Maid to Order

The Third World women who leave their children to take care of ours.

BY JONATHAN ROWE

On Sunday mornings, the parks and plazas of central Hong Kong teem with women. They are Filipinas mainly, but Indians, Thais, Sri Lankans, and others as well—women from the Third World who come to the First to scrub floors, care for children, and generally do work that affluent households no longer have the time or inclination to do. They sit on benches and blankets, chat, eat, entrust parcels to friends going home for visits—parcels the friends will carry in big, plastic zipper bags they call “Manila Vuittons.”

Sunday is their day off. The mood seems high-spirited, festive almost. Most of these women work—and live—in small apartments under the hawk eyes of demanding bosses. They have little privacy and less free time. The park is an escape. Guest workers in a strange land, they have nowhere else to go.

The discerning might note a sadness in some of the eyes. Many of these women are mothers. They have left their own children in the care of husbands and relatives, to come to Hong Kong to care for the children of the Chinese, and of British and American expats. Many like them are similarly employed in the Middle East, Singapore, Taiwan, and the United States. There is nothing new to migratory labor, of course. Whether it’s by Metrobus from Anacostia to Chevy Chase, a Greyhound from Mississippi to Chicago, or Philippine Airlines from Manila to Hong Kong, people have always followed work and pay.

But the conversion of mothering into an object of global trade is another matter entirely, and certainly on this scale. Some 30 percent of children in the Philippines have a parent who works abroad. That means 8 million kids whose mothers (most often) or fathers are thousands of miles away. It also means a lot of First World kids whose experience of the Third is a dark-skinned woman who scrubs their toilet bowl.

For the women, it is a way to make the best of a bad hand. A few might be escaping bad marriages; in a nation without legal divorce, work abroad can be the only way out. But the vast majority are doing it for cash to send home. A college graduate can make at least five times more as a maid in Hong Kong than as a teacher in the Philippines. Given the anemic Philippine peso, Hong Kong and U.S. dollars are worth a small fortune. They pay school tuition and enable families to buy land and build homes. Walk through a rural village in the Philippines and you generally can tell, by the quality of the house, whether someone in that family has worked abroad. But the price can be high. Mothers end up separated from their kids for years. If they are undocumented workers in the United States, they cannot go home at all. As guest workers all these women are easy targets for abuse, with legal recourse that is questionable at best and in practice often irrelevant. You don’t like it, Panmoy? There’s a plane leaving tomorrow morning, so go back to your pigs and dust and hungry kids.

This is not the global economy over which editorial writers enthuse, the one that supposedly will uplift the masses. It sounds more like an arrangement to ensure a supply of cheap labor to clean those editorialists’ homes. Yet it is pretty much invisible in America, where nannies and maids disappear into suburban

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kitchens or else blend into the polyglot throng in major cities. (By one estimate, less than 10 percent of household work in the United States gets reported to the IRS.)

That ignorance won’t be so easy now, thanks to Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy, a new collection of essays edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild. It is an apt pairing. The former is the author, most recently, of Nickel and Dimed, an account of a year of low-paid “women’s work” in the service economy. Hochschild has written extensively on the time-deficits in American households and the effects upon women, most notably in the Second Shift and the Time Bind. The “global woman” of the book’s sardonic title is a Third World housekeeper; and the house she is keeping, and the children she is caring for, are those of a First World family that doesn’t have—or want to make—the time.

As a cage-rattler the book succeeds. The authors give these women a story and a face. I doubt that anyone who reads it will look at Filipina nannies pushing strollers through the Safeway quite the same way again. But as a discussion of the global economic forces that channel Third World women into this role, and the hard facts of their legal status, Global Woman is somewhat spotty. The 17 essays, all by different authors, veer more into the gender politics of household work; some broach thorny questions for the feminist mind. For one thing, the domestic tyrants who rule over migrant maids are, in most cases, women themselves. The patriarchy can’t take this rap. But more, Third World nannies who work in First World homes are, after all, working. To argue that they should be home with their own kids has implications for First World feminism that are uncomfortable to say the least. And don’t forget, many First World parents are able to leave the house and kids during the day precisely because these Third World nannies are both available and cheap.

The editors deserve credit for venturing into this minefield, even if they don’t get all the way across it. They don’t flinch from the need at least to pay these workers a decent wage, and accord them more legal protections. But I wish there was more discussion of the law, and of the larger economic context as well. If the care export trade is a challenge to feminists, it is even more so to theologians of the global economy. The current version of that economy enables corporations and goods to cross borders freely. But actual humans still face the strictures of the old mercantile regime. This leads directly to the intolerable situations that Global Woman documents. When migrant workers labor at the pleasure of the host country, with little or no legal protection, their work can slip easily into a version of indentured servitude. To put this another way, if we in the United States and other First World countries are to benefit from a global care trade, then can we wash our hands of the effects with the payment of a monthly check?

