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# Mothering from Afar: Conceptualizing Transnational Motherhood

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the social, economic, and familial implications of transnational motherhood as experienced by women who leave their families behind in order to work internationally. In addressing the personal, sociocultural, and economic contexts which both motivate mothers to migrate for work, and emerge from their decision to do so, this article argues that motherhood is a relational concept, contingent upon social, cultural, and personal perceptions. In particular, it focuses on the experiences of transnational mothers in how they reveal the social, cultural, political, and economic structurings of the concept of motherhood. In doing so, this paper illustrates how motherhood is also a flexible concept, transforming based upon the particular situations within which mothers find themselves.

## **Keywords**

transnational motherhood, migration, international families, migratory work, borders

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## **Mothering from Afar: Conceptualizing Transnational Motherhood**

**Heather L. Millman**

### *Introduction: Transnational Motherhood*

Motherhood and caring for children are physically, psychologically, and socially challenging processes for women regardless of one's political and religious identity, or legal and immigration status. However, when mothers migrate to work transnationally, a more complex set of personal, sociocultural, and economic dimensions are interwoven into the experience of motherhood, particularly when one or all of a woman's children are left behind in her home country (Alzoubi 2011). The family lives of women are continuously reformed by contemporary social and economic trends that, within the context of migratory work, become globally contingent (Maher 2010).

Contemporary neoliberal economics and economic development have increasingly widened divisions between the global north and south, concentrating capital and employment opportunities in the north while radically altering the ways in which economically marginalized families in the south function in order to meet their basic needs. For many of these families, migrant work has become necessary in order to avoid sinking further into poverty. There are numerous challenges for both the migrant worker and their families left behind (Schmalzbauer 2004).

Within the context of global migratory flows, south-to-north migration has not ceased, even if it has

become more difficult and restrictive. However, these movements are now composed of more women in search of better economic opportunities. The women participating in the feminization of migrant labour choose to migrate due to socioeconomic and familial pressures or because of political or economic crises. Women's migrant labour is not amalgamated with men's because migratory experiences are inescapably gendered. Some women migrate in order to escape domestic violence, sexual abuse, sexism, or other systematic acts of violence or marginalization that they may experience at home (Cienfuegos Illanes 2010). Additionally, women who migrate north (often the United States or Canada) are often mothers, leaving their own children behind in the care of others. For transnational mothers, sociocultural and personal understandings of motherhood are transformed by the way preservation, nurturance, and training of children are conceptualized during these spatial and temporal separations (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997).

It is the experiences of the transnational mothers that I am concerned with in this paper; particularly the emotional, sociocultural, and familial contexts of having to migrate for work out of economic necessity. By "migrate" I am referring to women who relocate to new nations in the global north (primarily the United States and Canada) for the purpose of work (whether legally or illegally). These women may intend to return home at some future point, or may hope to eventually bring their children and husbands to join them in their country of work. In either case, I refer to transnational mothers as women who migrate and leave one or more children at home. In examining the

contexts of this migration and both the challenges and benefits posed for transnational mothers, I will emphasize how motherhood is a relational concept that is contingent upon social, cultural, and personal perceptions. Furthermore, I will argue that conceptualizations of motherhood are also flexible, and thus expand and/or transform based on particular situations (including economic and geographic situations) in which mothers may find themselves.

Focusing on the experiences of transnational mothers reveals the social, cultural, political and economic structures of the concept of motherhood. In exploring these structures, questions arise regarding the ways in which motherhood can be conceptualized when it can no longer be understood as a static and non-negotiated process. How does mothering from afar interact with sociocultural norms of the mother role? How do transnational mothers navigate their personal experiences within broader conceptualizations of “good” motherhood? In seeking to address these questions I will apply both gendered feminist and transnational theoretical perspectives in order to illustrate that migrant work has unique implications for mothers, and recognizing these implications is essential to an understanding of how gender and household economics operate within contemporary migrant work.

#### *Theorizing Transnational Motherhood*

Schmalzbauer (2004) invokes transnational migration theory in order to address the realities of families who are economically, politically, and socially rooted in more than one state. Emerging from the limitations of conventional migration frameworks to address the realities of transnational

families, transnational migration theory argues that temporary migrant workers simultaneously incorporate themselves into their host society while negotiating multiple identities tied to their current realities, and their ties to home. Furthermore, transnational migration theory argues that considering individuals and households alone is no longer adequate. Rather, one’s daily life and individual situation as it is linked to people and institutions across the borders of nation states is key to understanding the immaterial flows across boundaries that form transnational identities (Suurmond 2010). For transnational mothers, daily life involves the constant negotiation of geographies, economics, and social and familial roles. Yet since the late twentieth century transnationalism has also become an increasingly contradictory process. As borders remain permeable for certain individuals willing to perform certain types of transnational work, the difficulties in bringing children or other family members illustrate their increasing impenetrability (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Within these contradictions transnational migration theory provides an important foundation for addressing the contradictory experiences and perceptions of motherhood within a transnational context.

