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Extracting Labor from the Elderly: The Global Crisis of Social Reproduction from the Perspective of Aging Filipino Migrants in California and Around the World

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With an aging population and the largest share of older immigrants in the U.S., California illuminates complexities of the care crisis as a global labor migration issue. Existing research highlights migrant labor contributions, revealing their significant role in filling domestic work and eldercare gaps in host-destinations such as California, and connects this picture to the workings of the global economyⁱ. Yet, few studies consider aging migrant labor and how elderly migrants contend with their own transnational eldercare challengesⁱⁱ. My initial findings show that affected elderly migrants resort to becoming itinerant or settled reproductive *workers*—serving kin, other migrant worker families or paying clients in host-countries—as an old-age subsistence arrangement in response to complications of transnational work, aging and family life.

Aging Filipinos and the Phillipine Labor Export Project. This preliminary analysis draws upon narratives of aging Filipino migrants from overseas worker families to demonstrate how elderly migrant labor is utilised in receiving-countries, *and* also how it enables subsequent, prolonged migrations of working-age migrants globally. In California, Filipinos make up a significant immigrant population, with a well-documented presence in the health, eldercare and domestic work sectors. Moreover, an exemplary case in overseas labor migration research, the Filipino migration experience is revelatory for three reasons: 1) it provides a long-term example of a state-led labor-export project that institutionalized overseas work as an ongoing program since 1974ⁱⁱⁱ, 2) it highlights the migration of millions of workers to varied contexts of reception, from guest-worker destinations in the Middle East to those that permit permanent settlement, such as California; and 3) it illuminates intergenerational migrant worker *families* and the challenges faced



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by multiple overseas members, with some moving itinerantly from one short-term labor contract to the next in various destinations, and others contained in the same location and low-status occupation for decades.

Itinerant Elderly Labor in Migrant Worker Households. In this light, the Phillipine case offers a useful take-off point for identifying various ways that a complex global division of reproductive labor (Parreñas 2001)—commonly conceived as mainly harnessing the labor of working-age migrants—also depends upon elderly migrants seeking to secure their own needs in old age. For instance, Luz, 68 years old, is a striking example from California that illustrates how the labor of elderly migrants enables extended migration of young, able-bodied foreign workers to various parts of the world. When I first met Luz in California, she was preparing to return to the Phillipines to look after the child of her second daughter, who works as a nurse in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Having migrated to a receiving-country that typically denies family unification for guest-workers, Luz’s daughter had temporarily left her son to a cousin, while waiting for Luz to take over. In California, Luz manages another daughter’s household and looks after two grandchildren. By doing so, Luz also renders the necessary care labor that allows both parents to work in the US service sector full time. Here, Luz performs an elderly function similar to those depicted in other California low-income migrant households lacking resources for paid care^{iv}. However, Luz’s circulation as elderly labor is remarkable in that while permanently resettled in the US, she remains itinerant in her old age in order to facilitate subsequent overseas labor migration in the family.

With younger kin members formally integrated into the migrant labor system as paid care workers, aging kin members may informally circulate as unpaid care-workers incorporated through a parallel system of transnational family obligations. Dependent on overseas-breadwinner daughters for her housing and daily subsistence, Luz is compelled to remain mobile in her old age as required by the

multinational migrant worker household. Shuttling from one destination to another as an unpaid family care worker, Luz departs from the depiction of elderly grandparents as a household resource staying fixed in the origin country or permanently resettled in one destination overseas. Yet in contrast to highly-mobile transnational retirees from rich countries, as an aging migrant, Luz does not have the same access to income and entitlements: Lacking sufficient resources from independent living, she feels bound to providing reproductive labor that, in turn, allows the labor migration of various overseas breadwinners in the family.

Settled Elderly Migrants as Paid Care Workers. In California, I met other elderly migrants, who shared how they also sought to address their old-age resource requirements by responding to the demand for reproductive workers. While similarly uncomfortable with the idea of old-age dependence, Antonio and Petra deviated from Luz’s strategy: They seek *paid* work whenever possible, but as older workers they could only compete for employment in the care labor market given its varied and sustained demand for workers. With children in the US, Europe, Middle East and the Phillipines, Petra lives with a daughter in California. Petra worked for aging American wards but stopped at age 75, when she could no longer perform the heavy lifting tasks required of elderly caregivers. Antonio’s migrant worker family is also dispersed in varied locations, with sons serving as overseas guest-workers in the Middle East and South Korea. Unable to secure jobs outside of reproductive work in his old age, Antonio continues to find paid work as a babysitter for other Filipinos working in California. In as much as demand for reproductive labor exists across a wide range of families with different circumstances and capacities to pay, older migrants perform a role in paid care.

