

## Chapter 26

# Gender, Difference, and Contestation: Economic Geography through the Lens of Transnational Migration

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### Introduction

The “global woman” is a central figure in contemporary debates about economic globalization. Indeed, transnational migrant women workers have played increasingly prominent roles in a wide range of conversations about the politics and possibilities of economic development. This chapter examines the literature on overseas labor migration of Indonesian and Filipina women workers in particular as a lens onto broader discussions about the gender politics of migration and development, and as an entry point into a review of some central feminist contributions to economic geography.

Feminist scholars understand the migrant woman worker as a defining subject of the shifting gender divisions of international labor (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). A large body of research examines migrant women workers as recruited into migration systems organized by the ongoing devaluation and feminization of global social reproduction and care work (Momsen 1999; Parreñas 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; England 2007; Mattingly 2001). These studies explore women migrants, and racialized low-income women in particular, as embodying and living the gendered contradictions of transnational labor (Arat-Koc 2006).

Research on domestic workers identifies the patterns of extensive overwork, unpaid wages, sexual violence, family rupture, torture, and isolation that migrant workers face and argues that these conditions are far from anomalous. In this view, the conditions of “neoslavery” (Ong 2006) common to many migrant women workers, as well as the more widespread issues of precarious, informal, and flexible feminized labor, are part and parcel of the production and reproduction of economic neoliberalization processes (Wright 2006). Migrant women from the global South work as “servants of globalization” (Parreñas 2001), and the

*The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Economic Geography*, First Edition. Edited by Trevor J. Barnes, Jamie Peck, Eric Sheppard.

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devaluation and marginalization of “third world migrant women” are understood to reflect and reinforce deeply sedimented maps of global injustice.

In contrast to critical feminist analyses, liberal development scholarship celebrates migrant women for the role they play in promoting economic growth in their home countries. In Indonesia, for instance, the remittances that migrant women send home from abroad often constitute the majority of their families’ income (WDR 2008); entire communities depend almost entirely on remittance income for survival (UNFPA 2006); and migrant remittances rank second only to oil as a source of foreign exchange (World Bank 2008: 75). Indeed, from the perspective of the planners of the Indonesian national economy, migrant women’s labor provides a partial, strategic *solution* to many of the country’s economic ills. It addresses chronic rural poverty, persistently high rates of unemployment, and provides a stopgap to fill the long-standing foreign exchange deficit. This developmentalist storyline frames migrant women as heroic and necessary agents fueling the economic progress of their families, their communities, and their nations.

A third view, and the one that drives this chapter, focuses not on what women migrants or the feminization of migration can do *for* capitalist development, nor primarily on what capitalism has done *to* women and gender relations, but centers instead on how gender and other forms of social difference *are relationally produced* with economic change. Feminist economic geography was founded on this basic insight: gender, difference, and economies are mutually constituted (Hanson and Pratt 1995). Through attention to the socially and economically productive effects of gender and other forms of difference (including especially “race,” ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality), feminist research has expanded the spaces, subjects, and processes considered to be central to shaping “the economic” (Nagar *et al.* 2002). In particular, early feminist work emphasized the importance of gender divisions of labor, familial roles and responsibilities, and the feminization of childcare and domestic labor to understand the inequalities that shape labor markets, household economies, and everyday lives. It demonstrated the co-constitution of women’s and men’s daily transportation patterns with gendered household responsibilities and helped explain how residential location and gender differences in job search strategies contribute to the production of occupational sex segregation (Hanson and Pratt 1995; 1988).

Feminist geographers argue that the gender geographies of productive and reproductive work are important to analyze not only because they help understand differences between women’s and men’s roles in households, labor markets, and production systems (for a review, see Rose 1993). More importantly, putting gender at the center of analysis matters because it transforms the meanings of core concepts and thereby shifts explanatory frameworks. For instance, research on gender divisions of domestic labor indicates not only that women carry out the majority of housework but indeed that the standard economic notion of the “household” as a cooperative, income-pooling unit is a myth that obscures the hierarchies and inequalities embedded in the social relations of families, domestic spaces, and the global economy (Oberhauser 2000). Feminist studies of labor make a similar theoretical move: they point out that the globalization of production has coincided with the feminization of light manufacturing labor and that attention to gender relations is necessary for understanding how the social geography of the “global assembly line” is organized (Cravey 2005).

