Sen's perspective, we can say that the project is not ultimately economic; possibly going beyond their perspective, we can say that the project is social. The family wants not only income and creature comforts; it also, and primarily, wants a social position and the social power that goes with it. Such a position, in Filipino villages, requires that fiestas be given, that daughters be given 18th year debut parties, that gifts be lavished and that loans be made to relatives who are unlikely to repay them.

The family does not want income alone; it also, and primarily, wants a social position and the social power that goes with it

Local economies combine subsistence farming and patronage networks as well as small businesses. Money is used not only as a medium of economic exchange, but apparently carries emotional significance as well, so that, for example, gifts of cash do not 'buy' friends, but rather confirms relationships. Uses of money that seem irrational from a strictly capitalist perspective, may then be fully rational in the context of the local community. Conversely, uses of money that would be rational from the capitalist perspective, might be counter-productive to enhancing status in the local community. Non-productive patterns of investment and usages of cash, and the ambiguous success of the migration strategy may then be due to unrecognised incongruities among the local, national, and global economies that migrant work brings together--unrecognised, that is, not only by the OFFWs and their families, but also by state planners and international development agencies. To the extent that Capabilities depend on an understanding of the fields in which one must move, Capabilities enhancement will depend on an analysis of differing intersecting economies and the contradictions among them. Filipinos must be taught not only skills for negotiating standard capitalist economies at national and global levels, but also skills for negotiating and navigating local economies that are structured by conflicting traditional, national, and global patterns.

Rather than think of the ideology of female self-sacrifice, and dual productive and reproductive responsibilities, as adaptive preferences, we might think of them as cultural incongruities. In the traditional agrarian situation, this ideology was exploitive in that women worked harder than men and were denied the moral license (strikingly, but not exclusively, sexual) allowed men. They were, however compensated in some ways. Victoria Tumbaga, a Filipino feminist asks why Filipino women put up with their multiple responsibilities (del Rosario, 1999: 127). One answer is for the aura of having sacrificed themselves, thereby becoming the centre of the cult of the mother. Filipino women also have enjoyed real authority and power over family affairs that include not only 'homemaking' but also economic and business concerns (Medina, 1991; Shields et al, 1996).[18] As money based economies intrude into local levels, and the need for money grows faster than local sources of income, the functionality and trade-offs of the role may become skewed. What may have been tolerably exploitative becomes intolerably so in that women are pushed into repeated forays abroad, surrendering personal Capabilities in order to provide needed cash to their families. It makes more sense, in other words, to say that the role has become skewed by changing circumstances than to say that these women do not really prefer what they say that they prefer. For mothers, the role itself has become contradictory, requiring them both to stay at home and to go abroad. For the *ate* the role of caring for younger siblings has come, in some cases, to consume their entire young-adult lives and to deny them any hope of having families of their own. I have found indications that the intolerability

of the exploitation, coming from the incongruity of the role with the new circumstances, is motivating changes in the role itself. In particular, at least a few OFFWs are beginning to claim greater levels of personal autonomy than traditional roles allow. 'I regret that I did not save for myself,' says Sally 'Now it is too late. Give me another chance I will save for myself, for my own future.'

I do not see any of the above as fundamentally challenging the Capability Approach and indeed Nussbaum affirms that some of the Capabilities will have differing contents in different times and places (Nussbaum, 2000: 77). Rather I want to indicate the importance of taking culture seriously and fundamentally in any evaluation, and to urge caution in using the principle of adaptive preferences. I do, however, believe that it is necessary to find a way to include human groups, the family (as locally constituted) in the case of the Philippines, as entities with value, and with projects, in their own right. The OFFW is pursuing her own project, but that project is also a project of the family as such, and it is the family as such that gives her efforts meaning. Emphatically, we must not give up the principle of each as an end, but must find a way to think also of families (or the groups appropriate to a given society) as ends.

Making room for groups as meaningful entities and understanding apparently self-defeating behaviour in terms of cultural incongruities and structural contradictions rather than in terms of adaptive preferences, I maintain, will yield a more complete and useful picture for social, political, and development planners to work with.

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Notes

[1] This study was made possible through the financial support of the Cambridge Political Economy Society Trust, for which I am grateful.

[2] In the late Spanish period, according to Eviota, women's labour, in cottage-based weaving, was the primary source of income for parts of the Iloilo region (Eviota, 1992: 88).

[3] The economic life of many of these women includes both subsistence farming and cash markets with little if any backup reserves. Either crop failure or a downturn in the local money economy could result in destitution.

[4] I have quoted the respondents verbatim in order to retain the nuances of the language as spoken. I have inserted text in square brackets for clarification.

[5] Broker's fees and expenses (passport, medical, etc.) typically equal the total wages of 7-10 months' work in Taiwan.

[6] 8 of 32 in Iloilo and 6 of 21 in Manila. Common reasons given for voluntary early termination were: extreme homesickness, mistreatment or abuse, and family emergency. Reasons given for involuntary early termination included the termination of the position (e.g. where the position was eldercare, the patient died or relocated) and the diagnosis of tuberculosis in the OFFW.

[7] A piggery is a small pig raising business.

[8] My own observations here match the findings documented in Pertierra et al, *Remittances and Returnees*.

[9] There were a few cases in which the single OFFW held the title to land purchased with her remittances. These women, however, were more willing to relinquish the use of the land to their parents or married siblings than were married women.

[10] One government local development program that I encountered actually encouraged the creation of more piggeries. Needless to say, more piggeries do not diversify the local economy, nor is there a shortage of pigs on the local market.

[11] To be fair, the father participates in the procreative sacrifice, and is thus due respect and obedience. But his 'sacrifice' is not so intense, continuing, and personal. He is not a moral and emotional centre and is often physically absent. Neither is he expected to be morally exemplary, but is more of an abstract authority figure (Mulder, 1997: 31).

[12] See *Inequality Re-examined*, 1992, and *Development as Freedom*, 1999.

[13] The precise minimum level would vary by country, depending, at least in part, on the availability of resources (Nussbaum, 2000: 77, 80, 86).

[14] C.f. Pertierra et al, where it is suggested that values of individual achievement as taught in the schools, 'mainly ensures the reproduction of elite privileges.' (Pertierra et al, 1992: 147).

[15] Again, with the exception of training targeted to the international labour market.

[16] In one case, a teenage girl was sent to work in a convent in the Philippines in exchange for schooling and pay. We may consider that coercive because of her age. When she transferred to the convent in Taiwan, however, she was already an adult, and there is no indication of direct coercion at that time.

[17] A danger of the concept of adaptive preferences is that it may be used to deny substantive freedom by denying that people 'really' want what they think they want.

[18] While empirical studies of gendered power relations in the Philippines have yielded conflicting results as to how much power women have, it is clear that while the husband is the titular head of household, Filipino wives have, and historically have had, significant power, derived in part from egalitarian inheritance customs--women own land--and bi-lineal descent (see Medina, 1991: 143ff).