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**Domestic Insecurities: Female Migration from the  
Philippines, Development and National  
Subject-Status**

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**Domestic Insecurities: Female Migration from the Philippines, Development and  
National Subject-Status**

Robyn M. Rodriguez

Abstract:

Since 1974 when labor export was first institutionalized by the Philippine government as a developmental policy, it has benefited politically by providing jobs to its citizens and economically through the remittances sent by migrants earned from employment abroad. As the out-migration of women working mostly as domestic workers and entertainers began to rival and even outpace that of men, however, the state's highly profitable program faced a crisis or what might be termed "domestic insecurities": insecurities felt by its populace about labor export, prompted mainly by domestic worker migration; insecurities which threatened the legitimacy of a major domestic developmental policy. Ordinary Philippine citizens, migrant advocates and migrants themselves began to contest labor export. Many believed labor export exposed women migrants to harsh forms of sexual violence. Others believed that the out-migration of women was weakening the Philippines' social and moral fabric and still others, believed that the out-migration of Filipinas as domestic workers and entertainers threatened the Philippine state's subject-status on the world stage. Contestations over labor export culminated into a crisis state with the hanging of a Filipina domestic worker by the Singaporean government in 1995 compelling the Philippine state to introduce major migration reforms in order to salvage the labor export program on which it had come to critically depend. This paper track's

the emergence of the gendered crisis of migration in the Philippines, the state's response to it and its impacts on Filipina migrants. It aims to critically engage with the gender and development literature to illustrate the different ways gender, the specific experiences of gender by individuals as well as gendered representations and symbolism on different scales, shapes developmental interventions of postcolonial states and impacts women in both empowering and disempowering ways.

## **Introduction:**

Formed by the Philippine government in response to the global protests of the impending hanging of Filipina domestic worker Flor Contemplacion by the Singaporean government for allegedly murdering a fellow Filipina domestic worker and the child she cared for, the Gancayo Commission's objective was to evaluate the impacts of female migration from the Philippines. Protests swelled to global proportions as Filipino migrants and their advocates took to the streets of Manila and in their countries of employment outside Philippine and Singaporean embassies. Many believed that Contemplacion had been sentenced to death for a crime she did not commit. Protesters demanded that the Philippine state intervene to prevent the hanging, and they demanded that the Singaporean state reopen the case. The Philippine state, thrown into crisis, was compelled to respond to the protests, which threatened to undermine its labor export program, a program on which it had come to depend both economically and politically.

One key conclusion of the government's Gancayo Commission was the following:

"[T]he saddest reality as found in the mission is the irreparable damage that has been inflicted to the reputation of the Filipina woman in the international scene because of the indiscriminate deployment of our women as domestic helpers (DHs) and entertainers. **Our nation has gained the embarrassing reputation that we are a country of DHs, entertainers, and even prostitutes... It is said that even in a certain dictionary the latest definition of the word 'Filipina' is a 'housemaid'.**" (Beltran and Rodriguez, 1996: 73)

I begin today's talk with this quote because it captures the kinds of "domestic anxieties" that had pre-dated the Contemplacion hanging but which ultimately produced a

political crisis for the Philippine state. “Domestic anxieties” as I use the term here has multiple meanings. For years prior to the hanging, the state faced critiques of its labor export program, especially as women’s migration increased. The general public, migrant advocates and self-organized migrant women in different ways had drawn attention to problems associated with the out-migration of women. Some were concerned about the exploitation domestic workers and entertainers face at the hands of their employers and foreign governments. Others believed that women’s migration undermined the social and moral fabric of Philippine society as families were left without wives and mothers. The state, however, was initially ambivalent about these domestic anxieties as it continued to secure profits from labor export. It was not until these issues spilled out into the international arena, when the Philippine state’s labor export program was faced with a veritable domestic crisis, a gendered crisis, forcing it to respond with migration reform. As what the commission’s conclusion quoted above indicates, it was when the national subject-status of the Philippines had become threatened that the state became concerned with women’s migration and responsive to the issues long-raised by migrants and their allies. The Filipina domestic, the commission found, had become synonymous with the nation-state. If Filipina domestic workers occupied low-status jobs, the Philippines as a country had come to problematically occupy a low-status on the global stage.