Taking the above contributions as background, the present chapter explores migrant women’s domestic labor in relation to three overarching themes in feminist economic geography. First, it examines the centrality and necessity of social reproduction and care work

for economies, and underscores the violence, inequality, and devaluation that structure the global care economy. Second, this chapter underscores the significance of migrants' bodies and households as key sites for understanding how labor markets and national economies are produced and reproduced through gendered and racialized social practices. Third, and perhaps most importantly for economic geographies of the future, migrants' stories of political organizing signal some possibilities for producing alternative economies. While not wishing to overstate the power of workers' agency in shaping their economic horizons, recent research in feminist international political economy emphasizes the capacity of activists to resignify the value of particular kinds of labor. The chapter addresses these three themes with the broader goal of elucidating the difference that a feminist approach makes to the study of the economies of transnational migration.

### Global Care Chains: Indonesian Migrant Women Workers

In 1977, Saleh Alwaini, a businessman in Jakarta, Indonesia requested permission from the government's Manpower Department to send 20 women to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers (Hugo 2005). His request, though denied that year, marked the beginning of the Indonesian government's interest in promoting women's overseas labor migration as a development strategy. The plan to send women workers abroad was part of the broader national policy shift towards export-led development and coincided with the growth of export processing zones and the general liberalization of the national economy in Indonesia as elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Hill 2000).

International capital investment flowed into Indonesia in the 1980s at unprecedented rates, and the numbers of export processing zones specializing in light manufacturing rose rapidly. As the state opened up to global capital, it drew increasingly on women workers to service the expanding low-wage labor market, and it also began aggressively promoting the "export" of workers, and especially women workers, to overseas labor markets. The majority of these overseas women migrants were employed as domestic workers, hired to clean the homes and care for the children of higher income households in Malaysia, East Asia, and the Middle East. Surplus value is produced by these women's transnational labor, based on the disparity between the low costs of socially reproducing labor in Indonesia and the prevailing wages for their labor abroad. Underlying this transfer of value is rural dispossession and deepening indebtedness within low-income Indonesia, which is directly connected to the increasing concentration of wealth among those who are "making money off of migrants" (Jones 2000) whether within Indonesia or abroad.

Labor importing countries generally disallow temporary foreign workers from bringing members of their families with them, and in most cases they deny citizenship rights of all kinds to migrant workers. The selective and short-term admission of individual workers continues a long legacy of "coercive systems of labour that do not recognize family rights" (Arat-Koc 2006: 76). By separating the workers from their families, and allowing the in-migration of only healthy, working-age migrants, labor importing countries lower the cost of socially reproducing their own populations. Temporary labor importers benefit from the low cost of the foreign workers' wages to support the social reproduction requirements of their own society, and they simultaneously effectively "offshore" the social reproduction costs of the migrant workers and their family members. The costs of health care, education, child care, and elder care of migrants and migrants' families are borne by their origin communities (Arat-Koc 2006: 88). The transfer of the costs of migrant workers' social reproduction back

to their origin countries serves as a direct subsidy by low-income economies, households, and communities to higher income ones.

In addition to the international income inequalities that are exacerbated by temporary worker programs, the migration of domestic workers and nurses contributes to deepening disparities in the global “care economy” (England 2010). Migrant domestic workers provide *in-situ* support for the bodies, homes, families, and economies of their employers, and meanwhile their absence from their home countries produces care deficits tied to well-documented strains on migrants’ family relationships (Parreñas 2005). The transfers of emotional support and care labor from low- to high-income economies weigh heavily on poor women, both those who participate directly in transnational migration and those whose labor at home supports and enables the migration of others. The international division of reproductive labor positions migrant women workers as middle-tier workers in a three-tiered system: they work as employees of higher-income families and nations, and they often hire women at significantly lower wages than they themselves earn to care for their own children or elderly parents in their countries of origin (*ibid.*). In the global economy, the pay scale of cleaning and caring labor reflects both international and local disparities that cut along the lines of class, gender, nation, “race”, and ethnicity.

