

Migration, Domestic Work, and Repression

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IN THEIR EDITED COLLECTION, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild write that Third World women are on the move as never before, filling jobs in the "homes, nurseries, and brothels of the First World" (2002). The rushed and materialistic societies of the First World leave working parents little time to look after their children or their own parents. Women migrating from poor countries fill the gap. The migrants meet the personal needs of families looking for child care, of the disabled struggling to stay in their own homes, of employers wanting help with their elderly parents, and of male sex tourists looking for young, cheap, and compliant women.

The jobs the migrants fill are among the worst available, but women move to get them, drawn by the prospect of supporting themselves and, even more important, contributing to their parents' or children's upkeep. Increasingly, mothers of young children are joining these migrant workers, often living away from their children for years at a time. Fast travel has brought the world closer together, but these women do not have the money or time to make many return trips to see their children, who know them mainly from phone calls. Despite the mothers' anguish at the separation, they want to safeguard their children's futures even while they cannot comfort or enjoy them in daily life. The radical inequality between the First and Third worlds makes the wages of even exploitative jobs outstrip those available to the women in their own countries, causing separations of mothers and children almost unimaginable to the more privileged.

Global Woman's sixteen chapters are mainly based on fieldwork and are lively and compelling. The editors, both excellent writers themselves, have chosen vivid accounts. Most have been previously published, but they form a coherent and thought-provoking overview of the terrible dilemmas facing women who must choose between earning and caring, or at least, between earning and caring for their own families. The irony of women being hired to care for their employers' children while their own are far away has often been uncomfortably noted but only recently has it become a major focus of research and political analysis.

In the United States black women, and many Hispanic women in the Southwest, used to be trapped in domestic work. Racial segregation confined them to agricultural work or labor in white women's kitchens. The civil rights movement helped free black women and they have never looked back. Migrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean have taken their place. The change in worker supply has led researchers to focus on "transnational motherhood" (Hondegne-Sotelo 2001) and what Hochschild calls the "chain of care," whereby mothers look after other people's children, with their children cared for by women still lower on the occupational ladder or by other family members. The First World acquires a bonus of care, while the Third World suffers a deficit. The consequences for the children at the end of the chain are severe. It might be thought that they can come to terms with their mothers' absences, much as children historically have had to come to terms with fathers who might be away for months or years as sailors, soldiers, itinerant miners, or lumber workers. They are not abandoned, as the great majority live with their mother's mothers. The evidence shows, though, that they experience their mothers' absence piercingly. Their frequent emotional distress may, in fact, undercut the value of their mothers' sacrifices. The mothers often hope that their children will be able to stay in school longer with the aid of their remittances. Schooling requires focus and attention, however, and children suffering from loneliness and confusion can lose their ability to deal with schooling's daily demands.

The accounts are striking and, often, heartbreaking in their depictions of the emotional costs of

women's migratory strategies. *Global Woman* is thought provoking, without falling into the stance of seeing all employers as monsters, far removed from the people who might be reading the book. The authors argue that the current arrangements exact a huge price from the women doing care work, while also reinforcing gender boundaries in the First World. Couples able to hire caregivers no longer need to struggle over the division of labor, leading feminists to downplay efforts to create gender equality in housework and child rearing. The analysis, though, does not fully address a core question: Is the transfer of care workers from poor countries to rich ones really qualitatively new, as Ehrenreich and Hochschild suggest, or does it replicate older patterns? Or, to put it another way, is what we are seeing today another twist in the long saga of women migrating for domestic work, or are there new, and even more disturbing elements in the picture we are witnessing?

There is no doubt that domestic work has long served as a travel ticket. With all the hardships and loneliness it entails, it has offered women around the globe a chance to break from home with the knowledge that they could almost certainly be employed — and quickly — if they chose to move. They did not actually need to speak the employers' language (although it helped); they did not need education, or experience, or references, although these could land them higher in the (limited) hierarchy of jobs in other people's homes. Women with few opportunities at home could bravely strike out, whether it was Scandinavians migrating to the American Midwest, Irish women fleeing famine and despair to America's big cities, or English women taking vast voyages to Australia, knowing they would likely never see their families or homes again. For women around the world, domestic work has been the always-available job. Hateful though it might be, women knew that they could very likely find work within a week, and not even need a home. They could start out living in the employers' home, at their mistresses' beck and call from early until late, and could, if lucky, gradually establish themselves and move to their own dwelling, even if only a room.