My paper today is divided into 3 key parts. First, I begin with some background on Philippine migration and a theoretical discussion. Second, I track how different sectors of Philippine society, including the middle-classes, migrant advocates and migrants themselves began to raise concerns about the out-migration of women or what I term in the title of my paper, “domestic insecurities”, insecurities which ultimately led to a

gendered crisis with Contemplacion's hanging. Finally, in the third and concluding part of this talk, I evaluate to what extent the governmental reforms introduced to address and contain these "domestic insecurities" better empower women migrants.

### **Background and Theoretical Framework:**

Since 1974 when labor export was first institutionalized by the Philippine government as a developmental policy, it has benefited politically by providing jobs to its citizens and economically through the remittances sent by migrants earned from employment abroad.

Many studies of Philippine migration have demonstrated that migration offers important economic benefits. Remittances, which amount to several billion dollars yearly (\$8 billion US dollars in 2003; we have yet to get 2004 figures, but based on the general trends, it is likely to increase), increases the rate of national saving, thereby facilitating increased capital accumulation (Abello 1992). Moreover, remittances are an important source of foreign exchange (Vasquez 1992). The political benefits of migration, as the state makes plain in official policy documents, include mitigating the growth of the communist insurgency. The availability of employment overseas addresses the Philippines' perennial un- and underemployment problem, which, state officials believe, communists take advantage of to increase their ranks (see (DOLE 1995)).

Feminist scholars of development have argued that development is gendered in multiple ways. Postcolonial states draw on gendered representations to legitimize their developmental projects amongst their citizens, and they simultaneously draw on gendered representations to attract foreign capital on which they depend for investments (see (Ong 1999, Ong and Peletz 1995)). States that depend on labor export, like the Philippines,

must be able to mobilize their citizens for labor migration while also producing global demand for migrant labor. Gender shapes these two processes. For instance, the state has produced a discourse of “migrant heroism” representing overseas workers, particularly women migrants, as self-sacrificing, nationalist martyrs to normalize migration and migrants’ faithful remittance-sending to the homeland. At the same time, it produces discourses of Filipinas as having distinctive racialized and gendered characteristics making them desirable forms of labor for foreign employers. It is clear, that the Philippine has largely been successful in its project of labor export. Thousands of Filipino women, and men, leave the country on a daily basis to work, they do, in fact, send their remittances to the Philippines regularly, and foreign employers from all four corners of the world continue to demand Philippine labor.

Yet, if states rework gender for their own interests, it is not without conflict. As Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz argue in their anthology examining gender and body politics in Southeast Asia, “consent in gender meanings gives way to contestation” (Ong and Peletz 1995). These gender contestations can even lead to gendered crisis, especially if they spill into the global arena. Postcolonial states often concern themselves with their national-subject status in the world order as the legitimacy of their developmental projects also rests on it. National subject-status is often gendered, as different states are ascribed either more masculinized or feminized characteristics (Ong 1999). In the case of the Philippines, according to scholars like Neferti Tadiar, the migration of domestic workers produced “hegemonic national anxiety over the global status of the Filipino people” (Tadiar 1997). I argue that this “hegemonic national anxiety”, which is gendered, stemmed from the gender contestations and eventual crisis that culminated



with the hanging of Flor Contemplacion. This gender crisis ultimately, as I state above, forced the state to address the gender contestations its citizens had been engaging in.

### **Emergence of the Gender Crisis:**

By the late 1980s, Filipina migration began to significantly increase, rivaling the migration of Filipino men. A majority of these women worked as domestic workers and entertainers. This phenomenon raised concerns over the course of 1990s amongst the general public, with the media, migrant advocates, and migrants themselves issuing distinct, but sometimes-overlapping sets of critiques of the Philippine migration system. Indeed, it could be argued that it was only with the increasing migration of women that after nearly twenty years since its institutionalization, the Philippine state's migration program came to be significantly critiqued. Specifically, the death of a Filipina migrant worker triggered widespread public debate and marked an emergent gender crisis. In September 1991, Maricris Sioson returned to the Philippines in a casket after working as an entertainer in Japan. She was only 22 years old. A Japanese hospital concluded that Sioson had ultimately died from Hepatitis but her family believed that she might, in fact, have been a victim of torture. A second autopsy performed by the Philippines' National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) reveals that Sioson might have died from traumatic head injuries. In addition, the NBI found stab wounds and cuts in Sioson's vagina. The medical reports which appeared to be completely contradictory, raised major public concern. (Batnag 1991).

