

Dilemmas of Community: Reflections on Transmigrant Working Women in Qatar

Shefali Jha

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY

SHEFALI@MAIL.JNU.AC.IN

The six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council have, since the 1980s, attracted a large number of workers from South and Southeast Asian nations. In more recent years, increasingly more women from these countries have found paid employment in the Gulf. Whereas expatriate male workers largely join the construction industry in the Gulf countries, expatriate women work in domestic labor, the hospitality industry, beauty parlors and hospitals, and as teachers, office secretaries and accountants. Even though their residence permits have to be renewed every year, many of them spend as many as ten to twenty years working in the Gulf. These expatriate working women thus, both occupy, and construct transnational social fields. How do these expatriate women, workers from outside, set up new networks of their own to survive their location in transnational spaces? This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the experience of Filipina and Indian working women in the Arabian Gulf country of Qatar in terms of their integration in the Qatari economy and their survival strategies. Employment in most of the GCC countries, including Qatar, is governed by the kafala or the sponsorship system, the provisions of which are often used by the local employers to take advantage of the transmigrant workers. Caught between the practices of the states that they come from and the states that they work in, the transmigrant working women depend on local networks that they set up among their co-nationals in order to be able to negotiate the kafala system and to benefit from their experience of transmigration.

---->

Keywords:

transnationalism, kafala, gender, networks, state policies

EXPATRIATES IN THE GCC

One of the many ways in which globalization has impacted societies of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) is the influx of large numbers of transmigrant women workers. The incorporation of Gulf societies into the world economy increased drastically following the discovery of oil. Since the 1970s, much of the revenues generated by the sale of oil and natural gas of the Arab Gulf countries in the world market have been used to employ expatriate workers, both low skilled as well as highly skilled, to facilitate the development of infrastructure and services. In particular, the number of expatriate women has been steadily increasing in recent years.

The constant increase in the import of foreign labor has created a situation of skewed demographics in the smaller GCC countries (Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait) where the number of foreigners exceeds the number of nationals.¹ For instance, in Qatar in 2010, foreigners were 87 percent of the population while the nationals were a mere 13 percent (Fargues 2011). Further, the percentage of foreigners has increased substantially in each of the six Gulf states from the 1970s to the 2000s; in Oman, for example, from nine percent in 1977 to 31 percent in 2008, and in the UAE from 64 percent in 1975 to 82 percent in 2009 (Ibid.). If we look specifically at labor force figures, the proportion of expatriates to nationals is even higher. According to 2010 figures, the share of nationals in total employment in Qatar was only 5.6 percent, having decreased from 14 percent in 2001 (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning 2011). While the majority of foreign workers in the GCC originated in neighboring Arab countries in the 1970s, many countries from south Asia and southeast Asia now provide the bulk of the migrant workers in the Arab Gulf states (Kapiszewski 2006).

The demographic peculiarity of the GCC region is foregrounded when we consider that historically the region had been one of out-migration. The harsh climate did not successfully support the local population. For much of the region's history, people migrated in search of a livelihood elsewhere. For example, in Qatar, the collapse of the pearling economy led to what is described as the 'years of hunger' (1925-1949), and an "emptying of the Qatari population" (Fromherz 2012). Around the 1920s, the population of Qatar was estimated at approximately 27,000; by 1940, it had fallen to a mere 16,000 (Zahlan 1979; Fromherz 2012). The discovery of oil and natural gas, however, has changed the demographic and economic structures and the region now sustains large numbers of expatriate populations.

The labor market in the GCC countries is domi-

¹ Nationals constitute a narrow majority in the other GCC states of Oman and Saudi Arabia.

nated by expatriate men in comparison to nationals. This domination is to such an extent that there is a disproportion between the number of nationals and foreigners which has led to a similar disproportion between the number of men and women. In all of these countries the number of men is much higher than that of women because of the presence of single expatriate male workers. This has led many experts, such as Foley (2010), to suggest that national women can play an important role in decreasing their countries' dependence on foreign workers and changing the gender imbalance in the labor force. Despite the steady increase in the educational and employment levels of nationals and especially women, the number of expatriate workers is not falling, and increasingly many of these expatriate workers are women. In the case of Qatar, for example, in 2012, there were 27,072 Qatari women employed in the country (growing from 25,463 in 2009) as compared to 140,648 expatriate women (growing from 98,420 in 2009) (Qatar Statistics Authority). Of these employed non-Qatari females, in 2012, 90,361 were employed in the domestic sector. The corresponding figure for 2009 is 48,147, so the domestic sector employment for non-Qatari women has almost doubled in the span of three years.

This study investigates the transnational experiences of expatriate women in Qatar by highlighting their experiences of migration to seek employment, while drawing upon community networks that connect them to their homelands. As an important aspect of international migration, the migration of women has been growing rapidly in recent years.² Women are now migrating to other countries not only for reasons of family unification, but for purposes of employment. In Qatar, my analysis shows that expatriate women's experiences are ones that are centered on their national background as opposed to their gender. As a result, I argue that while globalization entails the movement of capital, commodities, ideas and people across national borders, global inequality strengthens, rather than weakens, the importance of national identities in shaping migratory experiences. Investigating the transnational social fields that these women occupy allows us to understand the effect of globalization on migrant women's experiences and evaluate the impact of global forces on their status.

