



Female Labour Migration for a Better Life?

The 'Never Ending Journey' and the Meaning of Migration for Filipino Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

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Cover photo: "The Plight of Hong Kong's Domestic Workers" AsiaSentinel. March 17, 2016.

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“To live is to suffer, to survive
is to find some meaning
in the suffering.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche



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Abstract

Thousands of women migrate from the Philippines to Hong Kong for ‘a better life’. Through ethnographic exploration and three months of field research amongst Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, this thesis explores how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is constructed. The aim is to demonstrate how diverse ideas, expectations and experiences in the diverse stages of migration construct the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. It covers four dynamics of the so called ‘migration journey’ that show the development of an understanding of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. It covers the historical developments, and the three stages of migration: pre migration, migration and post migration. It first shows two narratives on female labour migration: migration as an opportunity for a better life and migration as an escape for a better life. Second, it questions the idea of migration for a better life by discussing the living and working experiences of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. It shows how female labour migration is seen as an act of sacrifice from an emic perspective. This thesis concludes that the meaning of female labour migration changes over time and place: it is not static. The migration journey for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is a vicious circle and thus a never ending journey.

Keywords: Female Labour Migration, Filipino Domestic Workers, Meaning-making, Migration Stages, Experiences, Motives, Migration Journey, Hong Kong.

Acknowledgements

Before my master Cultural Anthropology and Sustainable Citizenship I did not know of many topics that fueled my interest in the last two years. The premaster Cultural Anthropology was my first real acquaintance with Anthropology and the diversity of topics that it has to offer. Since there were so many topics that were new to me, of which I wanted to learn and know more, I focussed on many diverse subjects during my master. Studying Anthropology at Utrecht University made it possible for me to choose and often change between the different topics. As Yvon van der Pijl (the director of the master's program) said, while referring to me, "She is maybe one of our best examples that shows how flexible researchers can be in the field".

In the beginning of February 2018 I went to Hong Kong with the purpose to study religion, belonging and identity. On the first Sunday of my fieldwork I was eligible with thousands of women. I did not know who these women were, what they were doing, or why they were in Hong Kong that day. What I did knew was that I wanted to find out. A quick search on my phone showed me many newspaper articles about 'foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong' in combination with 'abuse', 'discrimination' and 'rights'. After reading the first articles that showed up, I put my phone away. My plan for that day was to visit diverse temples to find the best research location for my research. Two weeks of visiting temples followed, but I could not shake off my curiosity and interest to know more about the foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. In consultation with my supervisor, I decided to change my research topic: I was going to study foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong!

The decision to change my research topic was the best decision that I made during my field research. I learned so much about domestic work, the Philippines, Hong Kong and female labour migration. I came in contact with many Filipino domestic workers and even made three very close friends, who I want to thank for their time, effort, personal stories and trust in me. However, when I came back from my fieldwork I found out that changing my research topic also brought some difficulties. Writing my thesis without a research questions was almost impossible and developing a research question after my fieldwork was very challenging as well. First of all, I want to thank my supervisor Lotje Brouwer for her very helpful and supportive feedback and her patience while writing this thesis and during the search for a research question.

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An additional note that I want to make concerns the references that I used in this thesis. The first two academic articles that I read on my chosen topic were from Nicole Constable (1997, 1999) who did several studies on Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. Except for these two articles and a reference to Bronislaw Malinowski, who is considered one of the most important 20th-century anthropologists, all the literature and sources used in this thesis are from 2000 to 2017.

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Female labour migration and Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong

Research, friendship and ethical dilemmas: my thesis introduction

It is the first Sunday of my fieldwork and I find myself astonished in the business district of Hong Kong. This area, called Central, is the heart of headquarters of many multinational financial services corporations. On weekdays men in three-piece-suits and briefcases, and women in corporate dresses and elegant heels dominate this area. Today, this area is the ‘home’ of thousands of foreign domestic workers dressed in their best clothes, because it is “*Filipina shine day!*”¹. While Ashley, one of the Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong says this, the other seven women around her start cheering and clapping. In Statue Square, Central Park, and around MTR² exits and the IFC mall³, thousands of women, mainly from the Philippines and Indonesia, come together on their ‘day to shine’.

I meet eight Filipino domestic workers on a sunny Saturday in the first week of March. Whereas it is hot and humid on the streets of Hong Kong, it is a bit colder and windy at the rooftop of the IFC mall where we come together. The IFC mall is one of the biggest malls in Central. The rooftop has a few bars and restaurants, a small garden, and an outdoor terrace. In the bars and restaurants there are mostly well off Chinese, British and American people who go for expensive lunches on a Saturday afternoon. The terraces, in contradiction, are mainly filled with Filipino domestic workers who bring their own food, snacks, drinks and music. Sarah, one of the eight women I meet today explains to me that the terraces are public spaces and that the owners of the restaurants are very nice, because “*they just let us sit here*”⁴. I realise that, if these terraces are public spaces, the owners *have* to let them sit there. But she seems so grateful that they can sit here without someone sending them away, that I decide not to spoil their fun.