The Philippine media responded to Sioson's death by not only providing the public with graphic details of Sioson's autopsy by the NBI, by publishing numerous articles detailing the abuses suffered by other Filipina migrants. Several major national

newspapers and magazines published special articles focusing on Sioson's case specifically as well as other related cases of abuse and violence suffered by both entertainers and domestic workers. One newspaper editorial likened the Filipino labor export program to the African slave trade:

That's the cost of her overseas employment, which, like that of others, has been so profitable to the nation. It constitutes the Philippine version of the African slave trade of previous centuries, which enriched the native slave-owners and the Christian (European and American) buyers of the human commodity at the slave market" ("The Great Philippine Export Trade" 1991).

Indeed, the problem of women's migration had come to take such a central role in public discourse that in 1993, two years after the Sioson case, the Social Weather Stations (SWS), a private survey research institution whose findings get widespread media coverage, conducted a national survey entitled "Public Attitudes Towards Female Overseas Workers: Implications for Philippine Migration Policy". The survey found that nearly a majority of respondents believed that the absence of Filipina women from their families produces "many more problems and misunderstandings in the family".

Moreover, the survey found:

on the statement that women workers overseas bring shame to the country, the predominant position is disagreement (47%). Still, the percentages who outright agree (21%) and those who neither agree nor disagree (32%) are, uncomfortably high (Abrera-Mangahas 1994).

Additional surveys were conducted in the following years, all of which gauged public opinion on either women's migration or women's employment outside the home. These

surveys were entitled, “The Filipino Family, Gender Roles and Other Women’s Issues”, “Survey on OCWs: Danger and Deployment Bans”, “Perceptions of Risks Faced by Female Overseas Contract Workers”, and “Public Attitudes Towards the Working Mother”. While I will not go into detail on the findings of these surveys, the overriding concerns that emerged about the migration of entertainers and domestic workers were that they faced specific sets of risks given the nature of their jobs, their migration had detrimental effects on their families, and that their employment brought some degree of shame to the Philippine nation.

Migrant advocates, including NGO workers, religious groups and scholars, echoed public concerns about women’s migration, specifically the migration of domestic workers. They too believed that the migration of women negatively impacted their families left behind in the Philippines. In one set of studies sponsored by migrant advocates the question is posed, “Why do women leave their families? Have the Filipinas, especially the married ones, relegated their moral and family responsibilities of being wives and mothers to the background in exchange for monetary gains?” The studies conclude, in fact, that women’s migration leads to “values disorientation,” in families and the neglect of children (Beltran and Rodriguez 1996). Meanwhile in a public dialogue sponsored by migrant advocates, it was found that “the overseas workers and their families are not able to release their psychological anxieties and emotional distress. This results in loneliness and depression and to some extent, others would rather commit suicide” (“Filipino Labor Overseas: Recommendations and Transcript of Discussion” 1994). In this same public dialogue, the issue was also raised to whether the

migration of domestic workers threatens the image of the country. According to one advocate:

More female workers are now going out and what kind of jobs do they get?

Domestic helpers—and there are talks about our export labor becoming world-class. But what do they mean by world-class when the job openings for abroad are still for domestic helpers? ("Filipino Labor Overseas: Recommendations and Transcript of Discussion" 1994)

Clearly, for this migrant advocate, the Philippines cannot be seen as a “world-class” exporter of labor if it exports low-status domestic helpers. In other words, labor export itself would not be problematic for the Philippines; it may even be a source of global status, however the export of domestic workers threatens the Philippines’ subject-status.

The state, however, was initially ambivalent about these “domestic insecurities”. There were some government representatives who shared concerns that “It did not matter that the Philippines was already gaining notoriety as a country of domestics and prostitutes,” critiquing the administration for being too invested in the economic benefits of migration and not sufficiently worrying about the nation’s subject-status globally. Yet, the state did introduce initial policy reforms in the deployment of Filipina workers, (Dueñas, 1991; Santos, 1992). While it introduced these reforms, it simultaneously launched an awards system to recognize the contributions of overseas Filipinos (Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2000). In other words, though the state exhibited some concern about the problems faced by migrant women workers, at the same time, it continued to normalize and even valorize their out-migration.