TRANSMIGRANTS IN TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FIELDS

In recent years, the transnational aspects of migrant communities have become important features for understanding migratory experiences in general

² In 1960, women already constituted 46.6 percent of total migration flows, and this number grew to 48.8 percent by 2000. In West Asia, by 2000, the 7.6 million female migrants were estimated to constitute 48 percent of all migrants in that region (see Zlotnik 2003).

(Basch, Schiller and Blanc 1994). I am using the term 'transmigrant workers' to refer to the expatriate workers in the GCC countries for the following reasons. Since they rarely have the option of becoming permanent residents of the countries in which they work, they maintain links in the countries of which they are citizens, and to which they will or might eventually return. They also sometimes maintain links with co-ethnic diasporas in other countries to which they may try to migrate later (Gardner 2008). On the other hand, although they usually come on short term contracts, and have to get their residence permits renewed every year, many expatriate workers spend up to twenty years or more in the GCC country in which they work. In that sense their lives are 'embedded in transnational social fields' (Ali 2011). They remain citizens of a particular state, but their way of being is that of a transnational or a transmigrant because they live a large part of their lives in another state. As a result, the boundaries of their social lives become reconfigured because of their experiences with crossing national borders, social worlds and cognitive maps on a regular basis. As they move between states to work and live, these transmigrants "come into contact with the regulatory powers and the hegemonic culture of more than one state" since they are "living simultaneously within and beyond the boundaries of a nation state" (Levitt and Schiller 2004,15).

Although officials in the GCC prefer to refer to these workers as contract workers, many scholars (Fargues 2011; Russell 1990; Sabagh 1990) argue that they need to be seen as transmigrants instead. Their official status may be that of 'migrants with temporary residency,' but many groups among these expatriate workers are actually long time residents of the GCC countries. A large section of these expatriate workers working in the Gulf countries without their families spend decades working there, renewing their contracts with their sponsors periodically. Other expatriates, whose salaries reach the threshold that grants them family visas, have children who are born, educated and eventually find jobs in the GCC. There is also evidence of non-national pensioners in these countries. Such evidence leads us to note that in the Gulf countries, "migration that was initially planned as temporary has often turned into permanent settlement" (Fargues 2011, 6) in the sense that expatriate workers have become a permanent feature of these populations.

The transnational aspects of contemporary migration to the Gulf shape the experiences of migrants. At the same time, such transnationalism has come to shape the GCC societies themselves. Although Gulf societies practice a kind of spatial and social exclusion against their expatriate populations (Gardner 2011), the predominance of the expatriates in managing the different institutions of these societies means that the expatriates become in a way part of

the social field of these countries. For instance, their role in running educational institutions, medical facilities, and media services integrates them into the societies of the Gulf states (Russell 1990). Still, their integration and experiences in GCC societies are marked by their connections and interests at home. As such, my research looks at ways migrant women in Qatar are integrated simultaneously into both Qatari society, and the places where they come from, and the ways their transnational position may be limiting or empowering.

THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND TRANSMIGRATION

Transnational economic and cultural practices may be accepted by contemporary nation states, but the idea of the nation state continues to hold a powerful legitimacy. In a nation state, the state belongs equally to all its nationals or citizens; as Canovan (1996) has claimed, many theories of redistributive justice take as given the bounded nature of the state within which it is responsible for redistributing resources. To distinguish between those who belong and those who are outsiders on the basis of membership to the nation continues to be legitimate the world over. In a state where the insiders are swamped by foreigners, it is important that the state find ways to signal that it belongs only to its nationals. On the other hand, some of the labor exporting states – to which these foreigners belong – project the idea of de-territorialized nation states. Caught between the two jurisdictions of the 'receiving' and the 'sending' nation states, how do transmigrants manage and further their interests? This study focuses specifically on women who migrate to Qatar for work. Given that many of these women are considered second-class citizens in the countries they come from, it is important to investigate the ways migration and earning income in an oil-rich country may change their position, both at home and in the new setting. My analysis looks into the ways their position may be constrained or improved with their migration and their increased ability to earn income. My inquiry looks at the changes in the position of migrant working women vis-à-vis their families, their communities and their sending and receiving states as important sites for understanding women's status in society and the possibilities for change following migration.

