

Gender and the Transnational Family

Femininity is imposed for the most part through an unremitting discipline that concerns every part of the body and is continuously recalled through the constraints of clothing or hairstyle. The antagonistic principles of male and female identity are thus laid down in the form of permanent stances, gaits, postures which are the realization, or rather, the naturalization of an ethic.

—Pierre Bourdieu¹

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. —Judith Butler²

The task of “measuring up” to one’s gender is faced again and again in different situations with respect to different particulars of conduct. The problem involved is to produce configurations of behavior *which can be seen* by others as normative gender behavior. —Sarah Fenstermaker, Candace West, and Don Zimmerman³

Lalake yan o baba-e yan? (“Is that a man or is that a woman?”) is a question that I frequently heard passersby utter out loud when I walked by. Some people gawked, others pointed, and the rest just looked at me in perplexity. I stirred gender confusion everywhere I went in the Philippines including city streets in Manila, beach towns in the provinces, a hallway of the Presidential Palace, the neighborhood where I lived, even the sports facility where I went running every day, and finally the malls I frequently visited to escape the sweltering heat outdoors. I was born biologically sexed as female with XX chromosomes, and before doing the research for this project in the Philippines had never questioned my gender identity to be other than that of a woman.

Prior to my return to this country where I was born and from which I was uprooted at the age of thirteen, I had not once thought that I would

cross gender boundaries when clad in a dress, defy gender normativity with my floral hairclips, challenge gender norms with my red lipstick, or violate gender categories when strutting in high heels. The gender trouble over my identity and the gender confusion I stirred left me aghast and quite offended at first, then troubled, and finally puzzled. What is it about me that instigated “gender trouble” in the Philippines? Moreover, why did people not hesitate to vocalize their gender confusion over me? In other words, why did they have to box me in a sex category? Finally, why did they need to place me within a set gender category that discretely embodies cultural notions of masculinity or femininity?

In the Philippines, I was often assumed to be a man, or more precisely a transgender woman, a *bakla*.⁴ Ironically, I am a heterosexual woman. At my field research site, a group of friends, I heard, had wagered a bet of a case of beer over my sex. Once, after a lecture, I was approached by a woman from the audience. In the middle of lauding me she could not help but suddenly blurt out, “Oh, my . . . you fooled me! The whole time you were talking to us, I thought you were a real woman.” The “gender trouble” embodying my everyday life in the Philippines is not mirrored in any other country I have visited in Asia, Europe, or the Americas. Thus, I often left the Philippines to take a break from my gendered woes and seek the comfort of gender recognition that welcomed me in another country. To be categorically defined as a woman, with all of its labels, stereotypes, and assumptions, became a welcome break from my gender ambiguity. Categorization, I learned from experience, brings comfort.

Because of my ability to escape the cultural terrain that placed me in an ambiguous gender location, I do not think that the confusion over my gender had been due to my physical appearance. Moreover, I do not believe that I have biological attributes that could predispose one to assume that I am biologically male. For instance, I do not have an Adam’s apple. I do not wear a moustache or sport any other facial hair. I happen to have curves. I may not have the biggest chest, but one could see it is not flat. At 5’4”, I am taller than most women in the Philippines but not taller than most men. I may have muscles, but they are not large enough to bulge on their own. I also wore my hair long in the Philippines, and often wore skirts. Despite all these physical attributes and my choice to manufacture a gendered female stylized body, I was still, perplexingly, labeled “biologically male.”

In my bewilderment over the gender confusion provoked by my physical presence, I asked my friends and family to identify the distinguishing mark-

ers that labeled me as male. When I asked how I could be *mistaken* for a biological male, almost all gave the same response: *galaw*, or movement. This one word captured what I would have to transform to fit prescribed gender categorizations in the Philippines. It is not what I do or the way I look but the way I move that labels me as biologically male. But where I learned to be a woman shapes how I move as one. I had conformed to femininity not in the Philippines but in the United States, not as part of a majority but as a racial minority, not in a suburb but instead in the inner city housing projects, and not in a neighborhood known for its safety but instead one associated with crime. Thus I learned femininity in a space that cultivated in it toughness, which emerges in my quick-paced walk, my purposeful gait, and my tough exterior. The everyday practice of my femininity violated the system of knowledge and discourse of femininity prescribed to women in the Philippines. Accordingly, most Filipinos placed me in the biological category of male.