Together, the public's and migrant advocate's concerns that women faced specific forms of exploitation overseas, that their migration had negative effects for their families, and that women's employment as domestics as well as entertainers threatened the Philippines' subject-status abroad constituted, I argue, an emergent gender crisis for the Philippine state. What is significant about the gender contestations around migration was the contradictory ways the broader public, migrant advocates and the state represented women's labor. Interestingly, the state, through its invocations of migrant women as "new national heroes", celebrated women for working outside the home and earning incomes abroad. Yet simultaneously, some state representatives supported the public and advocate's critiques of women's migration and attempted to better regulate it to some extent. Though the public and migrant advocates, were concerned with women's migration because their employment as domestic workers and entertainers reified problematic notions of femininity, they contradictorily raised the concern that women's migration undermined the social and moral fabric of family in the Philippines because women failed to perform traditional feminine roles.

Significantly, the concerns of migrant women themselves were often sidelined in these gender debates. By the time the Flor Contemplacion issue emerged, however, the self-organization of migrant women had increased to a global scale and it was their protests against Contemplacion's hanging globally that ultimately led to the crisis. This gender crisis questioned the legitimacy of the labor export regime and ultimately forced the state to respond to the various gender insecurities the migration of women had long elicited.

It was only four years after Maricris Sioson's death in Japan filled the headlines of every major Philippine newspaper that Flor Contemplacion's impending execution by the Singaporean government would fill newspaper headlines. Prior to and in the wake of her death, protests blazed throughout the Philippines and around the world. Migrante International, a transnational, migrant workers alliance led by migrant women, organized the protests. Though self-organized migrants had struggled around the Maricris Sioson case, several years earlier, it was only with Migrante's successful consolidation as an international alliance of migrant workers' organization in 1994 that it would, by 1995, allow it to mobilize global protests against Contemplacion's hanging thereby heightening the gender crisis for the Philippine state. Under global pressure from its migrant citizens, who had also effectively mobilized the Philippine public, migrant advocates and allies, the Philippine president requested that the Singaporean government consider postponing the execution. New evidence, including testimony from Filipina domestic workers claiming that the boy Contemplacion was accused of murdering, actually died from an epileptic fit while bathing, needed to be fully evaluated by the Singaporean courts. In making this request, however, the Philippine government strained relations with Singapore, a major trading partner. The Singaporean government, nevertheless, dismissed this evidence and proceeded with her execution.

Migrante's critique of women's migration, different from the previous critiques voiced in the public and by migrant advocates, focused on the Philippine state's labor export policy. For them, the Philippine government was complicit in and responsible for the various problems women migrants and their families experienced. In a report published by Migrante International activists working abroad, it states:

Philippine embassies and consulates generally shut out from their doors Filipino workers who have problems with their employers and with the governments of the so-called host country. In the case of the Philippine embassy in Singapore, it not only blamed Flor and others like her, it was the first one to say that Flor had been given a 'fair trial' by the Singapore court (Bayan International 1995).

Activists even invoked the Philippine state's discourse around Filipino migrants' "heroism" to highlight the state's culpability in Contemplacion's execution:

The case of Flor placed on the national agenda the sad plight of migrant workers, pointed to the complicity of the Ramos government in the death of Flor and its inability or refusal to protect its so-called "modern day heroes" who are in reality "modern-day slaves(Bayan International 1995).

Migrants' critique that women's migration was a consequence of the state's labor export program differed from the critiques voiced by the public and migrant advocates. Earlier debates around women's migration as framed by these groups, though concerned with the state's migration policy, had called mainly for migration reform. In the surveys of women's migration discussed above, for instance, those surveyed generally supported more restrictive migration policies limiting women's migration (Abrera-Mangahas 1994). Migrant advocates similarly called for more restrictions in the deployment of women migrants. In some cases, they called for increased training opportunities for women being deployed as domestic workers and entertainers. The logic being that training and professionalization pre-departure would result in more empowered women at the work-site. Moreover, they called for the state to engage in better negotiations with labor-importing governments that would allow the Philippine

government to offer services to its overseas citizens, particularly women (Beltran and De Dios 1992) ("Filipino Labor Overseas: Recommendations and Transcript of Discussion" 1994). Migrante, however, called for no less than the total dismantlement of the labor export program as evidenced in its mission statement as well as its affiliation with the militant left movement of the Philippines:

“The ultimate aspiration of Migrante is for migrant Filipinos to stay and live with their families in the Philippines that is free from the exploitation and domination of imperialist powers: where farmers own the land they till; workers enjoy a just employment and working conditions, and where people’s rights are upheld and defended. This aspiration they share with the vast majority of workers, peasants, and all democratic classes and strata in Philippine society” (Migrante International 1994).

If Migrante’s critiques of the state’s role in women’s migration, were different from those articulated by the public and migrant advocates, so too were their modes of raising their critiques publicly. Migrante activists use what they call “extra-legal” forms of protest such as rallies and demonstrations as opposed to the formal state-NGO dialogues for policy reform favored by migrant advocates because they believe these forms of protest put more decisive pressure on the state to respond.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, “extra-legal” modes of struggle both in the Philippines and overseas may have been the only way that migrant workers could register their concerns with the Philippine state transnationally. These actions captured international attention and the support of international human rights organizations (Migrante Europa 1995). It was self-organized migrants’ ability to bring migrant women’ issues onto a global stage, I argue, that effectively compelled the Philippine state to respond to long-held concerns about

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<sup>1</sup> Based on interview with Migrante International activists in Manila, 2000-2001.



women's migration from the Philippines. Though the public and migrant advocates, along with individual state representatives had voiced their "domestic insecurities" it was only with global mobilizations against the hanging of Flor Contemplacion when massive reforms in the overseas employment program would be put into place. In this final section I examine and evaluate the migration reform programs that the state introduced specifically for domestic helpers as well as entertainers.

**State response:**

Republic Act 8042 (RA8042) passed very soon after the execution of Flor Contemplacion was a watershed in the state migration program mandating many important policies very specifically related to better protecting women migrants. Though it did not address the demands for major economic transformation issued by self-organized migrant women like those in Migrante International, it did address the calls for migration reform that the broader public and migrant advocates had been articulating over the years. For instance, it states in RA8042 that, "The State recognizes that the ultimate protection to all migrant workers is the possession of skills. Pursuant to this and as soon as practicable, the government shall deploy and/or allow the deployment only to skilled Filipino workers". For domestic workers, who the state officially categorizes as "vulnerable workers", this has meant mandatory training programs prior to deployment overseas. In addition to skills training, the state also expanded its worker education programs attempting to better disseminate "information of labor and employment conditions, migration realities and other facts, and adherence of particular countries to international standards on human and workers' rights which will adequately prepare individuals into making informed and intelligent decisions about overseas employment".

The expansion of training and worker education programs responded directly to the calls of the public and migrant advocates for these kinds of services. Post-deployment, in countries of destination, RA8042 mandates government services on-site that offer additional training and skills upgrading programs. Moreover, the state provides legal and welfare services for migrant workers in distress. Because the state has officially incorporated a “gender sensitive” approach to migration policy, it means that all of these programs attempt to address the specific problems faced by migrant women. Finally, the state, through RA8042, even mandates new forms of non-governmental organization (NGO)-state partnership that engage migrant advocates in the provision of services and programs to aid in migrant workers’ protection. RA8042 states, “non-governmental organizations, duly recognized as legitimate, are partners of the State in the protection of Filipino migrant workers and in the promotion of their welfare”.

A closer examination of RA8042, however, through interviews of migration officials and observations of these programs, reveals how migration reform, is ultimately less about the regulation of women’s migration, but more about the regulation of women migrants themselves. Interestingly, the ways the state attempts to regulate migrant women, echoes the very same gendered ideas that the public and migrant advocates deployed in their calls for migration reform.

A migration official in the POEA explains the purpose of women workers’ training, as well as their education through the PDOS:

Our concern is that often these workers do not send money to the Philippines or don’t try to take care of family problems at home. These kinds of seminars emphasize workers’ responsibilities to their families.

Yet another migration official, a very high-ranking official of the POEA in fact, explains that the state must provide domestic workers and entertainers specific kinds of programs because, “There are lost of social costs when a mother or elder sister is missing.”