The transnational perspective, however, has been critiqued by scholars such as Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997), who argue that it fails to adequately incorporate gender into its consideration of transnational migrants. In addition, they write that when gender is addressed in migration theory, it is predominantly incorporated as a variable, rather than a *construct* that works to organize social life.

Consequently, in addition to transnational migration theory, a theoretical approach to transnational motherhood must also incorporate a feminist approach to understanding the gendered contexts of migration, labour, and parenting. Feminist critiques of globalization, transnational capital, and the economic processes driving transnational labour illustrate that gender ideologies and inequality continue to benefit capital enterprises through the maintenance of low wages, mistreatment at work, and the general undervaluing of women workers. While the economic gains made by migrant working women may provide new kinds of roles and empowerment, there are many paradoxes embedded within migrant work for transnational mothers, including globalized processes of gendered work that find many migrant women workers still in the domestic sphere, yet caring for someone else's home and/or children in place of their own (Contreras & Griffith 2012).

Feminist scholarship challenges uniform notions of motherhood and family that assume public/private dichotomies and rely on simplistic and overarching conceptualizations of the motherhood role (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). In addressing transnational migration, feminist theory investigates how gender is constituted and reconstituted in transnational spaces, and the political implications of this process. It inquires into gender as it is lived across borders and nation states, and how gender divisions, inequalities, and hierarchies function within transnational experiences (Fouron & Schiller 2001). A more integrated view of the local and gendered aspects of global processes incorporates the intersecting institutions of gender, family, the state, and the

market into the constitution of motherhood. This position argues that motherhood is shaped by gender roles, cultural norms, biological responsibilities, and social and economic conditions, as well as sets of heteronormative expectations that are constantly shifting. Thus, globalization and migration serve to build upon tensions in motherhood that already exist, rendering motherhood simultaneously a global and local process (Maher 2010).

In addition to considering the gendered dimensions of transnational migration, Contreras and Griffith (2012) are also concerned with the moral elements of the global political economy. A moral economic perspective recognizes the economic importance of reproductive labour, subsistence production, and unwaged work. It considers gendered migration and how migrant mothers directly contribute to the wellbeing of their children by providing them with basic needs, education, and hence better opportunities than they could have had, if their mothers remained at home. The accomplishments of migrant mother thus become relevant within moral economy theory, which is concerned with addressing global disparities in health, wellbeing, and other measures of quality of life. Moral economy theory is valuable in addressing the ways in which transnational mothers understand and negotiate their roles in providing care from afar. Incorporating this perspective into feminist and transnational foundational standpoints provides a valuable position from which to address the transnational motherhood experience.

*Mothering Across Borders: Becoming the Migrant Mother*

Women's identities as mothers involve multiple layers of meanings, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and care activities that are socially and culturally mediated (Maher 2010). Moreover, the experience of motherhood and migration is embedded in hierarchies of nationality, race, class, ethnicity, and gender, which operate differently depending on where one is located. Navigating through borders in order to find work is a political as well as economic process in which class, ethnicity, and gender are all implicated. Feminist geographers have addressed the ways in which the space used in order to organize our daily lives is implicitly gendered, and with regard to work they have observed that women often tend to take jobs close to home so that they can fulfill their domestic and child rearing responsibilities. Yet transnational mothers also occupy jobs that require them to maintain considerable distance from their families, but it is often domestic work that they attain—a field that remains significantly gendered, raced, classed, and segregated by nationality and citizenship (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997).

The Live-In Caregiver Program in Canada, for example, primarily employs Filipina women who are admitted into the country on temporary work visas that do not allow entry for additional family members (Pratt 2012; Citizenship & Immigration Canada 2012). This program, like many temporary migrant work programs, denies women mobility, and some scholars such as Pratt (2012) have equated these positions with a kind of serfdom under Canada's exploitation of the socioeconomic divide between the

Global North and the Philippines, and the labour supplied by economic disparities. Furthermore, despite being granted admission into the country, temporary workers are not granted many basic rights of citizenship, including the right to earn an equal wage to that of the national context in which they work. Within their employers' homes many women are subject to various forms of abuse which often go unreported for fear of jeopardizing any future opportunities to apply for citizenship (Pratt 2012).