The Care Drain

Global Woman covers a lot of ground. There are essays on Vietnamese professional women who marry down to get into the United States, on husbands in Sri Lanka whose wives have gone abroad and displaced them as breadwinners, on the trade in teenage prostitutes in Thailand, among many others. Susan Cheever, the novelist, weighs in with a piece on nannies in New York City, including her own. Ehrenreich observes the emergence of household work as a full-fledged capitalist industry, complete with chains, and puts it in the context of the feminist agenda. Twenty years ago feminists were revolted at the thought of hiring maids, especially those of color, she says. “There already were at least two able-bodied adults in the average home—a man and a woman—and the hope was that, after a few initial skirmishes, they would learn to share the housework graciously.”

But we guys balked, Ehrenreich says. Actually it’s not quite that simple. Everyone was working longer hours on the job, for example, which meant less time available for the home. But in any case, the stage was set for cleaning ladies—and as it happens, especially Filipinas. If there’s a central narrative in Global Woman, it is the legions of Filipinas who have spread across the globe working as nannies and domestic workers. There are 150,000 in Hong Kong alone. It is not accidental that the Philippines has become a leading exporter of human care. People there are educated, well-mannered, and schooled in English, which is the lingua franca of the global class that hires them. The country also is poor, and those with aspirations for their families and children have a desperate need for cash.

As it happens, my wife was one of these nannies, and her story may be instructive. She is the oldest of seven children, raised on a small rice farm in a rural village without electricity or running water. Her family managed to send her to college, but when she graduated there were no jobs. It took connections even to get work at McDonald’s. So she went back to the farm, started a small store, and helped her mother with the siblings while her father worked in Saudi Arabia to earn cash for their tuition. When he came back after
six years, she signed up with one of the Philippine placement agencies that profit handsomely from the care trade. Soon she was off to Hong Kong, where she worked for nine years. She made between $400 and $500 a month, about two-thirds of which she sent home. (Her last boss brought her for 10 months to San Francisco, where she and her husband owned an office building. It happened to be the building in which I worked.)

Migratory care work generally is an opportunity for educated women of some family means. My wife had to pay a hefty agency fee of 19,000 pesos, or close to $400. (It's more than double that today.) The cash income from their family farm is about $500 a year, but since her father had been in Saudi Arabia they could manage. Many young women can't, and they end up as factory workers, clerks, or housekeepers in a Philippine city for room and board and a tiny salary. Moreover, global migration is a way of life in the Philippines. People don't necessarily like it, but they accept it, with the combination of fatalism, resourcefulness, and pluck that are leading traits of this nation.

Family duty is almost as strong there as individual ambition is in the United States. Your family needs help, so you go.

Men go as well as women, and their lot can be no less rough. A man in my wife's village showed me a hand with two fingers missing, thanks to a machine in a factory in Taiwan. They promised him compensation but never paid a cent. But jobs for men are more scarce, and tend to require skills. Skilled women go too, especially nurses. In the United States, Filipinas have become to American hospitals what Dominicans are to major league baseball and Koreans to inner-city grocery stores. But nurses aside, women have the advantage precisely because they are "unskilled" in market terms. Their special skills—mothering and housekeeping—though chronically devalued in the market, are in great global demand.

The Philippine government promotes this trade, and a whole sub-economy of schools, remittance companies and the like has grown up around it. In the provincial capital of Iloilo, with its tired Spanish colonial streets, one of my wife's many cousins teaches Hebrew to Filipinas preparing to work in Israel.

Filipina household workers, in other words, are prototypical global women, and Hochschild's opening essay gets things off to a promising start. Hochschild combines a feminist sensibility with both humanity and common sense, and she has an ear for a phrase. She has interviewed Filipina nannies in the San Francisco Bay Area, and she turns their experience into a suggestive global theme. Third World countries are undergoing a "care drain," she says. The First World once extracted the Third's rubber, oil, and gold; now it extracts parental affection as well. "Today, as love and care become the 'new gold,'" she writes, "Third World children pay the price." Migration has become a "dark child's burden." And their mothers' burden as well.