For these officials, state migration programs are aimed at orienting women migrants toward the Philippines to actively cultivate their sense of familial responsibility. The assumption that they make is that women are not already orienting themselves to their families’ needs. As a consequence, families suffer a number of “social costs”. The gendered notions that underlie state official’s perspectives on programs aimed as “vulnerable workers” resonate with those articulated by the public and migrant advocates in the wake of Maricris Sioson’d death. If the public and migrant advocates pointed to increasing problems in migrant women’s family lives as a means for calling for migration reform, the state attempted to address these problems by attempting to inculcate certain kinds of family values amongst migrant women.

It is important to note that as I further queried one of these officials about the state’s programs for migrant women, she began to weep profusely stating:

We really need to take care of them. When I see the DH [domestic helpers] and the OPAs [overseas performing artists], I just cry. They’re so innocent...I really hope things change for them. We really have to reach out to them, to give them self-respect and confidence...you know, when we are on the airplane or in the airport traveling, when we have them next to us, deep inside we’re ashamed.

Here, interestingly enough, the state believes that training and worker education programs not only address the problems of women’s migration by equipping women with the proper family values, but effectively, the state assumes its own kind of familial

responsibility for them. This official uses familial language in describing the state's role. The state, in her words, must "take care of" domestic workers and entertainers because they are "innocent". By doing so, she seems to suggest, the state may be able to deal with the deep-seated sense of shame their migration produces.

Only through observations of the state's migration programs, can we see what kinds of gendered familial responsibilities the state attempts to inculcate as well as how the state attempts address the shamefulness of the migration of domestic workers and entertainers. In this paper, I will focus on my observations of the state-mandated Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar. I focus on the PDOS specifically, because all women migrants being deployed to work as domestic workers or entertainers are required to attend a Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar with either the POEA, a government agency, or an authorized NGO prior to departure. Indeed, migrants earn a certificate of PDOS attendance so that they are able to actually leave for their place of employment. The certificate is checked at the airport's Labor Assistance Counter prior to workers' being able to check in at with their airline. In addition, worker's returning overseas to work after a lapse of 5 years are required to be attend the PDOS again. In short, the PDOS is an important site of study because it is a vital component of the state's program aimed at addressing the problems of women's migration.

One major aspect of the PDOS is the "values formation" section. I found, interestingly, that the state had hired a former NGO staff member, who was also a nun, to facilitate the values formation portion of the PDOS. Excerpts from this PDOS facilitator illustrate the ways the state attempts to regulate migrant women. At one point she states:

When you ask in different countries what a Pinay is they will say domestic helper or fucking machine. Men in other countries will actually try their luck on Filipinas but you don't have to give in! They'll actually respect your decision not to give in, but because we only have money-values, we give in.

She continues:

You have your objective of achieving a "better life", but what are your concrete plans? Food? Shelter? Clothing? Education? What about your value systems? If you rely on the Pinoy value system will you succeed? It is not clear that you will. Food, clothing, education, will only deal with your physical needs. There is something else that's important, more than the dollars you send. There's the spiritual aspect. Remember, as OFWs, you are Pinoy and you're Christian. Bayan, lipunan, pamilya [Nation, society, family]. These aspects are within us but who is it that brings all sorts of problems to other countries? We do. It is embarrassing. Look at our country. Our heroes are dead and rotting. Take care of the dignity of your country.

These remarks are important because they suggest that the problematic representations that often bring shame to the Philippine nation are attributable directly to Filipina migrants themselves. Filipinas can be sexually promiscuous and their promiscuity is linked to having "money-values", that is, that women are literally willing to prostitute themselves for money. Here the state is concerned with the sexual conduct of Filipinas. As feminist scholars remind us, "Sexual conduct...is an indicator of the moral integrity and, to some extent, the legitimacy of the state" (Suryakusuma 1996).

Filipina women workers, according to the state, must regulate their sexuality because their sexual misconduct overseas shames the nation.

Though the values formation component of the PDOS, posits intimate links between the nation and the family. By coupling “nation, society and family”, the state seems to suggest that ultimately, when women take care of their families, they simultaneously secure the well-being of the nation.