There was, however, a key difference between women choosing to migrate and those suffering from racial oppression in their homelands. For white immigrants, domestic work proved a starting point. For black women, and Hispanic women in the U.S. southwest, it was more often a sentence to hard labor under the eyes of white mistresses. Their mistresses did not work themselves, but had the leisure to exercise their dominance as arbitrarily, pettily, and ruthlessly as they wished. These women did not suffer just under the tyranny of their mistresses, but also under state-enforced repression. Employers were bolstered by this state backing. Generations of black and Hispanic women were confined in the occupation, unable to break out of it until the civil rights movement brought strides toward equality. Significantly, it required political mobilization, and the partial dismantling of state repression, to also break the power and dominance of employers.

GIVEN THE HISTORIC TIES between migration and domestic work, are Ehrenreich and Hochschild justified in seeing women's global migration for care work as being new in its scope and range? Answering this question requires first considering what kinds of work are encompassed in the general designation "care work." Perhaps new forms of care work are emerging on the global stage. To some extent this is true, but the great bulk of careworkers are domestic workers of one description or another, whether primarily house cleaners, children's caregivers, or attendants for the elderly, the disabled, or the sick. Overwhelmingly, they work in private homes, as jobs in more formal settings tend to go to those with greater entitlements in the societies where they work.

Global Woman does not just consider domestic workers, but also sex workers. In amalgamating analysis of domestic workers (whether house cleaners or caregivers) and sex workers, Ehrenreich and Hochschild make an analytical point that all these types of workers labor to meet the personal needs, however, defined of those people in the First World with the money to buy such services and the power to exercise some measure of domination over others.

This point is well taken, but it should be borne in mind that sex workers occupy a small niche compared to domestic workers. Their numbers are hard to estimate, but they probably contribute little to the great migratory streams of women flowing to richer countries to work in private houses. While trafficking of women as sex workers across international borders does occur, and attracts much attention from international agencies (Renton 2005), sex tourism provides a convenient alternative for men, with the "entertainment" industry merging into sexual provision in many locations (Sassen 2002). Domestic work must be done in the employers' home. Sex work can easily be done in the workers' home countries. Men seeking sex often have the freedom and money to go to them. Thailand occupies the unenviable position of being a major destination for such sex tourism. Impoverished families in the drought-ridden north send their young daughters to Bangkok to become prostitutes (Bales 2002). The lure of sex tourism in the country can be seen in male predominance among tourists. In 2003, male visitors to Thailand from the wealthy nations of the United States, Britain, Japan, and France outnumbered female visitors by two to one, a gender disparity unique among major tourist destinations (Renton 2005). In reading about sex tourism for this review, I googled "sex tourism and Thailand" and quickly discovered how easy it is for tourists to receive all the information they need on how to find what they want in the country.

Despite the importance of sex tourism in certain areas, most care work is, in fact, domestic work. As such, it can be analyzed in relation to the great historic migratory flows that led women from their homes in rural areas, or in impoverished countries, to richer areas where domestic work offered a ready — if unappealing — fallback. The flows themselves are not new. There are, however, three features of the current situation that are distinctive compared to earlier patterns and that may justify Ehrenreich and Hochschild's contention that we are witnessing a new era in the transfer of care work from the Third to the First World. These features of the current situation operate to the detriment of women migrating for care work.

First, most migratory streams in the past involved women who settled in their new countries. When they left, they were unlikely to return to their home countries. There is reason to think that returning home was rarer for them than for male migrants. Male migrants could make money and then could return to win a younger bride. Female migrants, though, were more likely to find themselves aged out of the marriage market by the time they had established an economic foothold in their new country. This presumably reduced their incentive to return to their homelands. Women were also unlikely to leave husbands or children behind, as did some men, so in this respect, too, they had less incentive to return. They either maintained themselves independently in their new country, as did many Irish women in America (Diner 1994), or they found husbands in their new homes. In either case, settlement offered them an important option.

The situation of many women migrants today is different. While they continue to be more likely to settle abroad than are male migrants (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002: 21), many women are going to countries where they are not allowed to establish permanent homes. Those who come to the United States, even if illegally, can merge into the their large co-ethnic communities. Settlement thus remains a live option. Women migrants to Malaysia, the Middle East, Singapore, or Hong Kong have far less chance of creating new homes.