Global care chains are defined as the social relations of care provision that stretch across national boundaries. Indonesian migrant women who leave their own families in order to serve others abroad do so in the context of limited employment and income options at home. Among other motivations, local contexts of scarcity drive their interest in migration, as does their sense of responsibility for earning income for their families. When women with children choose to migrate, it is usually a female relative, a sister, or a grandmother, who provides care for their children. The “gendered woes” that Parreñas (2005) has found among the children of women from the Philippines who work abroad are similar to the stories of migrant families in Indonesia. The arrangements of “transnational motherhood” and family separation that accompany overseas contract work have high emotional costs, including high levels of divorce, depression, and suicide among migrant workers and their families. While a growing number of efforts are accumulating to try to quantify these “care costs” to migrants and their families and societies (Razavi 2007), there is a qualitative dimension to the suffering that is incalculable and takes on a global life of its own (Pratt 2009).

Among Indonesian overseas domestic workers, there are numerous measurable material aspects of their exploitation. Many scholars have documented patterns of extreme overwork, including not uncommon reports of 18-hour work days and 7-day work weeks, though degrees and types of overwork differ across receiving country contexts (e.g. see Wee and Sim 2005 and Constable 2007 on Hong Kong; Silvey 2004 on Saudi Arabia; Yeoh and Huang 1999 on Singapore; Lan 2006 on Taiwan; Pratt 2004 on Canada).

Most migrants take on substantial debt loads in order to pay for their training and transportation, and once abroad they work under conditions of indentured servitude. Migrant rights organizations within Indonesia and international human rights groups have documented numerous cases of torture, rape, and forced labor. The bodily and gendered violence that comes along with the devaluation of migrant women’s labor is thoroughly intertwined with – and mutually constitutive of – the generation of capitalist value (Federici 2009). As the following section discusses, migrant workers’ flexible, precarious niche in the global labor market is shaped “by layer upon layer of discourse that works through various socio-spatial distinctions” (Pratt 2004: 60) including importantly through the scales of the household and the body.

### Bodies and Households: Feminist Interventions

As Oberhauser (2000: 60, italics added) noted in her overview of feminism and economic geography over a decade ago, “feminism has increased our understanding of economic processes through its analyses of how gender and work are socially constructed at *multiple scales* and in diverse geographical contexts.” To understand Indonesian transnational migration, it has been necessary to explore such multiple scales and to critically examine the household and the body in particular as central scales of analysis. In most conventional migration scholarship, bodies and households are not starting points, and when they are considered, they tend to be viewed as ontologically pregiven, theoretical black boxes (i.e. the body reduced to an individual rational economic actor and the household as a resource-pooling unit). In contrast, feminist research finds that critical attention to households and bodies – their inner-workings, myths about them, and the political uses of particular representation of them – is necessary for an adequate understanding of the economies that shape mobility.

In most countries where Indonesian women work, domestic work remains legally unregulated. The “private” spaces of employers’ homes tend to be considered beyond the scope of labor laws. For transnational migrants, the lack of legal protection is compounded when their visa status is in question or their passport has been confiscated by their employers. The household as a site of limited state protection and heightened exploitation, as it is for migrant domestic workers, stands in sharp contrast to economists’ conceptions of households as income-pooling units (for a feminist critique of the economic view of the household, see Lawson 1998). Transnational labor migration also challenges the view of the household that relies on an imagined co-resident nuclear family (Aitken 2000: 78). In addition, a growing body of literature challenges the heteronormative blinders in migration research. Through “queering” migration, the rational economic household can be exposed as an abstraction tied to ideologies and discourses of heterosexual familialism that structure and police the mobility of sexual subjects (Luibheid and Cantú 2005).