**Maid and Voyage**

There is a superb piece on maids in Taiwan by Pei-Chia Lan, a sociologist in that country. In one case, the maid gets caught in a triangle between the wife, husband, and the husband's mother. The mother-in-law doesn't approve of the maid—a good wife would handle the household by herself—and the maid and her actually form an alliance. The mother-in-law also feels threatened, since the maid might usurp her own functions. The first night the mother-in-law prepares an elaborate Chinese dinner, just to show who's boss of the kitchen. The essay is a model of social anthropology. It gets inside the household relations and seeks to understand rather than to accuse.

By contrast, the essay on Filipinas in Hong Kong is more an advocacy piece. The writer, an anthropologist at the University of Pittsburgh by the name of Nicole Constable, shows that these women do not have an easy life. They often sleep in cramped spaces without air conditioning, or in bed with a child, or even on the kitchen floor. They are subject to long lists of petty rules—strict bed times, curfews for day off, dress codes, even restrictions on when and how they can bathe. If they finish their work early, some employers make them do it over again. Filipinas aren't paid to sit idle, after all. In addition, Chinese employers cheat on pay, and violate their contracts in other ways, such as demanding work on days off. (My wife's last employer contrived to get her out of the apartment a week before she was due to leave, forcing her to stay with a friend whose boss was away.) Technically the maids can seek recourse at their consulate.
But Filipinos do not have great confidence in their government. More importantly, the maids aren't inclined to make trouble, not with eager replacements a dime a dozen and families back home depending on their remittance checks.

Constable's picture is true. Yet there's a tendentious quality that made me want to add a few caveats. Not all Hong Kong bosses are dragon ladies, for example. My wife had three placements during her nine years there, and two were warm households that treated her with respect. The apartments were by far the best places she ever had lived. Even the hard boss—her last—was away often tending to her real estate investments, so there was less pressure. Moreover, maids who work for American or British expats were considered positively lucky. They often enjoyed more lenient rules, along with air conditioning, televisions, and telephones. Sometimes they could even live on their own with the employer paying the rent.

Though an anthropologist herself, Constable is not above putting her finger on the cultural scale. Food, for example, is a matter fraught with implication. Does the maid eat the same food as the family, served the same way? The question involves custom, courtesy, and class, and can be especially awkward if the host family speaks little English. One maid reported that her employers served her food in a separate dish at the family dinner table. Her first night she had shown obvious discomfort at eating from a communal dish, and she interpreted the separate dish as an attempt to meet her need. Constable, however, is not satisfied. "A more critical observer," she says, "might wonder if this is another attempt to establish the worker's place as a subordinate member of the household." Yes, and a critical reader might wonder whether that sentence is an attempt to establish that the Filipina is not capable of interpreting her own experience.

**Global Heart Transplant**

After the awful plight of adolescent sex slaves, the most wrenching part of *Global Woman* is the situation of Filipina mothers and their children. Hochschild interviewed a nanny in the San Francisco Bay Area who had to leave her own child two months after birth to come take care of someone else's. "The first two years I felt like I was going crazy," she said. "I would catch myself gazing at nothing, thinking about my child." Hochschild calls such cases a collective "global heart transplant," an image that suggests something about the recipients as well as about the donors. In a joint introduction with Ehrenreich, she writes, "It is as if the wealthy parts of the world are running short on precious emotional and sexual resources and have had to turn to poorer regions for fresh supplies."

This part of the story hits home in my household. We had a child eight months ago, and the thought of ripping my wife and child apart rips me apart as well. It reminds me that I am exempt, through no deserving of my own, from many burdens that millions in the world must bear. (I felt much the same way at the reports of Iraqi women who flocked to hospitals to induce delivery before the United States invaded.)

The pain metastasizes up and down the line. It is not uncommon, for example, for children in Hong Kong and the United States to become more attached to their nannies than to their own mothers. My wife knew of a case in Hong Kong in which a child was asked in school to draw their favorite person in the world. The child drew a picture of its Filipina nanny rather than its parents.

This does not improve relations in the home, nor simplify the nanny's feelings towards her own children. The essay in *Global Woman* on "The Care Crisis in the Philippines" by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, an assistant professor of Women's Studies and Asian American Studies at the University of Wisconsin, cites several of these. There is Ellen, for example, who was 10 when her mother left for New York City 12 years before. (The mother was undocumented and so could not leave the United States to visit home.) Ellen felt jealous of her mother's wards in New York, and missed her dearly: "There are times when you want to talk to her, but she is not there." Filipinos are not self-dramatizers. Such statements reflect real pain.