Within the United States, many live-in caregivers are women who have migrated north from Latin America, and like their Canadian counterparts most live in isolation from their own families and communities, in positions with no official labour parameters and earning less than minimum wage. In addition, employers will not consider women who bring their children, enforcing the separation of mother and child in order to make a living (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997).

Although transnational mothers are not limited to working in the domestic sphere, live-in domestic work particularly encourages the separation of mother and her children due to otherwise unmanageably long hours and requirements to reside within the employer's home. However, within these programs one can also see the ways in which gendered work is embedded within transnational ethnic, political, and neoliberal economic processes that necessitate the separation of women from their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997). Maher (2010) advocates for an integrated view of global processes as local and gendered, postulating that mothering is both established and conducted within the

institutional intersecting contexts of gender, family, the market, and the state. These institutions help to recognize and maintain “normative” gender roles and expectations within economic and social conditions. While social and economic conditions within the north create demand for migrant work such as in Canada’s Live-In Caregiver Program, the social and familial losses experienced within the Global South remain unregarded (Maher 2010).

Despite the emotional and social hardships of experiencing such loss, transnational mothers continue to make their journeys out of economic necessity. Schmalzbauer (2004:1319) refers to the transnational pathways between a migrant’s home and host countries as “survival pathways” for poor and unemployed workers. Transnationalism, she points out, is a response to structural inequalities that render it impossible for families to sustain themselves in their home countries. They must migrate in order to expand their resource base and gain access to two labour markets. The remittances sent home from their jobs abroad are what provide food, shelter, clothing, school, and other basic needs for their children, and often extended families. Nicholson (2006) adds that migration to the United States, for example, allows families who have been unable to own land to secure needs above basic levels of subsistence, including purchasing personal methods of transportation such as cars. Furthermore, as economic disparities continue to increase between the Global North and South, migrant labour shows no signs of decline. As migration intensifies and becomes increasingly feminized, border enforcement policies have dramatically altered, making it increasingly difficult for families who do

attempt to migrate together to be able to stay together. For mothers attempting to migrate to the U.S. to work illegally, for example, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act has increasingly criminalized the act of migration and increased rates of deportation. As a result, mothers whose work may not require them to leave their children behind often now choose to do so in order to protect them (Horton 2009).

The increasing incorporation of women into the labour market has contributed to transformations within the family that make it difficult to meet the demands of motherhood roles that call for the simultaneous nurturing of children and a physical presence (Illanes 2010). In the Global South, women’s employment opportunities have been transformed by changing economic and industrial conditions, and networks of “sending” and “receiving states” (primarily south to north) now increasingly provide transnational labour systems for women. At the same time, however, Maher (2010) points out that these systems also work to reshape family life and change the provision of care for children who are left at home. Maher also calls attention to the fact that, while children are usually left in the care of other women, international debt burdens have compromised community support systems for women and children. Structural adjustments have forced the privatization of essential services, intensifying poverty and disadvantage for women caregivers who remain in their country. With the geographic separation of the mother, the physical care of children is left to “other mothers” or “substitute mothers”—whether grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or other relatives or friends. The transnational

mother must then contend with the notion that biological mothers should be physically with their children (Illanes 2010). At the same time, however, transnational mothers continue to mother from a distance, sending home money for basic needs, and gifts in order to continue to care for their children and express their love (Horton 2009). However this process is complicated by cultural (and cross-cultural) constructions of the motherhood role, and by the perceptions of the mothers themselves between taking care of their children and physically being with their own children. Thus, conceptualizations of what it means to be a “good mother” and negotiating this paradoxical context of care are fundamental to the experiences of transnational motherhood.

*Conceptualizing Motherhood: Being the “good” Mother*

While migration impacts motherhood through changing conceptions of gender roles, attachment, and family structures (Alzoubi 2011), transnational mothers also express a great deal of anxiety over the separation from their children and remaining a “good” mother (Nicholson 2006). At the same time, amidst this anxiety and physical displacement, being able to provide for their children brings a sense of empowerment, despite their separation. In this way, the role of motherhood can be demonstrated as flexible and even contradictory when caring for one’s children simultaneously requires being separated from them for long periods of time (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997). Motherhood is experienced both personally and socioculturally; as Illanes (2010:207) explains, “Motherhood is a complex

image composed of several dimensions and charged with different meanings at regional and national levels.”