These women are modern-day indentured servants but ones who cannot redeem themselves through labor, eventually reaching freedom. Instead, they contract themselves out for specified periods. In economic downturns, they can be repatriated (Huang and Yeoh 1996: 484). As transient workers, they are highly vulnerable. They cannot gradually establish themselves, increasing their ties and resources; instead, they remain legally and socially outside the pale in their new societies. They are not on the low end of a continuum of resources and rights, but entirely outside the system of claims on society.

The second thing that is new in domestic workers' situation is that states play a larger role in regulating and channeling their migration than in the past. This can be highly negative for domestic workers. Migrants to the United States may move to the country illegally and this can impose its own costs in terms of lack of rights and fear of deportation. There are advantages to operating beneath the government radar, however, including the possibility of simply merging into established immigrant communities. This is much harder for women in societies where governments both foster and regulate immigration. Many migrants move from impoverished Asian societies to rapidly developing ones. Almost every aspect of their migratory experience is government controlled and regulated. As an analyst of the migration of Filipina and Indonesian women's migration to Malaysia writes, "The migration of peoples is not a new phenomenon in Asian history. What is new is the degree of overt state support for the transnationalization of migrant or 'guest' workers" (Chin 1998: 94). Countries where development has stalled actively foster women's migration as domestics. They aim to reduce tensions at home by sending some of the unemployed, or underemployed, abroad; they also want the women's remittances to bolster cash flows into the country. Such remittances are crucial to countries such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh (Chin 1998: 100). Many of the receiving countries also act aggressively to regulate the women's entry and control them once they arrive. Their regulations can be highly intrusive. In Singapore, for example, migrant domestic workers must submit every six months to medical tests for pregnancy or venereal diseases (Huang and Yeoh 1996: 485).

Those women migrating from Asian countries to other Asian countries or the Middle East do not receive protection from either their own governments or those where they do their work. If employers abuse or confine them, they get little or no assistance from their own embassies. Worse, if domestic workers appeal to police for help, they are often accused of theft and are themselves imprisoned (Haddad 1999). The level of abuse and dehumanization the women suffer can reach horrific levels. While conditions vary, it is not uncommon for the women to endure conditions of semi-slavery, unable to freely leave their employers' houses. Often their passports are confiscated. Many cannot use the telephone without their employers' permission and some are not allowed to use the phone at all (Hung and Yeoh 1996: 485). The women are legally required to live with their employers (Chin 1998: 142). Often the women are given little food and everything they eat is tallied. The time they go to bed can be set; and they are never able to escape their employers' demands. With governments strictly regulating their stays, if they resist or try to leave their employers, they are likely to be deported. Rather than risk this, most remain submissive, at least on the surface.

Global Woman does not systematically analyze differences in the level of vulnerability experienced by domestic workers in different countries. Overall, however, the situation of those in the Middle East and many Asian countries is very bleak, even bleaker than what is often experienced by new arrivals in the United States and Western European countries. Not only are they at the bottom of rigid hierarchies, their jobs do not bring them any prospects of long-term betterment in the societies in which they work. Overwhelmingly, the women report that they do these jobs mainly for the money they bring. They focus on the money they send home more than on their own loss of personal freedom. New immigrants to the United States working in other people's homes can also experience high levels of exploitation and isolation, but they are likely to gradually adjust and come to recognize that they can find better employers than the ones they first encounter (Wrigley 1995).

There is a third important way in which the situation of women migrants differs from in the past. Today more mothers of young children migrate without those children than used to be the case. The literature provides few examples of such migrations in the past. It is not clear exactly why this shift has taken place. One reason might be that until early in the twentieth century, infants could not be artificially fed without great risk to their lives (Apple 1987). Until formula was developed, the only option other than mothers' breastfeeding infants was to hire a wet nurse, but this choice was not

available to the poor. Basically, mothers had to stay with infants, although in situations of desperate poverty they sometimes chose to earn outside the home to safeguard the family as a whole, even at the cost of infant lives (Tilly and Scott 1990). Leaving aside infants, there are traditions of mothers migrating without children in the Caribbean; in former slave areas, including the Caribbean, long-standing poverty required mothers to rely heavily on their own earnings, which sometimes required migrating.