In vocalizing their confusion about my gender, people did not leave me in a space of gender ambiguity but often forcibly categorized me as one who is biologically male and gendered female. Yet, my choice to be gendered female as one assumed to be biologically male was often met with resentment and resistance. Waiters frequently greeted me "sir"; store clerks directed me to the men's and not the women's room; and airport security reprimanded me for being in the wrong line for the required body check of passengers. In the Philippines, my gender determined my sex.

In the perspective of most, I had to accordingly succumb to my prescribed categorization. As feminist sociologist Judith Lorber similarly observes, "The norms, expectations and evaluation of women and men may be converging, but we have no social place for a person who is neither woman nor man. A man who passes as a woman or a woman as a man still violates strong social boundaries, and when transsexuals change gender, they still cross a great divide."⁵ The same can be said for a woman who in her actions passes quite well, even if only inadvertently, as a man; she is seen to violate social boundaries by not behaving like a man. In my socially situated experience, practice and not biology had determined not only my gender but also my sex. A reconstitution of my everyday practices would have accordingly placed me in a gender and sexual category familiar to the discursive construction of masculinity and femininity in the Philippines.

My contestation of gender terms did not elicit transformation, however, but forced my conformity via my categorization. Including ascribedly male

traits in my performance of femininity was not greeted by a welcome expansion of gender terms from most. My insistence to be labeled as a female who includes in her self-presentation ascribedly male gender characteristics was met with resistance. Women blocked me from entering their rest rooms, and airport security detained me for not moving out of the line designated to women into the line for men. Thus, biology did not entitle me to be included in the social spaces of women, but my membership required the conformity of my behavior according to the gender terms in the Philippines. In other words, my performance of gender had to abide by the rules, the prescribed practices of the gender order, and the recognizable actions that would deem me worthy of the label of "Filipino woman."

Gender and Transnational Families

These gender lessons in the field emphasized to me that deeply embedded norms and expectations distinguish the daily practices of men and women. These distinctions, while arguably social creations in their maintenance, uphold gender boundaries that create social order via the proper behavior assigned to men and women. The prescription of "normative gender behavior" attends to the most minute actions, gestures, and behavior of individuals. As I had encountered, society continuously enforces gender boundaries to uphold norms through the monitoring of daily practices. A person's crossing of socially inscribed gender definitions is often met with dismay and faces obstacles, as shown for instance by my being prevented from entry into women's public spaces in the Philippines. I did not have to be biologically female, or just physically ascribed to be a woman; instead, to be allowed in these spaces I had to behave like a woman. Experiencing the Foucauldian assertion that society is a panoptic machine, I faced the coercion of gender conformity through the surveillance and policing of my actions and behavior.⁶

My experience raises the question as to the other ways that society may similarly attempt to control the reconstitution of gender—not just for those with transnational lives such as my own, but also for women who participate in the labor market, those affected by the disjunctures brought by the penetration of "ideoscapes" and "mediascapes" and other dimensions of cultural flows in globalization,⁷ and finally those forced to reconstitute their households due to migration. In this project, my concern is with the constitution of gender in the formation of migrant transnational households, meaning households located in two or more nation-states.

An estimated 7.38 million Filipinos work and reside in more than 160 countries.⁸ This makes them one of the largest groups of migrant laborers in the global economy. Notably, a great number of migrant Filipinos are parents—mothers or fathers who have had to migrate to provide for their children economically but who must at the same time leave these very same children behind in the Philippines. The increasing number of transnational families marks an institutional rupture to the order of gender in the Filipino family, as the maintenance and constitution of such households call for a redistribution of the traditional gender division of labor in the family. The formation of transnational households threatens cultural parameters and institutional norms marked by material inequalities between men and women as well as ideology. Thus, transnational families in their institutional arrangement invite gender transformations in the level of interaction.

This is the case in transnational families maintained by both migrant mothers and migrant fathers. For instance, in the case of migrant mother-based households, we see social change invited by the complete removal of biological mothers from the physical confines of the home, as well as by the increase in women's earning power in the household. In the case of migrant father-based households, we see the geographic inconvenience that fathers experience in maintaining their male-ascribed responsibility of disciplining children when they relocate to work across national boundaries.