Sarah and her friends (Fay, Liza, Anna, Nina, Rosa, Ashley, and Kate) are all from the Philippines and work in Hong Kong as domestic workers.⁵ Except for Nina, they all have children back in the Philippines and two of them are single mothers (Sarah and Rosa). Nina and Kate are in Hong Kong since the last couple of months, while the others are here for over a year now. They all work six days a week and their average work hours are from 6am until 10pm. Their main tasks are cleaning and cooking, and for six of the eight women who work for a family with children, these tasks extend to include taking care of children.

¹ Referred to by Ashley in a later informal conversation before the start of our interview on March 8, 2018.

² MTR refers to Mass Transit Railway Corporation, in this thesis it refers to the Metro in Hong Kong in particular.

³ IFC mall refers to International Finance Centre, one of the biggest malls in Central, Hong Kong.

⁴ Informal conversation with Sarah on March 3, 2018.

⁵ Extensive personal introductions follow later in this thesis.

The meaning of *meaning*

The aim of this thesis is to gain insights on how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is constructed, by looking at different narratives based upon three months of fieldwork and an ethnographic analysis. In this thesis I answers the following research question: “How is the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong constructed?” To answer this question I explore how Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong experience, perceive and give meaning to female labour migration, and how diverse aspects influence and construct this meaning.

To understand how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers is constructed, I start with an explanation of the word meaning itself. O’Conner (2003) shows that meaning-making is “the development of an understanding of the event and its implications” (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson in O’Conner 2003, 52). In this thesis I show the development of the understanding of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

The dictionary defines meaning as “interpretation or significance” (O’Conner 2003, 53). O’Conner (2003, 53) defines meaning-making in her article as “creating or discovering the significance of an event for one’s self, with both a cognitive (e.g. causality, comparison) and emotional (e.g. positive or negative valence, arousal) component”. This definition, as well as my research findings show that the meaning of an event is not fixed. It changes depending upon diverse ideas, expectations and experiences.

As O’Conner (2003) also shows meaning-making is a bridge between the negative emotions and the positive emotions,⁶ build through cognitive restructuring⁷ (see O’Conner 2003, 64-67). In other words, meaning is not inherent to an event or situation. It is rather the person who constructs the meaning that establishes an understanding of the event or situation. In this case, it means that the meaning of female labour migration is not static, or the same for everyone. Positive and negative emotions, as well as ‘the mental processes of perception’ for Filipino domestic workers give different meanings to female labour

⁶ I borrow “negative and positive impacts/emotions” from O’Conner (2003). Yet, I am very much aware that the idea of *negative* or *positive* changes from person to person. I, therefore, do not use these connotations in my thesis to show the impacts of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, but to explain the meaning of *meaning* I could not avoid the use of these words.

⁷ Cognitive restructuring is the change of the mental processes of perception (concerned with the act of knowing and perceiving). See O’Conner 2003 for an extensive explanation.

migration. The positive and negative emotions can change, and so can the mental process of perception, and thus, the meaning.

The meaning of female labour migration

In this thesis I show how diverse perceptions and emotions in different stages of migration change the meaning of female labour migration from the perspective of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. O'Conner (2003, 55) adds that "in order to make meaning of an event, individuals must explore the significance of the event for their broader lives. They must understand the negative and positive impacts it has had, and consider the intensity of the experience." To show how the meaning of female labour migration is constructed for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, I discuss the significance and impacts of female labour migration that influence their ideas, expectations, and experiences, and thus their meaning.

There are three stages in the migration process: pre migration, migration, and post migration, which I explain later. Diverse ideas, expectations and experiences construct the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. Filipino domestic workers decide and prepare to migrate to Hong Kong in the pre migration stage. I describe the motives for female labour migration and the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers with the push-pull framework for migration. The push-pull framework shows the favourable and unfavourable factors that influence the migration decision for Filipino domestic workers and construct the meaning of female labour migration for them.

To understand the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong in the second and third stage of migration, I look at theory on (the causes of) stress factors and distress of female labour migration. Diverse literature (Ahonen et al. 2010; Holroyd et al. 2001; Lau et al. 2009; Van der Ham et al. 2015) shows the relation between female labour migration and e.g. the sorrow and grievance for mothers who are not with their children, discrimination, exploitation, isolation, abuse, high vulnerability, adverse effects on their wellbeing, poor working conditions, strict employers, and stress, sadness or even depression.

Migration literature is inevitable and important in this thesis, yet many literature on migration tend to look at e.g. models of male migration, social constructs of gender, or the perspective that frames female migrants as mothers or caregivers only (Tyldum 2015). As Tyldum (2015, 57) states "when framed this way [as mothers or caregivers], the interests of

the women tend to be conflated with the interests of those who depend on their care”. The merging of the interest of both female labour migrants and their families, as Tyldum refers to in the above quote, is heavily discussed in the female migration literature and briefly highlighted in this thesis.