Yet this essay clenches its jaw in the face of its own emotional pull. The problem is not the separation of mothers and children, Parreñas says. Rather it is a "dominant gender ideology" that makes these women feel guilty for leaving home, and a media culture that links this separation to social problems such as delinquency. Why, some kids do just fine. Ellen has stayed in touch with her mother by telephone and email. She has done well in school and is now a second year medical student. Ellen is "clearly not the abandoned child or social liability the Philippine media describe."

Yeah, but. Leave aside that telephone contact can be erratic in the rural Philippines, and that not all families can afford cell phones to begin with, let alone computers. Leave aside, too, that not all Filipinas—my wife, for example—really care what the newspapers might say on this score. (The Philippine media is feisty with scandal, but does not carry the portentous authority that *The Washington Post* and *The New
York Times do here.) Let’s listen to another young Filipina named Theresa, who is quoted in the same essay. “When my mother is home, I just sit next to her,” she says. “I stare at her face, to see the changes in her face, to see how she aged during the years she was away from us. But when she is about to go back to Hong Kong, it’s like my heart is going to burst.” Theresa continues, “Telephone calls, that’s not enough. You can’t hug her, kiss her, feel her, everything. You can’t feel her presence. It’s just words that you have.”

But it’s all she’s going to get, in this essay at least. Again the writer assures us that such children “do not necessarily become ‘delinquent.’” The answer is not to find a way to enable mothers to stay in the Philippines, she says. Rather it is a “reconstituted gender ideology,” plus more benefits for migrant mothers in their host countries. I’m all for those. But I doubt that either is going to be much comfort to young Theresa.

To be sure, Parreñas is right to condemn any stigma against mothers who work abroad. As my wife says, these women are “heroes.” They endure hardship and separation to give their kids a better life. But war produces heroes, too, and that doesn’t make it a good idea. Even granting the large role of extended families in the Philippines, and the emotional resilience born of frequent migration, it would seem that the global mother trade is something to diminish if at all possible.

**Going Pains**

For her own part, Hochschild acknowledges that the best answer would be to enable more Filipinas to work closer to home. This, of course, is easier said than done. As recently as the 1960s, the Philippines was the bright economic light of Asia. Several decades of Marcos, plus a host of other things, took care of that. No one has a sure-fire way to end the country’s economic woes, but it would help to acknowledge that policies promoted by the United States don’t always help. Freer trade, for example, has brought a surge of agricultural imports, which depress farm prices and bring more hardship to the countryside. One of my wife’s sisters did what many in this country do to make cash — she bought piglets to fatten on the farm. (Some 80 percent of the pork in the country is produced by small farmers.) When the time came to take them to market, however, she discovered that imports had driven down the price so much that she would make very little. Experiences like that mean more need for women to go abroad. The United States protected its own markets for over a 100 years while its modern economy took root. Third World nations, especially agricultural ones, may need some flexibility as well. The Western development model has had other unintended consequences where Third World women are concerned. In Thailand, an export-driven economic boom actually has increased the demand for teenage prostitutes, since more men now can afford them. A little humility is in order regarding our prescriptions for the world.

But in any event, migratory workers always will be with us, so long as people yearn for a better life. (Hochschild cites evidence that an expanding market economy actually increases migration, perhaps because it raises expectations.) So long as opportunity is so meager in a nation such as the Philippines, moreover, no one should tell a mother she cannot do what is necessary for her kids. But shouldn’t these women at least enjoy the full protection of the law in the countries in which they work? This would end an egregious double standard in the global economy. Adam Smith assumed that capital is not mobile, just as (and ultimately because) people are not. This was the basis of free trade theory. If we are going to transgress the premise for fictional persons called corporations, should we not do it for real persons as well?

For example, the United States has something called H-1B visas for high tech workers. As a start, how about creating a similar program for nannies, cleaning ladies, and others — one that gives these women legal status so that they aren’t so easily exploited. And shouldn’t they be allowed, after a brief interval, to apply for citizenship and bring their husbands and children over to join them in the United States? At the very least, shouldn’t we require that their employers offer some minimal benefits, including plane fare home — as employers in Hong Kong must provide once the standard two-year contract is over? If we want their labor, then we should be willing to pay the price.

This should be high on the agenda for the next round of trade negotiations. It should join intellectual-property protections and genetically engineered food as topics of urgent U.S. concern. Maybe there even should be a sort of WTO for workers and their children, just as there is one tailored for corporations. It could help fulfill the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which, as Hochschild reminds us, asserts that children should “grow up in a family environment” and not be separated from their parents against the parents’ will. What could be more compassionately conservative than that? We could give this initiative a catchy name. How about “Leave No Child Behind”?