This article attempts to study the intersection of gender and transmigration in the context of Qatar, which like other countries of the Arab Gulf, has become a magnet for expatriate workers, including large numbers of expatriate working women. Increasingly many of these workers are from Asian countries: two large populations of expatriate workers in Qatar are from India and the Philippines. Indians are the largest group of expatriates at 24 percent and Filipinos are the third largest at nine percent, after the Nep-

alese (Snoj 2013) but many more Filipino women enter Qatar to work than Nepali women. This article includes the findings of a survey of 25 Filipina and 25 Indian women, including some office workers, nurses, shop assistants and domestic workers, working in Doha, Qatar. The analysis highlights their experiences of change in their position vis-à-vis their families and sending and receiving states. I argue that their experiences show that while globalization has led to the creation of new spaces for women, at the same time, it has also resulted in the ‘othering’ of certain women. Specifically, I highlight that their class and gender position in their home countries contribute to their ‘othering’ both by their home states and host societies. At the same time, the experience of migration makes available certain resources that at times entail an improvement in their status. After addressing general issues raised in the literature with regards to transmigrant women, I will highlight the key findings from my case study of expatriate working women in Qatar.

THE PROCESS AND EFFECTS OF TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION

Much of the literature on women and transnationalism celebrates this process as benefitting all the actors involved. Reports of the United Nations Population Fund and of the United Nations Population Agency (Eisenstein 2009) assert that not only is it the case that the remittances sent back by the female migrants alleviate poverty in their home countries, but it is also true that migration has impacted millions of women and their families positively. Through transmigration, women can become familiar with ‘social norms’ linked to the idea of rights; this may push gender norms in a progressive direction in their home countries. In the words of another researcher on female migrants:

Overall, when the balance sheet is drawn, the consensus among women migrants is that all things considered, their sacrifice has been worth it both in terms of what their family has gained out of their labor abroad (including houses built, children or siblings who have completed an education, savings, and capital for small businesses), and for themselves, a wealth of experience gained in overcoming many obstacles and realizing their self-worth (Asis 2005, 44).

On the other hand, there are many critics who see these migrant working women as continuing to be trapped between hierarchical structures; all that they are able to do is to replace one kind of inequality that they are caught in, with another kind of structure in which they still occupy a sharply unequal position. As one scholar puts it, describing the position of migrant women from the Philippines, “[m]igrant

Filipina domestic workers experience migration as a process of relocating from one set of gender constraints to another. As such, they are not likely to prefer one location over another but instead maintain a more complex relationship to the spaces they occupy in migration” (Parrenas 2008, 171).

These contradictory positions in the literature are substantiated with arguments, as we just saw, on the changing position of these women vis-à-vis their families and communities. At other times, attention is focused more on state policies – policies both of the state they come from and the state they go to work in – about migrant women (Rodriguez 2010; Ong 2009). Locating transnational working women in a framework that includes the sending and receiving states, family and community, proves useful in understanding the position of these women.

TRANSMIGRANT WORKING WOMEN AND THE SENDING STATE

The state certainly plays an important role in the transnational position of these women. Sending states have begun to play a crucial part in shaping the migratory process. While initially women tended to seek migration as a means for improving the welfare of their families, they are now being actively assisted in their endeavor by their states. Whether single or married, the decision for these women to migrate for work abroad is taken collectively – as a strategy to improve the position of their natal or marital family. Family members help in providing the funds needed to find a job abroad, and family members pitch in by caring for the children left behind. More recently, and in many cases now, along with the support of their families, the migration of women is also being promoted by their states, since several states have now made the export of the labor of their citizens part of their development strategy.

For example, the Filipino migrant working women are the ‘new heroes’ (*Bagong Bayani* in Tagalog). In 1974, the Philippine government introduced an overseas employment policy as part of its strategy of economic development, and in 1982, it established the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) which helps the citizens of Philippines find jobs abroad. The POEA provides training as well as orientation programs for Filipinos who have found work in other countries. “Thus, the state is a key player in the unprecedented increase of Filipino migrant workers, totaling approximately 8.7 million (as of 2007) with a daily deployment of close to 3,000. An official document indicates that the POEA had set an annual target deployment of 1 million beginning in 2006” (Lindio-McGovern 2012, 25). Compared to when the movement of Filipinos to work outside the country began in the 1970s, the end of the 20th century saw Filipino women beginning to dominate outmigration. In 2002, 85 percent of all professional

and technical workers, 63 percent of clerical workers, 48 percent of sales workers, and 90 percent of service workers, from the Philippines finding jobs abroad were women (Asis 2005). In total, in 1992, 50 percent of migrants from the Philippines were women; this number had risen to 69 percent by 2002. Women constitute the majority of migrants in nine out of the ten major destinations of Filipino workers, namely Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Japan, UAE, Taiwan, Singapore, Kuwait, Italy and the UK (Asis 2005). In general, Filipino women work outside their country not only as 'domestic helpers' but also as nurses, secretaries, and office and retail staff.