Central in this empirical research is the perspective of Filipino domestic workers themselves and their narratives. My primary objective as an anthropologist is not to look at one aspect of migration (e.g. the economic situation back in the Philippines or the female migrants’ role as mothers), but to highlight diverse historical, cultural, social, and personal aspects, experiences and ideas with the aim to understand the construction of the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. This thesis provides the reader with a holistic and emic understanding of the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Ethnographic approach

To study real-world settings to generate rich narrative descriptions, I use an ethnographic approach during the field research. Ethnography is a methodology that addresses the complexity of human experiences. According to Malinowski (1926) the ethnographer does not sit in his or her armchair, but goes into the field to spend time learning about groups of people and their surroundings. For this thesis I collect ethnographic evidence as explanatory data to answer the research question. To write a multidimensional thesis, I combine literature, ethnographic evidence and numerous vignettes, observations and quotes from my research participants to assess the construction of the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. To write a deeply engaged ethnographic research, I combine biographies and personal stories from Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong with theoretical data about female labour migration.

The task of an anthropologist, as Ingold (2011) suggests, is to study *with* people rather than studying the lives *of* people. The qualitative methods of participant observation enable this engagement during my fieldwork (cf. Juris 2008). As an anthropologist I am my own ‘research instrument’. The most important thing is to make no assumptions, yet in a way I always use my own referential framework to interpret the expressions and experiences of my research participants. This thesis is a representation of the engagement that establishes the dialogue with me as a researcher and my research participants, rather than the unmediated world of the participants (cf. DeWalt and DeWalt 2011).

Filipino domestic workers: more than *just helpers or maids*

This thesis is the result of a three month field research. The fieldwork period lasted from the beginning of February 2018 until the beginning of May 2018 in one of the wealthiest places in Asia: Hong Kong. As a special administrative region it maintains a separate political and economic system away from that of mainland China. It is a centre of world trade and a place of many comings and goings. As Constable (1999) shows, this international hub has a heterogenous, transnational and hybrid cultural and social scenery.

With its proximity to Victoria Harbour, Central serves as the centre of trade and financial activities from the earlier days of the British colonial era in 1841. It continues to flourish and serve as the place of administration after the transfer of sovereignty to China in 1997. On Sunday this area seems ‘the home’ of thousands of foreign domestic workers, “taking over” as the locals say (Constable 1997, 539). From individuals to groups up to fifteen women, foreign domestic workers gather to eat, talk, listen to music, and enjoy each others company. They perform rituals that are generally considered private (applying makeup and polishing nails) in public. “There, on the steps of such great monuments to capitalism as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, foreign maids speak in languages that the locals cannot understand” (Constable 1997, 540). There, on those steps in Central I conducted my three month field research.

Hong Kong is the fourth most densely populated region in the world with over 7,4 million people of various nationalities (Censtatd 2017). About five percent of the population, an overwhelming majority of women, are foreign domestic workers. In 2017 there are 370,000 foreign domestic workers; 48 percent from the Philippines and 49 percent from Indonesia. Other foreign domestic workers are from countries such as Thailand and India.

This research focusses on Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. In the 1970s there were but a few hundred Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, but their popularity grew quickly among the Chinese middle-class. Filipino domestic workers are mainly women who are employed within local families to perform domestic work⁸ (Asian Migrant Centre 2016). The majority of the Filipino domestic workers are between the ages of 20 and 40. Most are Roman Catholic and have attained more than a high school

⁸ Domestic work refers to the performance of a variety of household services for an individual or a family e.g. providing care for children and elderly, housekeeping, cleaning, household maintenance, cooking, laundry, ironing, shopping for food, and other household errands.

education. In contrast to what many Hong Kong residents think, they do not come from the poorest population of the Philippines.

Domestic workers are often subject to exploitation because their work is not seen as anything more than help (Help for Domestic Workers 2017). Throughout this thesis I use ‘domestic workers’ instead of ‘domestic helpers’ to recognise the position of my research population and to secure that the work of domestic workers is seen as more than ‘just help’. Filipino domestic workers, unlike the Chinese domestic workers in the past, do not accept their lowly position in the household hierarchy. Many non-governmental organizations who help these women and the International Labour Organization proudly insist for them to be referred to as ‘domestic workers’ rather than ‘domestic helpers’. In this thesis I use the term ‘Filipino domestic workers’ to refer to all the research participants. This does not implicate that the domestic workers are men. On the contrary, all my research participants are female domestic workers.

The word ‘Filipina’ has undergone a shift in meaning. As Barber (2000, 400) states “once proudly mobilised discursively by Philippine feminist and others who wished to distinguish Philippine women from the generic Filipino, “Filipina” is becoming negatively coloured by the demeaned class and status connotations accorded paid domestic labour”. As Barber (2000) shows in the above quote the use of the word ‘Filipina’ outside of the Philippines is inextricably linked with the idea of domestic services and a low position. In Hong Kong this word has become synonymous with “maid” and in Canada with “nanny” (Constable 1997; Barber 2000). Therefore, I will use the term ‘Filipino domestic workers’ throughout this thesis.