In Anthony Giddens's concept of structuration, structural constraints potentially disable practices so as to prompt social transformations.⁹ If so, we should expect to see the emergence of social transformations from the formation of Filipino transnational families. As social theorist of gender Robert Connell states, "To describe structure is to specify what it is in the situation that constrains the play of practice. Since the consequence of practice is a transformed situation which is the object of new practice, 'structure' specifies the way practice (over time) constrains practice. . . . But practice cannot escape structure, cannot float free from its circumstances (any more than social actors are simply 'bearers' of the structure)."¹⁰ According to Connell, structural conditions control but do not predetermine the gender outcome of the practices that constitute institutions. The reproduction of the social order depends on the constitution of practices. Disagreements in practices that emerge from internal contradictions in structural constraints may in fact subvert structures.¹¹ This perspective suggests that actions potentially transform institutional orders and structures.

Actions that depart from the reproduction of normative conceptions thus

enable “countervailing processes of resistance, challenge, conflict and change.”¹² As Judith Butler notes, “The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repletion that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.”¹³ Transnational families open the door for the reconstitution of gender by rupturing the structural constraints that encourage the “normative gender behavior” more appropriate to patriarchal nuclear households.

Indeed, transnational families are significant because they pose a challenge to the maintenance of the ideology of separate spheres as well as the traditional gender division of labor in the Filipino family. As noted, these challenges include the removal of biological mothers from the domestic sphere, the increase in the income power of women, and also the parodic performance of mothering and fathering that is prompted by its recital over distance. An example of “parodic performance” is the need for migrant fathers to portray themselves as exaggeratedly domineering authorities as their way of adjusting to being denied by geographical distance to perform their gender-ascribed duty as the disciplinarian of the family.

Although following “normative gender behavior” is not at all convenient in transnational families, I found that patriarchal traditions are more often sustained than contested by the actions that maintain these families. In other words, the institution of the transnational family reifies more than it transgresses conventional gender boundaries. Notably, the maintenance of gender does not only occur via the occupational segregation of most migrant mothers into domestic work. Instead, as I will illustrate, the various ways that migrants and their kin adapt to their reconstituted households enforce gender boundaries. Moreover, the integration of transnational families into the Philippine public sphere imposes a pressure to uphold gender norms via the public sphere’s rejection and society’s disapproval of this household structure.

By illustrating that actions in transnational households maintain “normative gender behavior,” I establish that actions do not necessarily succumb to their situated context or give in to structural constraints and organizational pressures. The reenactment of conventional gender norms in the transnational families of migrant mothers and fathers in the Philippines is testament to actions defying the potential subversions offered by the physical absence of mothers and fathers from the home.

As the actions that maintain transnational families do not always abide by their institutional and structural context, I found that a gender paradox

of reifying and transgressing gender boundaries limits the potential for gender transformation in Filipino transnational households. More specifically, I observed that while the structural arrangement of transnational households sometimes forces the unavoidable transgression of gender norms, for instance via the incomes earned by women, the performance that maintains these families also upholds “normative gender behavior.” I found that migrant mothers indeed provide care from thousands of miles away, whereas fathers continue to reject the responsibility of nurturing children. Additionally, migrant fathers insist on disciplining from a distance. Finally, mothers left behind at home by migrant fathers perform a parodic version of intensive mothering in response to the ultimate breadwinning achieved by migrant fathers. Resistance to the forced crossing of gender boundaries secures for transnational family members their self-identities as gendered male or gendered female. It should come as no surprise that both mothers and fathers insist on defying the gender transformations instigated by the reorganization of their households. They resist gender ambiguity and conform to gender boundaries.

In summary, this book establishes that a gender paradox defines transnational family life in the Philippines, from the incorporation of these families in the public domain to the actions that maintain them. It also illustrates the reifications and transgressions of gender norms that occur in transnational households. These conflicting processes of gender are the base from which I examine the experiences of children in transnational families.

Methodology

The primary research site for this project was a city located in an area of the Central Philippines that is composed of six provinces with an approximate population of 6 million.¹⁴ I chose this city as my field research site because of the high concentration of colleges and schools in this small geographic area. Based on my previous research on migrant Filipina domestic workers, I assumed that many children left behind in transnational families would be represented in institutions of higher learning, because the attainment of education for one’s children is a central motivating factor for labor migration.¹⁵ I also chose this site because it has a medium-range scale of migrant labor outflow and thus offers us a perspective on transnational families from a community that is equally divided between those directly and those not directly affected by emigration.