For transnational mothers, contending with ideological representations of good mothering often juxtaposes traditional ideas of physical and emotional nurturing with realities of nurturing from outside of their own domestic sphere, providing physical support that comes from remittances and emotional help through technological mediums such as the internet or over the phone (Yeoh & Huang 2010). While the conceptions of motherhood within a migrant mother’s place of origin remain important to her after she has left, the process of migration and the new sociocultural and national context in which she finds herself also impact her own perceptions of motherhood and what it means to mother from afar. Although ideas of “good” motherhood are embedded within culture, migrant women, like all migrants, are agents in themselves, and thus their actions cannot be simplified to cultural traditions. Similarly, while new cultural contexts can impact women’s perceptions of motherhood, transnational mothers are not always uncritical of Western notions of motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997).

Alzoubi (2011) writes that there are multiple and competing discourses of self-understanding of identities for immigrant mothers, and I suggest that the same is true for transnational mothers, as identity is constantly being negotiated within their social environment. In addition, transnational mothers also face the paradox that they are unable to take care of their children in the traditional sense, and thus migrant mothers experience conflicting emotions

that emerge from attempts to reconcile their necessary absence with more traditional conceptualizations of the “good mother” that they are familiar with. This ideal that “good” mothers must physically remain with their children is something faced in countries that transnational mothers migrate to; often when a mother leaves her child in the care of another adult for long periods of time the bond between mother and child is assumed to be immediately damaged (Suurmond 2010). Yet being a transnational mother means more than this ideal of biological mothers raising their own children. Transnational mothers distinguish their experiences of motherhood from estrangement or abandonment, because they are finding an alternative way to care for their children rather than giving their children up. Rather than being a passive embodiment of cultural gender roles and norms, these women are fully aware of the conditions that lead to their separation from their children, and a sense of pride is often derived from being able to provide for them (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997).

Nicholson (2006:14) writes that, “[Transnational mothers] are enacting conceptions of mothering that reflect what many African American, Hispanic, and Asian American women have long understood: that economic conditions often necessitate the sharing of child-rearing responsibilities with others...” Yet Nicholson also goes on to point out that in their long separations from their children, their often arduous journeys, and their low socioeconomic status in their countries of work, transnational mothers are living an exceptionally difficult form of shared mothering. Being a “good” mother thus entails a negotiation between ideals and

circumstance. Illanes (2010) argues that motherhood is embedded in two contexts: image and practice. A certain image of motherhood is both historically and culturally constructed and then associated with a series of practices. Transnational motherhood is a context in which these two modes of image and practice do not always function in absolute agreement, and as a result certain tensions arise for women who must mother from afar.

“Good” motherhood for transnational mothers involves being able to provide for their children and to give them the opportunity to have a better life. The tensions that arise from having to leave their children in order to do so become ingrained in the everyday life of the mothers away (Contreras & Griffith 2012). On the one hand, gifts and remittances become one strategy for transnational mothers to mother from a distance. In her interviews with Salvadorian transnational mothers in the U.S., for example, Horton (2009) found that interview participants were proud to be able to send home the toys their children wanted, new clothing, and electronics. Horton also argued that being able to utilize the influence of the American dollar is simultaneously a form of personal and political economic power. From a moral economic point of view, this economic power must be acknowledged to be worth much more than money, as it is contributing to the wellbeing and future opportunities of the children left at home (Contreras & Griffith 2012).

At the same time, however, long-term separation from children, husbands, and other loved ones can lead to feelings of loss, anxiety, guilt, loneliness, and even physical and mental health issues,

despite the reasons for, and benefits from, this separation. Although the use of technology allows for a certain degree of intimacy with their children, it does not fully substitute for more deep-seated beliefs about nurturance and traditional mothering (Yeoh & Huang 2010), and carries both love and feelings of guilt (Horton 2009). Leaving their children in the prolonged care of others can also create anxiety over the potentially harmful influence of the mother's prolonged absence, even though the grandmothers and other female family members are trusted caregivers (Contreras & Griffith 2012).

Such conflicts and contradictions implicit within transnational motherhood are also examined from the perspective of gender roles and expectations. In one sense, along with improving the material conditions of their families, working abroad provides a kind of independence and self-reliance that transgress gender boundaries. While some women leave their husbands to help care for their children and others migrate along with their husbands, often women have ended abusive or dysfunctional relationships with partners or husbands. Furthermore, in migrating they are also loosening gendered constraints that bind them to the household, and gaining a kind of financial control within the family (Contreras & Griffith 2012). The paradox, as pointed out by Contreras and Griffith, is that despite these new forms of independence transnational mothers continue to mother from afar in ways that attempt to "make up for" their disruption of their traditional roles. Moreover, for some transnational mothers such as the Latina women interviewed by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997), while many of them work as live-in caregivers looking after the

children of others, they strongly believe that one should not bring in someone from outside of the family to care for their children. Even in the care of family members, transnational mothers often worry that their children may get into trouble in their adolescence, or may even develop more affection for their "other mother" than for their biological mother.