If women migrants bring shame to the nation, they may ultimately cause problems for future migrants. As the instructor of PDOS’ “values formation” section contends, should problematic women workers tarnish the Philippines’ image, all categories of Filipino migrants may lose future opportunities for overseas work. She states, “its in your hands, the image of this country, and the prospects for your fellow Filipinos”.

What becomes clear through an analysis of the PDOS is that state displaces its own role in promoting the systematic migration of women workers in these particular categories of work, suggesting instead that it is the consequence of bad decisions on the part of women. Women migrants, ultimately, are to blame for problems in the families and for bringing shame to the nation. . While the PDOS is supposed to be “gender sensitive” and empowering to “vulnerable workers” as an educational tool, it instead has, problematically, the effect of disciplining Filipinas.

Once migrant women are deployed to work overseas, there are even institutional mechanisms by which the state can assure that they conform to their familial responsibilities. The family members of migrants can, through the POEA’s Welfare Services Branch, compel their overseas relatives to send money to the Philippines if they

fail to remit their earnings regularly. The POEA can send letters to migrants to remind them of their duties to their families reading:

We would like to remind you that as an overseas Filipino workers it is one of your obligations to provide ample financial and moral support to your family. Make your loved ones feel your presence as though you were with them through constant communications. Failure to comply with this responsibility affects not only the socio-economic, but also the moral and mental well-being of helpless dependents, thus adversely affecting their struggle for survival. We therefore hope you understand our writing you (Welfare Services Branch ).

After several warnings, workers can then be “watchlisted” and prevented from future overseas work.<sup>2</sup> Here, the Philippine state draws on discourses around familial responsibility to compel errant migrants to remit their earnings home.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper suggests that in the Philippines, migration has become an important developmental intervention. Migration, particularly the migration of women migrants as domestic workers and entertainers, however, has come to be questioned by many important social actors. These social actors including the broader public, migrant advocates and migrant workers themselves have contested the meanings of gender, especially notions of femininity, as it has been transformed by international migration. The different ideas of gender and their implications for the families and the Philippine state, are sometimes contradictory. Concerns raised about migrant women’s welfare, at times, reify traditional notions of femininity, even as they are aimed at bettering the conditions migrant women face. The state though initially ambivalent about these

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, Welfare Services Branch, POEA, 2000-2001.

concerns, even with the highly graphic and violent death of Maricris Sioson is ultimately compelled to address them, particularly when self-organized migrants bring the issue of women's migration to a global stage with the protests against the hanging of domestic worker, Flor Contemplacion. When the Philippine state finds its gendered subject-status tested in the global arena, it finally responds to the broader public and migrant advocates' call for migration policy reform. Yet, upon closer interrogation of state officials and observations of the programs and services this migration policy reform gives rise to, it becomes clear that it is women migrants' themselves, as opposed to the processes of women's migration, that are regulated. Indeed, paradoxically enough, the ways the state defines appropriate forms of femininity, are precisely those invoked by the public and migrant advocates to call for reform.

This paper offers a different theoretical vantage point, as I suggest in the beginning of this paper, for understanding the gendered implications of migration. However, it has additional theoretical and political implications. Theoretically, this paper suggests that migration policy reform may be induced by specific kinds of gender politics as developing states, like the Philippines, struggle to maintain domestic and global legitimacy. Politically, this paper suggests that the kinds of migration reforms that states introduce as a consequence of gendered, political crises, may problematically reify traditional notions of femininity; notions that may serve to disempower women. The fact is, women migrants are indeed subject to various forms of abuse when they work overseas—they are paid low wages if they are paid at all, they work in terrible working conditions, and are subject to various forms of physical, sexual and psychological violence—calling for necessary interventions on the part of the state. However, we need



to interrogate the kinds of responses that have been instituted by the state, as well as other social actors, to address these problems. It is necessary to examine the consequences of these policies, regardless of their stated purposes, in terms of its potential consequences for women migrants. Finally, though I do not discuss it at length here, there is the issue of how self-organized women position themselves in these gender debates. At times there is a disjuncture between the ways migrant advocates make claims on behalf of migrants, and the way migrants make claims for themselves. Given the problematic policy reforms that resulted from the state's gendered crisis of migration, self-organized migrant movements, may offer more empowering visions for migrant women.

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