I spent eighteen non-continuous months between January 2000 and April 2002 doing field research for this project, with the first round of data gathered between January and July 2000 and the second round from May 2001 to April 2002. For my primary data, I conducted one- to three-hour in-depth and open-ended tape-recorded interviews with sixty-nine young adults who grew up in transnational migrant households. I supplemented these interviews with open-ended interviews with thirty-one of their guardians.

I identified most of the participants in this study with the cooperation of schools in the area. I solicited volunteers to participate in this study in four of the largest schools, but I also diversified my sample by seeking research participants outside the school setting through the use of informal networks of family and friends. Altogether, I interviewed thirty children with migrant mothers, twenty-six with migrant fathers, and thirteen with two migrant parents. The parents are scattered globally, working in Asia, the Middle East, the Americas, and Europe. Some of them worked on cargo ships. My interviews with young adult children focus on their family life, relationships with their parents and other relatives, feelings about parental migration, and finally their goals and aspirations in life. With only an intermediate knowledge of the local dialect, I conducted these interviews in Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines. Most interviewees responded in Tagalog, but some used a combination of Tagalog, English, and the local dialect. I fully transcribed and then translated these interviews into English. A research assistant aided me with translation of passages in the local dialect into English.

Interviews were conducted in a private and quiet setting, usually my residence in the city center, since many of the interviewees resided in crowded student boarding houses or did not feel comfortable enough to talk openly about their transnational family life in their own homes amidst kin. To protect the anonymity of informants, I have used pseudonyms for all interviewees. I collected an unsystematic sample of research participants by using snowball referrals that began in four of the largest schools in the area. I identified interviewees by making classroom announcements and visiting business establishments that students frequent near school grounds. I collected interviews in both public and private school settings so as to generate a sample that is representative of diverse class backgrounds. To further ensure the diversity of my sample,

I also identified interviewees using nonuniversity-based networks of friends and relatives in the area.

From May 2001 to April 2002, I returned to the field to conduct follow-up interviews with the children as well as open-ended and in-depth interviews with their guardians. I interviewed thirty-one guardians of twenty-eight children in my study and an additional five guardians of young children. I located the guardians with the help of a research assistant, who had to travel to quite a few remote destinations. We were able to locate only fifty-six of the children originally interviewed. Of these children, two denied our requests to speak to their guardians. Of the children who gave us permission, ten of their guardians declined our request for an interview. Most gave the reason of being too busy. We were unable to interview as many guardians as we would have liked as many were also geographically inaccessible. We conducted the interviews with guardians not necessarily to check the validity of the information we gathered from our original sample, but to gain an understanding of the roles and contributions of other members of the family in transnational household maintenance.

In order to include the perspective of younger children in my data, I supplemented my interviews with a survey questionnaire of 228 elementary and high school students from transnational migrant families. I conducted this survey in two public school districts and one private school in the area. The survey expands our perspective on the changes in family life initiated by migration, the role of extended kin in transnational household maintenance, and the emotional state of younger children growing up without at least one migrant parent. Two research assistants helped me complete the survey, which we conducted in all of the public elementary schools in one district in my research site and in one public high school and one private high school in the area.

Finally, to gather information on the community perspective toward transnational families, I conducted focus-group discussions with members of local organizations and support groups for migrant workers and their families and interviewed guidance counselors, priests, and representatives of non-governmental and governmental organizations. I also gathered secondary research materials in Manila, particularly surveys and census reports released by governmental and non-governmental organizations on the state of migration, the labor market, and the status of women in the Philippines, as well as media reports on transnational families.

In summary, I look at transnational families from the perspectives and experiences of those left behind by migrant workers in the Philippines. My

readings on the constitution of gender in transnational family life come from the perspective of individuals whose narratives are accordingly shaped by their gendered expectations of the family, their gender ideologies, and their notions of “normative gender behavior.” In my analysis of the constitution of gender, I do not ignore the assumptions that shape the narratives that I had collected for this study but deconstruct and identify them in my reading of transnational family life. While I was mistaken as a *bakla* in the field, I do not believe that my perceived sexuality influenced the contents of my interviews. *Baklas* are far more integrated in the Philippines than they are in the United States. At most, I believe my interviewees probably talked about my mistaken sexual identity after I had left and commented on how deceptively good I looked as a woman.