Indian women, especially from the southern Indian states of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, migrate to the Gulf states as well, to work as nurses or as domestic servants. According to one study, in the 1990s, there were 113,000 domestic workers of Indian origin working in Kuwait, 49,000 of which were housemaids. The Indian Emigration Act of 1983 governs the movement of unskilled labor outside India by requiring an emigration clearance for certain categories of workers. When this Emigration Act was enacted in 1983, its purpose was to allow more categories of workers to leave without needing any emigration clearance – the clearance is not required if the Indian is a graduate or if his or her destination is a particular group of countries. Thus the Indian state has also begun to encourage outmigration in order to ease the pressure of unemployment in India and to take advantage of foreign remittances (Raghuram 2005).³

What bears studying is how this active support by the state for women's migration impacts the relationship between these women and their state. Women have often been considered to be second class citizens. Historically, few of them worked for a wage and the state not only undervalued the work they did at home, but also did not take sufficient steps to prevent the systemic inequalities that women often faced in their societies. Now that they are paid workers, contributing to the foreign exchange reserves of their state, their new role may provide some leeway in their access to the state. Whether the women also experience such changes in position remains unknown and is worthy of study.

The modern contract between the citizen and the state is supposed to be based on employment by the citizens, with its attendant taxation, in return for treatment as citizens and not as subjects by the state (Pateman 1988; Levi 1988). Women were not seen as party to this contract because they did not

have access to employment in the public sphere till after the World War years. As a result, it is important to investigate whether the change in women's position and, specifically, their perception as 'new heroes' who regularly send remittances home, results in valuing them as productive citizens of their nation. Furthermore, since the state still casts itself as the protector of its women citizens, and any dishonor of its women is considered to reflect on the state, how does this play out with respect to the relationship between the state and these migrant women? These migrant women are certainly helping the state – their jobs abroad not only ease the pressure on their state to provide for employment, but the foreign remittances they send also assist the state with its balance of payments. It remains to be seen whether, in return, the state fulfills any of their longstanding demands for equal rights.

THE TRANSMIGRANT WOMAN AND THE FAMILY

A second set of issues revolves around the relationship between the transmigrant woman and her family. Not only is the family an important factor in the initial step in the decision and ability to migrate, but also often the success of the move depends on what happens with the family the migrant leaves behind. The strategy to send a female member of the family to work abroad is only successful with the cooperation of the rest of the family members. The remittances have to be managed well and not wasted. Younger members of the family need to be looked after, and the family should be prevented from breaking up. Since this is a collective effort, the bonds of the family are strengthened, rather than loosened, in spite of the distance. Much of the literature on the subject, for instance Agrawal (2006) and Asis (2005), shows that some of these women feel empowered since they use migration to remove themselves from the subordinate position that they occupy in their own families and communities. They often earn ten times more than they did in their home countries and they see themselves providing financially for their families back home. Their self-confidence increases as they learn to cope with the conditions they face in a new country alone, and increasingly see themselves as breadwinners. They also provide long distance 'care' as well by keeping in constant touch with their families.

In spite of the attempt to be 'present' for their families, part of which is accomplished by the frequent remitting of monies, the fact remains that these migrant working women are abroad. Their absence sometimes leads to the creation in gaps in their social status upon their return if their savings are insufficient for them, which means that their place in the family may become even more precarious than before.

³ Indonesia and Sri Lanka are two other countries which have been following a similar strategy of sending their female citizens to work in other countries, so that remittances can be sent home. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the policies of Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES AND TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICES

When women migrate to other countries to work, they might leave their 'place' in an established social structure behind, and with that, they abandon any support networks they have. This support could be provided by some family members, perhaps natal family members, or by friends. Transmigrant women try to replace such support networks either by getting some family members over, by setting up 'fictive kinship networks' (Mahdavi 2011), or by becoming members of new groups they find or organize in the countries in which they work. In Qatar, for instance, there are reported to be about 120 Filipino organizations that cater to the Filipino migrant community. Some of these groups arrange fund-raising activities to help Filipino workers in financial trouble. Organizations in the Philippines which cater to the needs and interests of migrant workers, have branches in some of the countries to which Filipinos migrate. The existence of such transnational communities is helpful for migrants. The quality of migrant women workers' experience will depend on the kinds of support networks that are possible for them in their country of work. The large number of foreigners in the Arab Gulf countries provides a strong foundation for the formation of support networks among the different national and ethnic groups.

THE TRANSMIGRANT AND THE RECEIVING STATE

The last set of issues concerns the legal context in which migrants find work in their destination countries. In each of these countries, different kinds of immigration rules govern entry for work and for other purposes. In the countries of the Arabian Gulf, a sponsorship system, or *kafala*, governs the employment of foreigners. (Longva 1993; Vora 2013). A foreign national can only work in these countries if they have a local sponsor who is a citizen and legally responsible for the foreigner's conduct. The migrant worker cannot change jobs without permission from their sponsor and, when sponsorship is withdrawn, the migrant worker must leave the country. Unless the sponsor grants the employee who is leaving a 'No Objection Certificate,' the employee cannot return to Qatar for work before two years. While illegal, the sponsor often keeps the passports of his or her employees and is able to exercise various forms of mental and physical control over them. This puts the migrant workers in the Gulf in a difficult position. In the case of women migrant workers, the condition which makes it possible for them to get jobs with higher salaries also places them in a subordinate position with respect to the sponsor or *kafil*. These women workers often have no recourse but to take the help of family members or their embassy when navigating the sponsorship system. Any attempts to reform the

system face opposition not only from groups in the receiving countries, but also from groups which benefit from the movement of labor in the sending countries: "Other men in other places, friends, placement agents and immigration officers 'help' migrant domestic workers to move but this places them in an even more vulnerable position" (Raghuram 2005,167).