Gaining insights into the lives of Filipino domestic workers

To answer the research question, I use multiple qualitative research methods and techniques that are classic for doing anthropological field research. Qualitative research analyses date from direct fieldwork observations, in-depth, open-ended, and semi-structured interviews, focus group meetings, many informal conversations and an analysis of online and written material. The most important research method during the field research is participant observation. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, 1) define participant observation as:

“a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tactic aspects of their life routines and their culture.”

In the quote above show DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) the use of participant observation as the main research method for field research. As an anthropologist I adopt the use of participant observation during my field research to participate in the lives of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. On the one hand, participant observation helps to understand the explicit aspects of their lives; how Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong articulate things themselves. On the other hand, it helps to understand the tactic aspects of their lives; things that Filipino domestic workers are not aware of (e.g. body language). The challenge of participant observation is the balance between being an observant and being a participant. To participate means getting involved, being subjective, and immersing myself. To observe means keeping an emotional and sometimes physical distance, and being objective (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Participant observation also helps to avoid “quixotic reliability” of answers (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 122). Quixotic reliability is the tendency for research participants to say what they think the researcher ideally wants them to hear.

O’Reilly (2005) states that participant observation is not really a method on its own: “it involves making notes, asking questions, doing interviews, collecting data, drawing up lists, constructing databases, being active in research”. The diverse parts of ethnographic research are not separate from participating and observing, but they are, in fact, inextricable linked. During the field research I write down all my field notes. Especially in the beginning it is important to write everything down. Field notes move from first impressions to insider sensitivities. In the beginning the field notes are broad and towards the end of the fieldwork the field notes are more selective and specific. As well as writing field notes, I reflect towards myself, my experiences, and my own feelings and emotions. I combine this information with the intellectual ethnographic notes. It enables me to “stand back, avoid overinvolvement or ‘going native’” (O’Reilly 2005, 99).

Participatory action research (PAR) is another technique that I use at the end of my field research. PAR is an approach that emphasis participation and action. It seeks to understand the world by trying to change it, collaboratively and following reflection (Reason and Bradbury 2008). I did not use PAR throughout my whole fieldwork period, since the emphasis of the research is not on collective inquiry. Yet, one aspect of PAR (experimentation grounded in experience) is relevant for this research. Therefore I use one

exercise of PAR: Drawing: “perceptions of change”.⁹ For this exercise the research participants draw themselves five to ten years ago and reflect upon the drawing. After discussion their drawing, they draw themselves and their lives right now. The same reflection and discussion follows. The PAR drawing exercise leads to insights in participation (life in society), action (experiences) and research (knowledge) (Chevalier and Buckles 2013, 10). It gives new insights on personal life topics e.g. life in the Philippines, changes in marriage, and ideas about raising children from a distance. It helps me to gain useful and very personal information from my research participants that they do not share during interviews or informal conversations.

Ethical considerations

DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, 211) argue “researchers must be aware of the ethical considerations of research from the point at which they choose the question to be asked, through the choice of a population in which to study it, the methods to be used to collect data, the recruitment of informants, and publication”. What they show in the quote above is that there are diverse aspects of doing research that need critical thinking and ethical consideration. As I researcher I am aware of the ethical considerations from the start of my research.

DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) point out the ethical considerations concerning the questions to be asked. During my field research I notice that my informants do not answer certain questions. Questions concerning their employers, their children or the sacrifices that they have to make are topics that they try to avoid as much as possible. When I directly ask them such questions they reply with *“tell us more about yourself”*¹⁰, *“you already know everything about me”*¹¹, *“there is nothing new that I can explain”*¹², or *“you know all the answers already”*¹³. Some of the Filipino domestic workers also tell me that my research topic is not as interesting as my love life of other personal stories. As Fay (who I extensively introduce in the following chapter) tells me *“Let’s not talk about our sacrifices. It’s boring Rens, also for you. There are better topics to talk about. Happier*

⁹ Borrowed from “PAR 1 Drawing “perceptions of change within the university” from the presentation from Merel de Buck for Utrecht University “Ethnographic Positioning and Participatory Action Research” in December 2017.

¹⁰ Informal conversation with Liza on March 25, 2018.

¹¹ Informal conversation with Fay on April 4, 2018.

¹² Interview with Sarah on April 14, 2018.

¹³ PAR exercise and discussing the drawing with Fay on April 21, 2018.

topics. *Let's talk about your love life. About dating Hong Kong guys!*"¹⁴ Later in my fieldwork, I find out that my informants often change the topic because it is "*too hard*"¹⁵ to talk about it and they do not want to talk about it.

I strongly agree with Oliver-Smith and Hoffman (2002, 14) that anthropologists have a responsibility to "mitigate the suffering of others to the highest degree they can". It is my responsibility to reduce the suffering of my research participants. Especially concerning topics that they prefer not to talk to. Reducing the suffering for my informants means not talking about this topic. For me it means missing out on useful data for my research. I try to find middle ground and ask Fay one more time to tell me about the topics mentioned earlier. However, I do not ask her in person, but via messages, which I feel might be a better channel and might make it easier for her to explain her feelings and emotions.

