Gossiping Endurance: Discipline and Social Control of Filipina Helpers in Malaysia

Michelle Lee Guy

Introduction

Rapid economic, technological and communications advancements in many parts of the world have resulted in an extended movement and dissemination of people, goods and information across geographical borders. Further, the proliferation of transnational business, production and human management enhances the expansion of the international labour market, including the female labour force. Much of the work on transmigration and the international division of labour, however, has been either (a) gender biased: focusing on men as productive human resources, predominantly when those from less developed countries flock into highly industrialized and developed economies; or (b) that migratory practices/purposes were largely based on calculations of economic returns; or (c) to do with maintaining homes at multiple locations, therefore, sustaining multi-stranded social relations. Women’s participation in transmigration and their experiences on a daily basis, their social relations with other women, and their coping mechanisms while abroad were, more often than not, ignored.

In this paper, I attempt to examine some of the implications of female transmigration because of work, particularly for Filipina domestic helpers in Malaysia. I will focus on the contexts of transmigration, social control and discipline embedded in their experiences of working in others’ households. The examination is largely grounded on women’s social interactions and communication in the household (or the workplace, for transmigrants) and in public spaces. These experiences and interactions might be considered mundane or trivial for some; nonetheless, how do these interactions represent the mechanism of control and discipline in their daily transnational social reproduction? In addition, what are the ways and means used to sustain normative behaviours and order in women’s (migrants and employers) interactions?

In Malaysia, foreign domestic helpers are subordinated and subjected to surveillance, which indicates that control and discipline are considered (by employers, state authorities and employment agencies) to be necessary for maintaining social order. Whereas, in public spaces, interaction is mainly
between fellow transmigrants, and largely consists of mutual support, sharing and exchanges of information of various kinds, news from home, work experiences or news about other Filipinos. Nevertheless, mechanisms of control and discipline are inevitably practised amongst migrants to ensure “proper” or normative behaviours and job security.

It is my objective in this paper to analyze the use of gossip as one of the mechanisms employed to impose control and regulate unequal relations between employers and helpers; and to enhance a reputable collective image as well as to warrant job security amongst migrant helpers; thus, bridging the needs of networking and support to discipline and control amongst migrants.

1. Methodology

While the transnational experiences of women workers are highly characterized by close surveillance by employers, employment agencies and state authorities, as well as complicated sentiments of freedom and guilt, the mechanisms of social control and communication, either between female employers and migrant workers, or amongst fellow migrants are essential. By utilizing “gossip” as a method of communication and social control, in which structured power relations between female employers and migrant helpers are sustained; likewise, migrant workers exert control over one another. This has in turn, upheld “acceptable” collective norms, behaviours and values, which are expected amongst migrants; thus, “gate-keeping” their professional image as “good” or professional domestic helpers.

In this paper, I discuss how gossip is used to maintain social control and discipline in relation to Filipina transmigrants and domestic service. It is a part of a larger research on Filipina domestic helpers I did in Malaysia (1996–97). In the course of 14 months, the research has concentrated on Kuala Lumpur and its vicinity for 12 months; and the other two months were spent in the Philippines. Indepth interviews were carried out with 13 Filipina domestic helpers and seven female employers in Malaysia. I have also collected 10 diaries written by Filipina helpers. Additionally, focus group meetings were held in different stages for a period of six months. The group included eight to 10 Filipina helpers who frequently visited the Filipino Ministry at St John’s Cathedral in Kuala Lumpur. Indepth interviews and focus group meetings have generated useful data based on respondents’ articulation of their lived experiences, thoughts and inspirations.

Interviews with female employers were performed in their homes. Apart from that, interactions among the employers, other family members and their helpers were observed. Interviews with seven of the helpers were conducted in their workplace and another six were at the Filipino Ministry. The latter set was arranged to avoid potential tension and fear on the part of Filipina helpers to provide information in the presence of their employers.