Another factor affecting the position of migrant working women in the Gulf states is the kind of jobs that most of them find. Although they are present in many occupations – as nurses, teachers, cashiers, saleswomen, restaurant workers, shop workers, managers, accountants, and office workers – some of them undergo a process of 'deskilling' and 'downgrading' as the jobs they get do not match their educational degrees. This particularly applies to migrant women from Asia, who often only get lower status jobs in these countries. Some Filipino women, for instance, who might have been primary school teachers in the Philippines, find work as beauty salon workers after migrating. The perception of Asian women as maids contributes to the process of deskilling. Since many of these women, especially from south Asia, have not worked outside their homes before, they find work in Gulf countries as maids. According to Raghuram (2005), the majority of expatriate women in the GCC are Asian domestic workers. Many Indian women from Kerala, for example, predominantly work as housemaids in the Middle East. These women have become part of 'global chains of care' (Weir 2005), where they are unable to physically take care of their own families because the only jobs they get involve leaving their families to care for others abroad. The contradictory positions many women domestics find themselves in, where they are unable to care for their own families yet experience an improvement in their status due to their care for other families in the Gulf, is an important aspect of their experiences worthy of deeper investigation.

BACKGROUND TO THE QATARI CASE

Despite the woeful economic climate in the world today, Qatar continues to attract a large number of expatriate workers. According to a 2009 report of the United Nations Population Division, the proportion of international migrants in Qatar's population was 87 percent. The proportion of foreigners is even higher at 94.3 percent if we look at the labor force figures for Qatar (Thimothy and Sasikumar 2012, 10). These foreigners in Qatar (businessmen, employees, workers) come from many different countries, with large contingents from India, the Philippines, and Nepal, from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam, from many countries of North Africa and the Levant, from South Africa as well as from several countries of Europe and North America.

Of these migrants, a large number are women. Several studies, including that of Thimothy and

Sasikumar (2012, 21) have pointed out that between 1990 and 2010, “the stock of international female migrants has been registering a consistent increase, in comparison to the sluggishness noted in the stock of total migrants and male migrants.” This study also points out that of the nine million migrant workers from south Asia in the Gulf countries, women made up half of this number at 49.6 percent. It is in this context that we note that Qatar is a destination for purposes of work, for a large number of women from south and southeast Asia.

There are many occupational areas in Qatar where expatriate women work – many are secretaries and office workers, cashiers in hypermarkets, workers in the restaurant or retail business, teachers in expatriate schools and nurses and doctors in local hospitals. However, domestic work remains the largest category of expatriate women workers: in 2012, there were 90,361 foreign female domestic workers in Qatar, this number going up from 46,202 in 2008 (Qatar Statistics Authority). Since domestic work does not fall in the purview of Qatar’s labor laws, abuse of domestic workers is repeatedly reported leading many countries, like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and India, to place various restrictions on the export of domestic workers. These restrictions are, however, circumvented through visitor visas that can later turn into work visas. After domestic services, the other categories of economic activity in which large numbers of expatriate women in Qatar participate are health, social work and education.

Like other countries in the Arabian Gulf, Qatar also follows policies for the nationalization of the workforce, and encourages Qatari women to participate in the labor force as an integral part of such policies. Qatari women are more highly educated than Qatari men, but they look for jobs primarily in the public sector. Better paying and more secure government jobs are only available for national women, whereas expatriate women are more commonly found in the service sector working as cashiers, waitresses, nurses and maids. Housemaids can only be ‘other’ women – from India or Indonesia, who do not enjoy the protection of Qatari labor laws; Qatari women have a different position in their state than these transmigrant working women. This is a situation in which different groups are encouraged to think of themselves as separate and different from each other. The result is that when expatriate working women in Qatar fall amiss of Qatari society and Qatari officials, they are forced to fall back on their national community networks.

FINDINGS

Details about the kind of employment found, the difficulties faced, and their other experiences, were illuminated in the findings of my survey of expatriate working women in Qatar. Since, as I have already

pointed out, Indians and Filipinos constitute two of the largest groups of expatriates in Qatar, I surveyed women from both these groups. The majority of the Filipina respondents were secretaries, office workers or shop supervisors and assistants; some were also primary school teachers and nurses and there were two drivers and one beauty salon worker in my sample. The majority of the Indian women respondents were domestic workers. Within their borders, India and the Philippines have different employment opportunities for their female workers. For instance, the Philippines lies within the category of countries with a high percentage of women CEOs, whereas India is a country with very few women in high managerial positions. In India, domestic work is the single largest sector employing women in urban areas (Times of India 2013, 6).