Indeed, “unpacking the household” has allowed scholars to see the hierarchies of gender, “race,” age, and sexuality in operation at close range and to understand how the inequalities of labor and resource control within households reverberate across broader scales of economic organization, such as the neighborhood, city, nation, and transnational fields (Nagar *et al.* 2002). Such a critical view of the household emphasizes the inequalities that run through family and social networks, as these are stretched across space and intertwined with the politics of local and global labor markets. Attention to the politics of the power dynamics within households helps explain who works for whom, under what conditions, and at what wage in the global economy. Indeed, “[i]n the aggregate, the global household produces and distributes a large quantum of social wealth in the form of unpaid labor, household-based business income, monetary and in-kind remittance, and gifts,” and it does so highly unequally (Safri and Graham 2010). A critical focus on households can help understand how the social and spatial landscapes of inequality are produced.

In addition to the scale of the household, feminists have also paid a great deal of attention to the scale of the body and processes of embodiment (e.g. McDowell 1999; Wright 2006). They have identified the limitations of the presumed “gender-neutral” subject of much social science research and shown how the power of gender norms operates through both institutional controls and self-surveillance of bodies (Pratt 2004). Everyday practices of immigration and labor control reproduce gender difference through the regulation of sexual behavior and

morality, reproductive rights, and the politics of stigma and shame. The governments of Indonesia and Saudi Arabia participate in producing a feminized domestic labor force through specific programs to recruit and train women to subscribe to “technologies of servitude” as overseas workers (Rudnyckyj 2004). Government officials in Indonesia also expect specific performances of gender identity in the airport terminal where returning migrant workers are processed separately from other travelers coming into Indonesia (Silvey 2007). The physical segregation and disciplining of low-income Indonesian migrants before, during, and on the way home from their overseas contracts marks them as socially subordinate subjects across transnational space, and reinforces national, class, and ethnic categories of social differentiation.

Feminists have approached the body as “a surface to be mapped, a surface of inscription, as a boundary between the individual subject and that which is Other to it, as the container of individual identity, but also as a permeable boundary which leaks and bleeds and is penetrable” (McDowell and Sharp 1997: 3). Such work insists that bodies are socially and politically produced and performed, and that the specific meanings encoded on bodies are consequential for the organization of economies. As Wright (2006: 13) puts it, “the material embodiment of the social subject is. . . always materializing. . . never complete.” She (ibid: 14) identifies the myth of the “disposable third world woman’s body as a spatial entity that is always being produced along with commodities that flow through the circuits of capital.” The myth of disposability – the production of third world women’s bodies as low-value or worthless, easily replaceable commodities – is also in effect in shaping the abusive and exploitative treatment of Indonesian migrant domestics workers by labor recruiters, overseas employers, and government officials.

Yet the pervasiveness of the devaluation of third world women’s bodies does not lead scholars to interpret the female body as a simple site of oppression. Rather, feminist work views bodies as terrains of struggle and cultural contestation, and attends therefore not only to the violence done to women’s bodies but also to the strategic invocation of bodily images and stories in support of migrant rights movements.

Some feminist theorizations of the body also foreground Foucauldian conceptions of biopolitics (Moss and Al-Hindi 2008). In contrast to essentialist and universalist approaches to the body, analyses of biopolitics examine the often invisible and taken-for-granted, everyday practices that regulate and govern the gendering of bodies. From this perspective, the reason that the majority of Indonesian domestic workers are women is not only that the state promotes the feminization of this niche of the global labor market. Just as importantly, women are slotted into low-wage domestic labor through public and popular discourses and everyday social practices that normalize the idea of women belonging in domestic service. As Harcourt (2009: 20) puts it, “Population statistics, medical records, thumbprints on our passports, identity cards that state our height and eye colour, magazines that advertise ideal bodies, are all part of biopolitical strategies that categorize . . . bodies.” Examining such strategies has been central to understanding how the gendered economy of migration is produced not only through government policies and the use of overt force but through ongoing social reinforcements of norms about which bodies belong in which work spaces.