Second-Wind Labor Migrants Working Beyond their Productive Years. By filling demand for care labor in varied sectors across the population, these elderly migrants are able to earn their keep so they are not “dependents” of the extended migrant-worker household. As older workers

who have supposedly phased out of the labor market, Petra, Antonio and Luz take on unmet reproductive labor functions as paid or unpaid workers. These experiences from California also resonate with collected narratives among elderly migrants in other countries, which suggest that the global reproductive labor pool is also comprised of migrants who work beyond their so-called “productive” years. For example, Lorena, 75 years old, extended her employment as a domestic and eldercare worker in Italy beyond her 70s. Given the great demand for migrant care workers in the overseas labor market, Lorena stayed in Italy to continue supporting her husband who had returned to their village in the Philippines. Even while having papers to reside in Italy, Lorena’s husband could not find stable employment prospects. As an older male worker in Italy, he retired in the home-village before he turned 60 years old. In contrast, as the overseas breadwinner in a highly gendered labor market, Lorena only returned to the village at age 74, and not until she was able to finance the labor migration of five adult children now pooling resources to keep their aging parents home.

Extracting Labor from Elderly Migrants. In sum, these initial findings show that a number of elderly migrants resort to the provision of reproductive labor precisely at a time in their lives when they themselves may be requiring eldercare, within the age range similar to global North senior counterparts who rely on migrant care labor. Compelled to earn their keep due to insufficient old age resources but constrained by limited prospects, elderly migrants find openings for paid and unpaid care work due to the high demand for reproductive labor across the entire population. Aside from building on calls for additional studies on inequality among different groups of elderly in the global division of reproductive labor^v, these preliminary illustrations also imply that the necessary supply of working-age global migrant labor is in part sustained by old-age vulnerabilities of transnational elderly migrants.

To fully examine these intertwined dimensions of the global care crisis, future research must address

the circulation of migrant labor as a holistic process of social reproduction, whereby the existence of labor in the global economy is made possible by the necessary work of maintaining and renewing all human beings. Approaching care labor demand *and* supply from the perspective of migrants is a productive first step. Going beyond a model that assumes a huge care deficit in rich countries and an abundance of care labor in the global South, scholars must examine the interplay of age, class, gender, race, and citizenship in shaping unequal access *and* obligations in the provision of care labor. For one, scholars must consider both working-age and elderly migrants as labor providers and specify patterned social reproduction dynamics that pull aging migrants into settled or itinerant care work. Moreover, additional research is needed to establish to what extent this extraction of elderly labor in migrant worker families serves as a key enabling factor behind continued intergenerational labor migration from the global South.

ⁱHondagneu-Sotelo, P. 2007. *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*, University of California Press; Ehrenreich, B. and A. Hochschild (eds) (2003) *Global woman: nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy*, New York: Metropolitan Books; Parreñas, R.S. (2015 [2001]) *Servants of globalization*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.; Hochschild, A. R. (2000) ‘Global care chains and emotional surplus value’, in W. Hutton and A. Giddens (eds) *On the edge: living with global capitalism*, London: Jonathan Cape, 130-46.

ⁱⁱAlthough not specifically dealing with the eldercare deficits of older migrants, previous research on migrant care work have emphasized that relegating reproductive labor functions can only partially resolve the problem since care-deficits are merely passed-on to low-income migrant providers and their kin. See Parreñas 2015 [2001] and Hochschild 2000. Focused primarily on the extraction of care labor from young, able-bodied workers, Hochschild (2000) conceptualizes this as global care chains structured as “a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. A typical global care chain might work something like this: An older daughter from a poor family in a third world country cares for her siblings (the first link in the chain) while her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a nanny migrating to a first world country (the second link), who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country (the final link)” (Hochschild, 2000:357)

ⁱⁱⁱRodriguez, R. 2010. *Migrants for Export: How the Phillipine State Brokers Labor to the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

^{iv}Treas, J. (2008) *Transnational Older Adults and Their Families*, *Family Relations*, 57, 468-478; Treas J and Mazumdar S (2004) *Kinkeeping and caregiving: Contributions of older people in immigrant families*. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 35: 105-122; Fukui, Haruna M., and Cecelia Menjivar. “Bound by inequality: The social capital of older Asians and Latinos in Phoenix, Arizona.” *Ethnography* (2015):1466138114565550.

^vParreñas 2015 [2001]