Almost all of the Filipina women I surveyed cited higher salaries as the main reason for migrating to Qatar for work. Except in two cases, all of these women had prior work experience in the Philippines, in comparable jobs or in jobs with more responsibility; however, they earned much less and needed more money to be able to meet the financial needs of their families. Some of the respondents cited the absence of taxes along with the higher salaries as a reason for choosing to work in Qatar. With their higher pay they could send more money home, and could also take more gifts for their family members on their visits home. Some of the respondents scoffed at the rhetoric of the successive governments of the Philippines referring to Filipino transmigrant workers as heroines and heroes and said that they often faced harassment at the airport at Manila in trying to take things home. These respondents also mentioned that the Filipino state organized periodic job fairs at which information with respect to jobs available in other countries was made available; this, the respondents felt, was the least that the state agencies could do, considering that there was a dearth of reasonably paid employment in the Philippines. Beyond this, those surveyed did not feel that their sending state helped them in any significant way in their stay abroad. Their sending state certainly benefitted from their expatriate labor – their remittances, as pointed out earlier, eased the balance of payments situation in their home country – but did not do much for them in return.

Most of the respondents were in their thirties, with the average age being about thirty-five years. Fifteen of the respondents in the sample of Filipina working women were married, although for ten women in this group their husbands and children had stayed behind in the Philippines. Most of the women said that they could not afford to bring their families over, although one respondent also said that she preferred that her family stay in the Philippines. Only five of the respondents were ‘single’ parents with children, which meant that for the majority of my sample their migration was not a result of the breakdown

of a marital relationship. In so far as the majority of the married women respondents were concerned, one aspect of their decision to migrate for work was an acceptance of new ways in which responsibilities for taking care of the family are assigned to husbands and wives.

Most of the women reported regularly sending remittances, usually on a monthly basis, back to their home country. Three of them said that they were able to send as much as QR 24,000 per year (USD 6,600) as remittances to their families at home. Others were able to send about QR 10,000 (USD 2,700) or less in a year. They were usually able to visit their families and friends at home once every year, although a few of them could only visit the Philippines once every two years. They also kept in touch with their family on a daily basis through the telephone and the Internet. Although they suffered from the absence of their immediate family, especially their children, these women said that they had to work in Qatar for financial reasons. Some of them were afraid to shorten their stay in Qatar because that would put their family in financial straits. Their objective was to be able to work in Qatar long enough to improve the material condition of the family left behind, and they were prepared to stay away and make do with short periodical visits home.

Most of the Filipina respondents had been working in Qatar for three to six years. Four had been in the country for eight years so far. I wanted to know where they went for help if, during their stay in Qatar, they faced any problems. Three of the Filipina women in my sample said that they went to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) for help in case of trouble.⁴ One named the Dugong Pinoy United Filipino Volunteers as a source of assistance. Some said that they took the help of their Christian friends and of the Church in case of difficulty. In 2008, a Catholic Church, Our Lady of the Rosary, was built in Qatar, on land set aside by the Emir from his personal holdings (Foley 2010). According to the media, there are about 120 Filipino organizations in Qatar catering to the large Filipino population. Since Qatar follows extremely strict policies for the acquisition of citizenship by long term migrants, migrant workers know that their stay in Qatar is temporary. However, most of the women in this group already had family members residing in Qatar such as cousins, sisters or uncles. In that sense they were still near their family and often turned to these family members for help during their stay in Qatar.

The transnational social fields that these respon-

⁴ The OWWA provides insurance in case of injury or death on the job. In case of the tragic fire at Villagio Mall, for example, there were press reports that if the three Filipina teachers who died in that fire had been registered with the OWWA, their families would have received some insurance as compensation.

dents find themselves embedded in are, to some extent, created by them, as well as being a part of their situation. As they begin their employment in Qatar, these expatriate working women try to find jobs for other family members – an aunt, a husband, or a brother – who can come over from the Philippines. This is an attempt to create a support network for themselves in Qatar that will then make it possible for them to work for longer in the country. The support network of some family and friends helps them not only when they face problems with their sponsor, but also to bear the absence of other family members, such as their children.

Most of the Indian maids I surveyed in Qatar had been in the Gulf state for six to eight years and were earning more there (about five times more) than they would make as maids in India. The Indian respondents had no prior work experience; they had been housewives in India and had no other skills. Most of them said that, initially, the family members who had sent them had claimed they would only be required to work for two years, but that they had continued to work for much longer, and did not see any possibility of leaving their job. They were in Qatar without their families, and usually lived in quarters in their sponsors' houses where they worked as housemaids looking after older parents or young children. They were able to go home only once in three to five years and, when they did that, they usually took with them many 'gifts' or 'hand me downs' from their sponsors as well as electronic items/clothes bought from the market.

Most of the Indian maids I surveyed were in their thirties or early forties. They were all married women but most of them suffered from considerable family disruption. They had found jobs in Qatar because their husbands did not earn enough, if at all, back home in India. The money they sent home was often misused, and they worried constantly about their children going astray. They repeatedly expressed a desire to go back to India and not return to Qatar, but they accepted that they would probably continue to work for several more years.