I text Fay in the evening to ask her if she wants to help me with a specific thing for my research. She replies that she is more than willing to help me and asks me what it is about, so she can prepare for it. I explain to her quite extensively that it is about the sacrifices that she makes for herself and her family, and her feelings and thoughts related to this topic. She replies with the following text "Ohh, that is interesting Rens, but maybe if you will ask me about that, I have to cry haha." She continues: "You know that that topic always makes me cry, haha, and honestly I do not want to talk about it hahaha." I am about to give up, because as much as I want to gain useful information, looking at this dilemma from an ethical perspective, I certainly do not want to force my participants into uncomfortable situations. While I am thinking of other ways to get useful information, or asking her questions such as why it makes her cry instead of continuing into details, she sends me another message: "But, for your studies, I will share it with you. I will talk to you when we meet."¹⁶

As I show in the beginning with the quote from DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) and in the vignette above, it is important to be aware of the ethical considerations of the research. Which questions to ask is one of the ethical considerations during my fieldwork. The methods to use to collect data is another important choice to make. The main method that I use during my field research is participant observation.

¹⁴ Interview with Fay on April 22, 2018.

¹⁵ Text conversation (Facebook Messenger) with Fay on April 8, 2018.

¹⁶ Text conversation (Facebook Messenger) with Fay on April 8, 2018.

As DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, 214) argue “participant observation as a method raised the greatest number of ethical questions with respect to informed consent and the right of people to choose to participate in research in any of the methods usually applied in fieldwork”. Informed consent is the agreement on the usage of communication between a researcher and his or her research participants. I agree with DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, 214) that participant observation is “ethically challenging” rather than “inherently unethical”. During my fieldwork I am always completely open with my research participants about my role as a researcher. I talk to 35 to 40 domestic workers, who are all aware of my role as a researcher. To gain deeper personal information I build stronger relationships with five Filipino domestic workers in specific. Although these five women are aware of my role as a researcher, there are moments where they “forget” my position (cf. DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 214). Lugosi (2006) argues that ethnographic research is always in a liminal state between overt and covert research. I experience being in the liminal state during my fieldwork many times. There are moments where I have the idea that my research participants ‘forget’ that I am a researcher. Yet, I always make sure that they know what I do with certain received information, especially very personal and vulnerable information. The personal dilemma concerning my position as a research in the field is as follows: I develop a strong relationship with five Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, who help me to gather deeply engaged ethnographic data and confide in me with more personal stories. During my fieldwork I find this challenging, because it is hard for me to find a good balance between a friendship and the relation between me as a researcher and the five Filipino domestic workers as my research participants. It often cost me a lot of effort and energy to get useful information for my research, since my informants prefer to talk about other topics, as I show earlier in this paragraph. On the other hand, it helps me to get more personal information, especially for this reason, as I show in the vignette above.

During my field research I document all the personal dilemmas and internal conflicts, all the conversations that I have with my research participants, both formal and informal, and all my other findings throughout my fieldwork in descriptive and methodological notes. I further keep track of all my interactions in a journal, which enables me to carefully analyse my findings in chronological order. I hereby follow Diphoorn’s preferred method ‘mosaics of data’, where I do not distinguish personal, observational and methodological notes. I use this method because I agree with Diphoorn (2016) that categorisation of the different types of data disregards the interconnectedness between emotions, experiences, methods and knowledge.

The last aspect that DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) discuss concerning ethical considerations is the publication of the research. To insure anonymity for my research participants I use pseudonyms for all the domestic workers to whom I talk during my field research. In some cases I also leave out personal details or additional information. As well as all the pictures that I made during the field research.

Structure

To answer the research question “How is the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong constructed?” I highlight diverse historical, cultural, social, and personal aspects, experiences and ideas of female labour migration. This thesis follows the journey of female labour migration from the Philippines to Hong Kong, as I refer to as the ‘migration journey’. I distinguish four dynamics that show the development of an understand of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong during the migration journey.

The first chapter covers the historical developments that shape the meaning of female labour migration as ‘common’ and ‘normal’ nowadays. Female labour migration is often a necessary response to globalization, and to the social, political and economic changes in the Philippines throughout the years. In this chapter I discuss the the transformation in economic roles for men and women in the Philippines and the changes of the meaning of labour migration throughout the last decades. I describe migration and its different flows, and labour migration in particular. Further, I explain the historical transformation of labour migration in the Philippines and dive deeper into the literature of female labour migration in the Philippines.

The second chapter starts with the migration journey for Filipino domestic workers in the sending country (the Philippines). I discuss how the push-pull framework for migration shapes the meaning of female labour migration as either an opportunity or an escape, or a combination of both. Unfavourable circumstances in the Philippines and favourable circumstances in Hong Kong are motives that shape the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers as an act for a better life.

The third chapter discusses the second and third stage of the migration journey for Filipino domestic workers in the receiving country (Hong Kong). I show how an understanding of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is traced into stress and distress from living and working in Hong Kong. This chapter questions the idea of migration for a better life through the sense of loss of family, home

and county, and poor living and working conditions in Hong Kong. From the perspective of Filipino domestic workers themselves the meaning of female labour migration in Hong Kong is seen as an act of sacrifice. Further, I briefly discuss the last stage of the migration journey: returning back to the Philippines. I show how the migration journey for Filipino domestic workers is a never ending journey for the search for a better life.