Research on embodiment also aims to provide a corrective to the “disembodied” research approaches that are commonplace in the discipline and to acknowledge the corporeal and relational nature of intellectual labor and research practice. As Barnes and Sheppard (2010: 195) have recently pointed out, “Anglophone economic geography historically has been dominated by a narrow range of participants (males of northern European heritage). . . [and]

increasing the social and geographical diversity of affiliation remains critical.” From a feminist perspective, such diversity matters because differently located bodies bring distinct knowledge to bear on the production of theory. They contribute more accurate knowledge of particular lived economies and their relevance for economic processes. In the case of Indonesian migration politics, this has meant attending to dynamics that extend beyond wage rate differentials and macro-structural economic policies. Producing situated, feminist knowledge about Indonesian migration has involved attention to the ways in which migrants themselves interpret, define, and live their economic contexts, asking what migration’s pushes and pulls mean to them, how “costs and benefits” take on significance for them, exploring the factors and issues that matter to them and that may have been occluded by Western theory, and tracing the rationalities that have influenced their mobility decisions. In a very basic sense, the central concern of this work is to put people as embodied subjects back into narratives of economic change and migration.

Researchers are of course also embodied subjects. In research on the migration of Southeast Asian domestic workers, researcher embodiment matters in at least several ways. First, the distinct majority of scholarship that is published on domestic workers is written by women. Their gendered experience of living many of the issues they study pushes them to attend to the everyday struggles undertaken to provide cleaning and caring labor. Their understanding of the significance of embodied labors is clear not only intellectually but viscerally. Second, a focus on researcher embodiment matters because it opens up the question of how privilege and power are bestowed on the bodies of employers and knowledge producers and withdrawn from those bodies that carry out the devalued labor. It requires a critically reflexive engagement with one’s own privileges as these are linked not only to “issues of power and social marginalization in the production of knowledge” (Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 199) but also are intertwined with gendered and racialized economic inequality.

However, identifying the unequal positions of bodies in the global economy is not a research end in itself. It is also a call for action, an invitation to engage in what Swarr and Nagar (2010) have termed “critical transnational feminist praxis.” They focus attention not only on difference, but also on the importance of developing collaborative methodologies that connect researchers to the people they study. In this sense, their priorities parallel Katz’s (2001: 1214) call for the development of a “topography of feminist political engagement.” By this she means the development of “a politics that works the grounds of and between multiply situated social actors in a range of geographical locations who are at once bound and rent by the diverse forces of globalization.” Such a topography asks scholars to develop analytical and political connections between, for example, Indonesian migrant labor issues and the struggles of undocumented, temporary migrant workers in the United States. Making such connections has the potential to open up new ways of seeing possible political and economic futures (for a review of recent work in this vein, see Silvey and Rankin 2011). This work stresses the power of economic subjects to resignify the systems of valuation they inhabit and in so doing – however minimally, locally, or temporarily – to rescript their place in relation to capitalist development (Gibson-Graham 2006). In the following section, I outline in broad brush strokes what such work has to offer to economic geography.

### **Migrants Organizing: Local Protests and Transnational Imaginaries**

In November of 2010, two new cases of overseas migrant domestic worker abuse made the news in Indonesia. Migrant rights advocates (Al-Jannah 2011) told the story this way:

Barbaric is the proper term for the persecutors of Sumiati and the murderers of Kikim Komalasari, two female migrant workers (TKW) from Indonesia who were tortured by their respective employers in Saudi Arabia. However, the recurrence of such cases of persecution and murder only showed a small portion of the extractive violence of capitalism. That was the message delivered by around 250 Muslim women from Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), on Wednesday (24/11) morning in Jakarta. . . . [T]hey did not deliver a speech, but just carried banners and posters. One of the posters that read “Sumiati and Kikim = Small Victims of Notorious Capitalism” was stretched and shown to riders and passersby who passed through the crowded street.