One of the Indian maids from Andhra Pradesh spoke about working for a high income Indian family in Doha for about five years. After that her employer had lost his job and had to return to India. Even though she complained of missing her family back in India and of constant worry about her children, she did not see this as an opportunity to return to them. She had asked her former employer to help her find another job as a maid with another Indian family and she had even managed a raise of 200 riyals (about USD 50). She told me that although she was apprehensive about how she would find her new place of work, she was not too worried. If it were not to her liking she would leave and return to India, and then try for a job in Kuwait where she had heard that salaries for domestic work were even better. She

had extended family in Kuwait, and expected that they would help her find work. So she looked forward to working in a Gulf country for many more years, as long as she could periodically visit her family in India. Her story reflected the experience of many of the women interviewed. Namely, they tried to extend their stay in Qatar as much as possible, and as they familiarized themselves with the visa regulations, they would attempt to find jobs for other family members. Some of them managed to stay for more than a decade in Qatar.

In Qatar, these expatriate maids relied on each other for help and assistance. They would visit each other about once a fortnight and they would generally gather at the quarters of a maid whose sponsor was wealthy and, thus, tolerated the maid helping her friends with 'gifts' or with taking time off to visit the doctor. During festivals like Eid, after Ramadan, a well-off sponsor would present his maid as well as her visiting friends, new clothes and boxes of eatables. Sometimes the maids would be given clothes for children that they could take back home. Apart from each other, some of them had natal family, like a brother or sister and nephews living and working in Qatar. In cases of trouble with their sponsors, some of the maids related the possibility of fleeing to the Indian embassy, to wait for the embassy to arrange for the passage for the maid back home to India. With the help of the Embassy, an organization called the Indian Community Benevolent Forum, organizes return tickets and other such assistance for low-income Indian workers.

Expatriate working women in Doha, Qatar, try to recreate support networks in their new country of residence, to assist them when dealing with their sponsors. They especially need help having their exit permits signed by their sponsor when they want to visit their families back home. Sometimes they are able to do so with other family members brought over for work, or with friends who are already working there. Their last resort is usually a welfare organization attached to their embassy or their embassy itself because at that stage the embassy can only help them to return home. These women do earn a higher income in Qatar, but there do not seem to be any organizations in local civil society to which these women turn to for help. As the sponsorship regulations can only be negotiated with the intervention of a family member or an embassy staff, these women often have to fall back on their families/states to deal with their sponsor.

CONCLUSION

When one thinks of women and migration, one can focus on different aspects. Some scholars talk of 'marriage migration,' given that in patrilocal societies women who marry, have for years been leaving their natal homes and migrating to their husbands'

houses in new locations. More recently, apart from 'marriage migration,' scholars have begun to study the movement of women within their countries in search of employment. In countries like India, for instance, women participate in internal migration in large numbers. This article, however, looks at the experience of women who migrate to other countries in search of work. The GCC countries are an important destination for this kind of migration – women from south and southeast Asia are increasingly finding employment there not only as nurses, teachers, accountants, cashiers, beauty salon workers, and secretaries but also as domestic maids.

My research shows that expatriate working women both occupy and construct transnational social fields. They are subject to the jurisdictions of different countries at the same time, and they also maintain their connections across countries, with their families and their communities. Some scholars who have examined these women's lives in these transnational social fields paint a dismal picture of their position. It is as if these women are puppets moved around by the forces of neoliberal capitalism: their relatively higher paying jobs are available only under conditions of leaving behind families and other networks. As Fraser (2009, 110) writes, "the dream of women's emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation." Other commentators, however, have claimed that women do get empowered by this movement for work – by earning a higher salary and thus becoming a 'breadwinner,' and by learning to cope on their own.

In my case study of women domestic workers, accountants, office workers, nurses, beauty salon workers and teachers, both from India and the Philippines, working in Doha, Qatar, I found that these women were interested in prolonging their stay because of the comparatively high salaries that they were able to obtain. Their experience of migrating to another country for work was mediated by the community networks available to them. The improvement in their economic standing, when buttressed by support from networks formed with members of their own community, made them judge their experience of transmigration as worthwhile. Once they were able to establish or become part of new networks of working women, mostly from the same region, they could activate these networks when in trouble. This enabled them to continue working as expatriate women for longer, as well as made their stay more comfortable.

In the GCC countries like Qatar where they worked (except for Bahrain and Oman which have made changes) the legal framework regulating their working conditions remains intertwined with the *kafala* system, and its attendant abuses. The struggle against the sponsorship system is carried out at another level, as the literature shows (Hanieh 2015). The involvement of international human rights

organizations and that of migrant workers NGOs, like the Migrant International of the Philippines pressure sending countries to take steps to improve the position of their transmigrant workers in the countries in which they work. For the transmigrant working women, their negotiation with the *kafala* is at another level, taking the help of the friends they have made amongst other workers from their countries, or their 'cousins' or 'brothers' that are working there or their genuine family members who have been brought over to provide assistance. The attempt to establish these new networks is factored in in the

literature on transmigrant workers, and it is these familial and community networks of their co-nationals that merit more attention in understanding the transmigrant experience of these working women.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the workshop participants, and especially the directors of the workshop, May Al Dabbagh and Dalia Abdelhady, for their valuable comments on this article.