The last chapter contains the conclusion. In this chapter I answer the research question, reflect and account upon my results, and show both the academic and social insights and consequences of my research.

Chapter 1 - Historical context

From globalization to female Filipino labour migration: the 'migration journey' through time.

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”

- Karl Marx (1852), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Globalization

Globalization, flexibility in employment, increasing social mobility, and insecurity in personal relationships are developments that contribute to a sense of uncertainty and fragmentation. Globalization is a complex world transformation. It refers to the integration of countries through the mobility of capital, ideas and people. Flows of goods, services, people, and even labour take an increasingly global form. Studies with various perspectives show economic, political, and cultural components of globalization (Browne and Braun 2008; Gunter and van der Hoeven 2004; Inda and Rosaldo 2002).

Diverse factors of globalization (e.g. technology, trade, communication, and information-flows) bring some economies and societies closer together, but also marginalise many countries and individuals. World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization (2004) discusses the unequal distribution of the benefits of globalization, both within and between countries. I begin this chapter to look at globalization as a starting point for migration.

First, key concepts of globalization (e.g. trade, financial flows, technology, global production systems, employment, inequality, and poverty) according to World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization (2004) show the economic influences of globalization. On the one hand, globalization brings an abundance of opportunities on a global level. It leads to progress and opportunities, and creates wealth and favourable circumstances for some (Stiglitz 2006). On the other hand, globalization brings growing unemployment, widespread poverty and inequalities for others (Firebaugh 2003; Kochuthare 2014; Mills 2009; Wade 2004). I discuss the impact of the economic influences of globalization for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong throughout this chapter.

Second, other key concepts of globalization (e.g. interconnectedness, mixing, and risk) according to Eriksen (2014) show the social impact of globalization for different groups. One group may feel superior to the other. Globalization makes groups of people, as well as individuals, vulnerable because of the power and unity of groups (Eriksen, 2014). For many globalization brings uncertainty, insecurity, and exclusion. The social dimensions of globalization enclose the marginalization for groups or individuals. The social dimensions refer to the impact of globalization on the lives and work of people, their families and societies (World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization 2004). It raises the concern about the social impact of globalization on income, employment, working conditions, and social protection of families and communities. In the following chapter I discuss the social impact of globalization by building upon narratives from Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Third, I outline one key aspect of globalization in particular: migration. Migration is the temporary or permanent move of individuals or groups of people from one geographic location to another for various reasons. Castles, de Haas and Miller (2014) discuss that the increase of the global economy is a main force for what they refer to as “the age of migration”. All countries of the world are either sending or receiving countries in ‘the age of migration’. Castles, de Haas and Miller (2014) argue that developments of international migration, which I describe in this thesis, relate to political, economic and social transformations that shape today’s world. The political, economic and social transformations are extensively discussed throughout this thesis.

My aim in this chapter is to show how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers is constructed through time. I show the transformation in economic roles for men and women in the Philippines and the changes of the meaning of labour migration throughout the last decades. I discuss migration and its different flows, and labour migration in particular. I explain the historical transformation of labour migration in the Philippines and dive deeper into the literature of female labour migration in the Philippines.

Three waves of migration

There are diverse flows of migration (e.g. economic migration, political migration, lifestyle migration). The Global Migration Group (2017) discuss that the key motivations behind international migration are work (labour migration), study (migration for educational purposes), and asylum (the arrival of refugees). This thesis focusses upon labour

migration. Labour migration is driven by economic inequalities or the search for employment, and is vulnerable to economic, political and environmental changes. In this chapter I show diverse economic and political changes that shape (the meaning of) labour migration of the Philippines throughout the years from a historical perspective.

Philippine migration scholars identify three waves of migration (Barber 2009). The first wave is from 1900 to the early 1940s, a period marked by colonialism. Filipinos work in a variety of labour markets, such as agriculture, food processing and services throughout the United States of America. Two legacies of this colonial domination are the large number of Filipinos who experience poverty, and the large numbers of Filipinos who understand and speak English. The first legacy is in part because of the lack of access to economically viable resources and secure employment. The second legacy is because of the English based education system that the colonial rules introduce. The English based education system distinguishes the Filipinos from most other Asian migrants, especially in countries that have English as first or second language (Barber 2000, 2009). During my fieldwork I notice that 38 of the 40 Filipino domestic workers to whom I speak understand and speak English. Most Filipino domestic workers tell me that they speak English *because* they are from the Philippines.

Anna is one of the first Filipino domestic workers who I meet during my fieldwork. She works in Hong Kong as a domestic worker for two years. I meet her on the steps near MTR exit A on her day off at the end of February. When I ask Anna the first time I meet her if she speaks English, she answers “*Yes, of course. I am Filipina.*”¹⁷ As if it is obvious that all the Filipino domestic workers speak English.

The second wave of migration starts with the granting of independence in 1946. The second wave leads to a more class-diversified store of Filipinos who depart to the United States of America. This second wave lasts until the early 1970s. In 1972, by the declaration of martial law, economic uncertainty and political instability compels out-migration. There is an increase of 671 percent of applicants who want to work abroad (Barber 2009).