Transnational motherhood is thus paradoxical in nature, as these women both recognize that their absence is what provides for their children, yet are troubled by their absence because of the limitations created to the care they can provide. Additionally, they are simultaneously breaking with certain traditional gender roles, and reinforcing them in their efforts to meet their own standards of "good" motherhood, which, despite the flexibility of their conceptualizations of motherhood, are inevitably rooted in cultural constructions of motherhood.

It is important to emphasize that there is no universal or even widely shared notion of what constitutes "good" mothering, and in discussing the contradictory nature of mothering from afar it also becomes clear that when ideology and practice are placed side-by-side, there are also no homogenous models of "good" mothering within any one culture. Thus, in both contesting and reproducing traditional expectations of mothering, transnational mothers do not replace their pre-existing notions of what it means to be a "good" mother; rather they expand their definitions of motherhood in order to encompass the economic advantages that require long-term separation from their children (Nicholson 2006). Even when the ideal form of motherhood often involves full-time physical caregiving, in contexts of

economic need, spatial and temporal separations between mother and children can be incorporated into a more flexible conceptualization of motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997). Motherhood is thus a relational concept that is contingent not only upon social, cultural, and personal perceptions, but that it is also adaptable, and thus expands and transforms based on particular (often economic) situations.

*Conclusion: Negotiating Care*

Women's lives within families, societies, and nations are being transformed by contemporary social and economic trends. Globalization, the feminization of certain types of labour such as migrant caregiving labour, and the intersection of traditional and new forms of gender roles are all implicated in contemporary notions of motherhood. The relationship between women and their mother roles and the ways in which transnational working women experience and negotiate their identities as mothers encompasses a wide range of physical, emotional, social, and economic activities contributing to care (Maher 2010). In this paper, I have demonstrated how transnational mothers contend with contradictory processes of reshaping and reinforcing traditional conceptualizations of motherhood, and how contemporary global economic structuring necessitates more flexible ideas of what it means to be a "good" mother (Contreras and Griffith 2012).

Sustained demand in Western nations such as Canada and the United States and neoliberal economic structural policies continue to economically marginalize the Global South, and as a result migratory flows from the South to the North are perpetuated (Nicholson 2006; Maher 2010). As women

increasingly form a significant part of this migratory labour force, the transnational family becomes a growing phenomenon (Horton 2009). As a result, it is essential to approach transnational labour from a gendered perspective that addresses the experiences of mothers who have been forced to leave their children in order to provide for them. In this way, addressing transnational motherhood at the individual level also speaks to the larger, global socioeconomic and conceptual configurations that affect gender roles and family structures.

It is clear that despite the advantages and sense of empowerment that transnational work can provide to mothers and their children, the emotional costs can be high. Mothers worry about leaving their children in the care of others, and experience feelings of guilt at their inability to provide physical nurturance. At the same time, they understand the economic necessity that creates this distance (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997). Yet, as Nicholson (2006) argues, the increase in movement of migrant populations on the global scale suggests that this reconfiguring of the motherhood role will likely become progressively more prominent. In this way, as Contreras and Griffith (2012:63) declare, "these mothers become situated squarely within the global political economy." From a gendered point of view, mothers leaving their children to become part of the international labour force raise questions and generate discussion regarding the roles of women, parenthood, and what can be conceptualized as "good" motherhood. It thus becomes clear that economy, culture, and gender are all unavoidably intertwined in the creation, maintenance,

and transformation of the notion of the motherhood role.

Although outside of the scope of this paper, several additional areas of investigation may further contextualize and enrich the understanding of transnational motherhood experiences. The family left behind, for example, is profoundly impacted in the separation with of the mother. Examining the social and emotional impacts of transnational motherhood on the family members left behind will provide an integral angle to how these global movements affect family relations. Furthermore, families receiving remittances may also experience developments in socioeconomic class, which may in turn impact their positioning within their communities. In addition, exploring the process of applying for citizenship by some members of the Live-in Caregiver program would further address issues of nationality and immigration for those who wish to become full citizens of their host countries. As international migration and global political economic structures continue to develop and change, local and individual scales must continue to be addressed in order to more fully understand the broader implications of transnational migrant labour for women and families.

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