This pattern now appears to be spreading in many parts of the globe. In Mexico and Central America, for example, increasing numbers of mothers leave for the United States, either with or without their husbands. Sometimes they send for their children after they have established themselves; sometimes after many years in the United States they create new relationships and new families; sometimes they return to Mexico to rejoin their children. It is possible that this option appeals most to women whose marriages are faltering. While once they might have had no choice but to stay put, enduring loneliness or abuse within the marriage, they now can now set out on their own. In the Philippines, where women's migration without husbands (or children) has become relatively common, such migration is sometimes called a "Filipino divorce" (Rhacel Salazar Parrenas, as cited by Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002: 11).

Recent research describes the emotional hardships of children left behind by migrating mothers. Some children fare better than others, with the difference perhaps due to the quality of care they received in their mothers' absence (Parrenas 2002). I have interviewed a number of Caribbean domestic workers in New York whose own mothers had earlier migrated to the United States without them while they were children. Most said that they had accepted their mothers' absences, understanding that they were sacrificing for them. Those domestic workers I interviewed who had left their own children described anguish and longing as dominating their years without their children. When they reunited with their children, often when the children were teenagers, some had trouble re-establishing connections, making the situation one of continuing sadness. Joanna Dreby, a sociology student at the CUNY Graduate Center, interviewed mothers and fathers who had migrated from Mexico to central New Jersey without their children. She then went to Mexico and, with the parents' permission, interviewed the children they had left behind. Although they remained firmly in the family circle, with nearly all cared for by their mothers' mothers, many suffered from emotional distress. This was particularly true for older children. Even though their mothers' earnings helped them stay in school, they had trouble concentrating. Many dreamed themselves of migrating. Their teachers worried about "migration fever" gripping their communities.

Notably, Ehrenreich and Hochschild report that sociologist and migration expert Doug Massey found that mothers' migration without children did not seem to be fueled primarily by economic desperation. Instead, it seemed more related to the presence of manufacturing in the area, which may have raised the women's horizons and their awareness of their own earning capacity as individuals (28). A key change may be a decline in the sense of the family as the core economic unit and a gradual shift toward a more individual way of conceiving of earnings and life chances. And Dreby's finding that "migration fever" can grip entire communities also suggests that children begin conceptualizing of their own earning power as soon as they near the age when they could potentially strike out on their own. The mothers' choices may reverberate downward in ways they might not have intended.

Global Woman drives home the realities underlying the care solutions found by the First World. These solutions do not address continuing gender inequalities in affluent countries and all too often rest on the exploitation and even dehumanization of the women who actually provide the care of children, the elderly, and the disabled in many First World households. Ehrenreich and Hochschild see the situation as new in the scope and range of the migration undertaken by Third World women migrating for jobs as careworkers to more privileged countries, creating care deficits in their own

families and countries. In my own view, their analysis could more clearly differentiate between the situations of women in different migration streams. Some are particularly disadvantaged and suffer extreme marginalization in the countries where they work, while others are indeed exploited, but have better long-term prospects.

OVERALL, I THINK IT is fair to say the features of the "new migration" render migrating women even more vulnerable than their predecessors who undertook long and risky voyages, in many cases, with only the promise of jobs in other women's kitchens at the end of them. In important respects, the "new migration" resembles the worst features of the experiences of Black and Latina women who labored as domestic workers. They too suffered from state repression; their lack of political rights made possible extreme exploitation by employers in their homes. Similarly, migrants from poor Asian countries to wealthier countries suffer from total lack of political rights. Domestic work does not occur in a vacuum. Employers can fully indulge selfishness and a family-centric meanness when operating from a toxic combination of feelings of ethnic and cultural superiority, combined with the backing of the state in repressing workers.

No positive gender relations can spring from such a toxic mix. Instead, sisterly empathy is killed at the source. Domestic work is peculiarly antithetical to the workers' own maintenance of a strong and healthy family life. The very qualities employers often value, the flexibility to have workers stay late when the employer wishes, undermine workers' ability to look after their own children. This has now reached a new extreme, with workers increasingly leaving children behind as they venture to other countries to labor in employers' houses. The feminist movement, as Ehrenreich and Hochschild suggest, needs to reconnect with its early roots and to once again raise the banner of gender equality in the home. It is only a generalized egalitarianism that is likely to create deeper respect for those who actually do the care work. Inequality in one sphere transmits itself to other spheres, with patriarchy creating inequalities in the home that then reverberate even more strongly across lines of ethnicity and nationality. *Global Woman* raises these issues in a compelling way.