In the third wave of migration Filipinos are more visible and more researched in international labour markets. The “devastating effects” of increases in the prices of crude oil in the mid 1970s is the start of the third wave (Barber 2009, 1270). The oil crisis, in combination with the colonisation and the mismanagement of the economy when Marcos is the President of the Philippines (1965-1986) with a corrupt, extravagance and brutal regime exacerbates the economic hardship in the Philippines even more (Barber 2009;

¹⁷ Informal interview with Anna on February 24, 2018.

Centre for International Crime Prevention 2002; Transparency International 2004; Wintrobe 2000). This leads to an acceleration and the growth of numbers of Filipinos who respond to their domestic economic disadvantage and a shift in the scale and nature of Philippine international migration, by taking overseas contract work (Barber 2000).

These waves portray how labour migration changes through economic inequalities, the search for employment, and economic and political changes. Throughout the years the large numbers of Filipinos who experiences poverty, and the economic uncertainty and political instability in the Philippines lead to an acceleration and growth of Filipino labour migrants.

Filipino women and the international labour market

Diverse changes throughout the years in the Philippines do not just lead to the growth of Filipino labour migrants. It also leads to the increase in Filipino female labour migrants. Labour migration is often described as a male dominated activity, where male breadwinners migrate for economic motives. Yet, women also play an important role in the labour migration in the past century. Literature on labour migration increasingly recognises that women migrate as well. Women from the Philippines take jobs in domestic industries in East Asia, Europe, the United States, and the Middle East (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2001).

The increase of Filipino women that search for employment abroad is related to several trends in the mid 1980s. Four trends increase the global demand and employment of Filipino women: the economic decline in their own country; the rise in labour demand in Asia and the Middle East in the international service sector; the decline in male-dominated labour demand in the construction sector in the Middle East; and the global labour marketing campaigns by the Philippine state (see Ball 2004). These trends contribute to the remarkable transformation of the gender structure of Filipino labour migration. Whereas the majority of Filipino labour migrants is men in the early 1980s, nowadays 72% of labour migrants from the Philippines is women (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration 2004). These women work in, among others, domestic services through Asia, North America, the Middle East and Europe (Barber 2000). The most popular countries for Filipino domestic workers are Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Italy and countries in the Middle East.

The International Labour Organization (2015) shows that the growing demand of households for domestic services in the past decades explains the relation between female

labour migration and the increase of Filipino domestic workers. There are more than 10 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) and one in every five OFW is a domestic worker. These domestic workers are mostly women. The Philippines is one of the world's top four sending countries of migrant domestic workers. An average of 86,000 Filipino domestic workers migrated abroad every year for the last 25 years. Most of the 67 million domestic workers worldwide are women (International Labour Organization 2015; Philippine Overseas Employment Administration 2013).

Today, women are more and more on the move as independent workers. Most of them move to more developed countries to search for a better life for themselves and their families, where they find work as domestic workers.

Fay is one of them. I meet Fay on International Women's Day on the stairs at the MTR exit A in Central, Hong Kong. While she makes a cross stitch with the pattern of the Last Supper, fifteen other women sit around her; calling, texting or eating. Fay is a domestic worker in Hong Kong who lived in Iloilo, a province on the island Panay in the Philippines. She left her husband and (now) six years old son in the Philippines when she moved to Hong Kong 1,5 years ago. Since then, she works as a domestic worker. First, for a family with two children where she has to clean, cook and take care of the children six days a week, but after a while she switches from one employer to another. Now she works for a couple in the Mid-Levels, an affluent residential area on Hong Kong Island. The couple has an older son, who is only there when his parents are away on holidays or on a business trip. Fay wakes up at 6am to prepare breakfast and lunch for her employers and to clean their house. After breakfast, she cleans the dishes, continues cleaning the house and towards the afternoon she starts preparing dinner. After dinner she cleans the dishes and the kitchen again, and around 10pm she is done with her workday. Fay shares her room with another domestic worker. An older woman who is also from the Philippines and works in Hong Kong for almost forty years.

Fay represents one of the many Filipino domestic workers who move to a more developed country to search for a better life for themselves and their family. In this thesis, I mainly use the stories from Fay and two other domestic workers who I will introduce later. Their stories represent the ideas, experiences, and other stories of most of the forty domestic workers to whom I talk during my fieldwork concerning the construction of the meaning of female labour migration. I use their stories to explain the migration journey for Filipino domestic worker who migrate from the Philippines to Hong Kong in search of a better life.

Concluding remarks

The meaning of labour migration in the Philippines changes throughout the years. In this chapter I discussed globalization as a starting point for migration. There is an unequal distribution of the benefits of globalization and it marginalises many countries and individuals. Economic and social factors of globalization lead to uncertainty and insecurity for, and exclusion of countries, groups and individuals. In this chapter I discussed three waves and four trends that influence the construction of the meaning of female labour migration in the Philippines.