REFERENCES

- Agrawal, Anuja. 2006. *Migrant Women and Work*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Ali, Syed. 2011. "Going and Coming and Going Again: Second-Generation Migrants in Dubai." *Mobilities* 6 (4): 553-568.
- Asis, Maruja M.B. 2005. "Caring for the World: Filipino Domestic Workers Gone Global." In *Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Worker*, edited by S. Huang, B.S.A. Yeoh and N.A. Rahman. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International.
- Basch, Linda., Nina G. Schiller, and Christina S. Blanc. 1994. *Nations unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-states*. London: Routledge.
- Canovan, Margaret. 1996. *Nationhood and Political Theory*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Eisenstein, Hester. 2009. *Feminism Seduced – How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Fargues, Phillipe. 2011. "Immigration without Inclusion: Non-Nationals in Nation-Building in the Gulf States." *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 20(3-4): 273-292.
- Foley, Sean. 2010. *The Arab Gulf States – Beyond Oil and Islam*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2009. "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History." *New Left Review* 56: 97-117.
- Fromherz, Allen J. 2012. *Qatar – A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Gardner, Andrew. 2008. "Strategic Transnationalism: The Indian Diasporic Elite in Contemporary Bahrain." *City and Society* 20(1): 54-78.
- Gardner, Andrew M. 2011. "Gulf migration and the family." *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1(1): 3-25.
- Hanieh, Adam. 2015. "Migrant Rights in the Gulf: Charting the Way Forward." In *Transit States: Labour, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf*, edited by A Khalaf. London: Pluto Press.
- Kapizewski, Andrzej. 2006. "Arab versus Asian Migrant Workers in the GCC Countries." United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. May 22. Accessed from http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/EGM_Ittmig_ArabP02_Kapizewski.pdf.
- Levi, Margaret. 1988. *Of Rule and Revenue*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Levitt, Peggy, and Nina G. Schiller. 2004. "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Field Perspective on Society." *International Migration Review* 38(145): 595-692. Accessed from http://policydialogue.org/files/events/Levitt_Glick_Schiller_Conceptualizing_Simultaneity.pdf.
- Lindio-McGovern, Ligaya. 2012. *Globalization, Labor Export and Resistance*. London: Routledge.
- Longva, Anh N. 1993. *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion, and Society in Kuwait*. Longva Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Mahdavi, Pardis. 2011. *Gridlock: Labor, Migration and Human Trafficking in Dubai*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ong, Aihwa. 2009. "A Bio-Cartography: Maids, Neoslavery, and NGOs." In *Migrations and Mobilities – Citizenship, Borders and Gender*, edited by S. Benhabib and J. Resnik, New York: New York University Press.
- Parrenas, Rhacel S. 2008. *The Force of Domesticity – Filipina Migrants and Globalization*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Pateman, Carole. 1998. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning. 2011. *Qatar national development strategy 2011-2016*. Doha: Gulf Publishing and Printing Company.
- Qatar Statistics Authority. *Labor Force Tables*. Accessed from www.qsa.gov.qa/eng/index.htm.
- Raghuram, Parvati. 2005. "Indian Domestic Workers in the Global Market." In *Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers*, edited by S. Huang, B.S.A. Yeoh, and N.A. Rahman. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International.
- Rodriguez, Robyn M. 2010. *Migrants for Export: How the Philippines State Brokers Labor to the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Russell, Sharon S. 1990. "Migration and Political Integration in the Arab world." In *The Arab State*, edited by G. Luciani. 373-393. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sabagh, Georges. 1990. "Immigrants in the Arab Gulf Countries: 'Sojourners' or 'Settlers'." In *The Arab State*, edited by G. Luciani. 349-372. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Snoj, Jure. "Population of Qatar by Nationality." *BQ-Magazine.com*. December 18, 2013. Accessed from www.bqdoha.com/2013/12/population-qatar.
- Thimothy, Rakkee. and S.K. Sasikumar. 2012. "*Migration of Women Workers from South Asia to the Gulf*." Noida: V.V. Giri National Labor Institute and New Delhi: U.N. Women South Asia Sub Regional Office.
- Times of India. 2013. "Women in Senior Management Around the World." New Delhi, March 16.
- Vora, Neha. 2013. *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Weir, Allison. 2005. "The Global Universal Caregiver: Imagining Women's Liberation in the Third Millenium." *Constellations* 12: 308-330.
- Zahlan, Rosemarie S. 1979. *The Creation of Qatar*. London: Croom Helm.
- Zlotnik, Hania. 2003. "The Global Dimensions of Female Migration." *Online Journal of Migration Policy Institute*. March. Accessed from www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=109.