Organization of the Book

As noted, this study establishes the paradoxes of gender that define the maintenance of transnational households. By this I mean that I illustrate the disruptions and perpetuations of “normative gender behavior” in Filipino transnational migrant families. I begin my inquiry into the constitution of gender by situating these families in a political framework that explains their formation from the gendered lens of the global economy. I explain in Chapter 1 that transnational families form in the context of the macro-process of *care resource extraction*. This macro-process occurs via two mechanisms—(1) the labor migration of women as domestics and nurses and (2) structural adjustment policies that enforce the reduction of state welfare provisions in lieu of servicing the foreign debt.

In Chapter 2, I shift my focus to the integration of transnational families in the Philippine public domain. I argue that public reaction to transnational families highlights their dysfunctions vis-à-vis dominant perceptions of the proper order of gender in Philippine society. In so doing, the public inadvertently hides the dysfunctions of the Philippine economy by placing these problems in the shadow of migrant women’s disruptions of gender conventions. Then, in Chapter 3, I move to establish how gendered care expectations of children define intergenerational relations in transnational migrant families. I establish that children’s care expectations demand greater work from women than they do from men.

In Chapter 4, I begin my close interrogation of intergenerational relations in transnational families. This chapter focuses on the families of migrant fa-

thers, which I establish to reflect heteronormative nuclear families. The only difference is the temporal and spatial rearrangement of the family: instead of routinely coming home during suppertime, the father comes home to his family every ten months. However, the maintenance of these families, which may seem to epitomize the patriarchal nuclear family, in actuality relies on the transgression of gender boundaries by the wives left behind in the Philippines.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I take a closer look at the transnational families of migrant women, which I show rely on the assistance of extended kin, unlike the more nuclear-family-based transnational households of migrant men. Chapter 5 establishes the contradiction between the reconstitution of gender by the institutional rearrangement of migrant-mother families and the perpetuation of gender norms by the care practices in these families. I look closely at the work of fathers, migrant mothers, eldest daughters (of which I interviewed fifteen young women), and finally extended kin, showing that each group reinforces gender boundaries in the caring work that they do for the family.

In Chapter 6, I examine the prominence of the discourse of abandonment among the children of migrant mothers. I establish that regardless of the care that they do receive in transnational families, the children of migrant mothers are more apt to describe their relationship with their mothers as consisting of abandonment. Moreover, their cries of abandonment increase the more their families deviate from the conventional gender scripts of the Filipino family.

Chapter 7 offers a look at the lives of children in families with two migrant parents. In this chapter, I address the issue of prolonged separation, which is a common experience but is not exclusive to this group of children. Notably, most children who endure prolonged separation have parents who are based in nations with liberal migratory regimes, such as the United States. Here, I address how the geographical destination of parents—in other words, the state policies of the receiving country of migration—shapes transnational family relations.

I conclude my study with a discussion of the persistence of gender in globalization. I emphasize how not even the complete removal of biological mothers from the home can threaten the stronghold of the ideology of separate spheres in the family. I end with some proposals on how ideological changes might lessen the difficulties confronting transnational households.

The Global Economy of Care

A growing crisis of care troubles families in the developing world. By care, I refer to the labor and resources needed to ensure the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals. This is the case in the Philippines, where parents must look to labor migration as a way of ensuring that they can send children to school, give them access to quality health care, and even provide them with just the basic food. On average, 2,531 Filipino workers, many of whom are parents, leave the country as overseas contract workers on a daily basis.¹ Indeed, the transnational family has become a norm in the Philippines, where according to representatives of local nongovernmental organizations in Manila, there are approximately 9 million Filipino children under the age of eighteen who are growing up without the physical presence of at least one migrant parent in the country.²

The phenomenon of the transnational family cuts across class boundaries. Migrant parents occupy not a few but many labor market sectors, from professionals to semiskilled workers to unskilled laborers. These workers are in various destination countries and occupy a vast range of occupations in the global labor market. They include engineers toiling in the oil rigs of Gulf region countries; nurses caring for the elderly and sick in Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; domestic workers cleaning the homes of the affluent in Asia, the Gulf region, North America, and Europe; seafarers manning cargo ships the world over; and teachers safeguarding the classrooms of public schools in Texas and California. These are just a few of the occupations held by the parents of the children I met in the Philippines.

In this chapter, I explore the reasons why parents raise their children in transnational households. Not all parents who want to leave the Philippines