Other posters and banners that the activists raised read: “The Heroes of Foreign Exchange = The Prey of Capitalism,” “Capitalism Impoverishes,” “Female Migrant Workers Are Not Slaves,” “Poverty Is Rampant, Female Migrant Workers Soar,” and “Millions of Female Migrant Workers: The Evidence of the Failure of Government to Make People Prosper.” The migrant rights organizers made their claims in public spaces in urban Jakarta, and they have begun building coalitions with global human rights organizations. They have put pressure on the governments where migrants are employed, and they have collaborated with local social movements to push for women workers’ rights, to insist that their labor be more highly valued and legally protected.

Feminist geography invites scholars to attend to such moments and sites of contestation because it is here that we can see people collectively refusing women’s devaluation and exploitation (Wright 2006). The activists see through the discourses that seek to devalue and criminalize them and they understand and oppose the injustice reflected in constructing temporary foreign workers as “surplus populations.” They understand that the migration industry is profiting from migrant women’s underpaid labor. Migrant activists in Indonesia and elsewhere are insisting that migrants make claims for their value not just as workers but as social and political subjects (Varsanyi 2010). Migrant workers and migrant rights advocates are employing a set of diverse tactics and politics which, as they begin to articulate the heterogeneity and common ground of disparate struggles, are contributing to imagining new, less rigid forms of social and economic organization for the future.

As Leitner, Peck, and Sheppard (2007: 22) have argued, “there are clearly non-neoliberal social and spatial imaginaries, alternative forms of subject formation, and newly emerging practices of contestation – including alternative economic and social practices and innovative alliances across multiple axes of social difference.” For economic geography, their argument invites scholars to pay closer attention to the human interpretations and political contestations that contribute to the making of political-economies. For example, rather than understanding migrant workers’ activism as simple resistance to neoliberal pressures, they advocate a conceptual framework that foregrounds the “complex articulations of sociospatial struggles through which negotiations and reworkings of neoliberalism and its others take shape across space and time” (ibid.). Over time, Indonesian migrants rights advocates, like the immigrant day laborers in the United States who have organized to improve workers’ pay and conditions (Theodore 2007), may be able to bring some of the worst abuses of migrant workers under control. In so doing, they will play – and indeed are already playing – a part in producing the conditions under which economic history is made. Indonesian migrant domestic workers would never claim to make the economies they inhabit, nor would feminist scholars want to overemphasize their power in doing so. Nonetheless, as feminist research continues to work towards theorizing the range of geohistorically specific ways in which difference matters for the global political economy, one crucial



area of analysis is the political work that is aimed at challenging the status quo. Attention to movements such as migrants' rights organizations that advocate for legal and economic transformations highlights "the need not only for a differently theorized economy, but for new ethical *practices of thinking* economy and becoming different kinds of economic beings" (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxviii, italics in original).

For economic geography, this requires not only that the standard bearers of the field "keep on talking; . . . [and] engage in continual and open deliberation" (Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 195) with feminist scholars. It also insists that economic geography acknowledge the distinguished lineage of feminist scholarship that has already developed an extensive and deep engagement with economic geography (Oberhauser 2000; McDowell and Sharp 1997; Lawson and England 2005; Cravey 2005) and international political economy (e.g. Bair 2010; Gibson-Graham 2006; Waylen 2006; Safri and Graham 2010; Steans and Tepe 2010). This chapter has argued that such an engagement – through the lenses of care economies, households, bodies, and protests – provides more than analytical inclusion of subjects and spaces previously largely excluded from economic geography. More importantly, feminist engagement also "strengthens the vision of globalization from below; alters the participants, practices, and potentials of economic development; and reconfigures the imaginary of economic transformation" (Safri and Graham 2010: 100). This is no doubt a tall order, but it is one that a future economic geography can and must take on board.

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