Colonialism, the granting of independence, economic inequalities and the economic hardship in the Philippines, the search for employment, and the economic and political changes lead to an increase in labour migration. Filipinos are more present in international labour markets nowadays. The changes contribute to the idea of labour migration as more and more common throughout the years. It seems to be the solution for many Filipinos who experience poverty. Labour migration increases as workers wish to escape the economic uncertainty and political instability in the Philippines. Labour migration is an answer for many Filipinos who search for employment and economic certainty.

It is not just the idea of labour migration that changes in the Philippines throughout the years, but certainly the meaning of female labour migration. As I showed in this chapter, women also play an important role in labour migration. The four main trends that influence the construction of the meaning of female labour migration are the economic decline in the Philippines, the rise in labour demand and employment in the international service sector, the decline in male labour migration in the construction sector and global labour marketing campaigns.

All these factors lead to the transformation of gender structure of Filipino labour migration. Nowadays 72% of Filipino labour migrants are women. They mainly work in the domestic services, and Hong Kong is one of the most popular receiving countries of female Filipino labour migrants. In this chapter I showed how the meaning of female labour migration is constructed through historical changes within and outside the Philippines, that shape the idea of female labour migration as something that is nowadays seen as common, as a response to globalization, as an answer for economic insecurities, and as an solution for unemployment. In the following chapter, I discuss the meaning of female labour migration by focussing upon the first stage of migration (pre migration) and the sending country (the Philippines).

Chapter 2 - Migration for a better life

From the Philippines to Hong Kong: the start of the 'migration journey'

Female labour migration from the Philippines to Hong Kong is a process, as I refer to as 'the migration journey'¹⁸. This chapter focusses on the start of the migration journey for Filipino domestic workers. Literature on migration distinguishes three stages of migration: pre migration, migration and post-migration (see for instance Bhugra and Jones, 2001; Friberg 2012; Keyes and Kane 2004; Khawaja et al. 2008; Miller et al. 2002;).

In the first stage of migration: pre migration, women are (still) in the Philippines. They decide and prepare to move to another country for diverse reasons (Wessels 2014). In the initial stage "migrants usually perceive going abroad to work as a strategy for building a better life [...] for themselves and their families" (Friberg 2012, 1601). Friberg (2012) shows in this quote that migrants have certain ideas and expectations about working abroad. In this chapter I describe the ideas and expectations of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers and their families and I discuss diverse motives, and push and pull factors for female labour migration.

"Why do people migrate?"

This chapter starts with an outline of the changes in the migration literature throughout the last decades. I use "Why do people migrate? A review of the theoretical literature" by Hagen-Zanker (2008) to do so. The review shows the complete spectrum of economic migration theory starting from the 1950s. Hagen-Zanker (2008) discusses the differences and complementarities between different approaches on economic migration throughout the years, which I outline below.

Lee (in Hagen-Zanker 2008) describes migration for the first time in a push-pull framework on a individual level in the 1960s. "Positive and negative factors at the origin and destination push and pull migrants towards (non) migration" (Hagen-Zanker 2008, 9). The push-pull framework discusses the favourable and unfavourable factors (e.g. migration laws, economic motives) that influence the migration decision. Sjaastad (in Hagen-Zanker 2008) focusses on the labour market and describes migration as an

¹⁸ I refer to the migration journey as the journey that Filipino domestic workers follow when they migrate from the Philippines to Hong Kong. To understand the construction of the meaning of female labour migration, I focus upon the ideas, expectations and experiences of Filipino domestic workers in the three stages of migration: pre migration, migration, and post migration. I call this whole process the migration journey.

individual investment decision (the human capital approach)¹⁹. In the 1970s Crawford (in Hagen-Zanker 2008) shows that migrants make a conscious decision to migrate that they base on more than economic reasons. The migration decision depends on values and expectations of migration outcomes that are not necessarily economic, but also personal. Hoffman-Novotny (in Hagen-Zanker 2008) explains a migration theory of social systems in the 1980s. The theory does not exclude economic push factors, but places them in a wider context of societal push factors. De Jong and Fawcett (in Hagen-Zanker 2008) discuss an individual decision-making model that also considers non-economic factors and societal influences for migration.

In the last decades focusses migration approaches not just on individual migration decision-making models. Diverse migration approaches focus on a wider decision-making framework and include family relations and household structures (Bigsten; Mincer; Morokvasic; Sandell in Hagen-Zanker 2008). Hagen-Zanker (2008) argues “when looking at migration from a gender perspective, family structures can influence the migration decision of women in particular”. She shows that migration decisions are made by household members together for the wellbeing of the family as a whole. Almost all the conversations and interviews that I have with Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong validate the idea of migration as a family decision. Families in the Philippines do not migrate together, but rather send one household member off as a labour migrant. The short vignette below illustrates how female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is almost always seen as a family decision.

“We decided together that I am the one to work abroad”, Fay tells me in between searching and buying some food for our picnic later that day. She does not even stop to look at me while she tells me this. For her, it seems normal. A decision that she and her husband made together. It is something that does not need a lot of words to explain. I find myself acting a bit surprised. For me, it does not sound as normal as it does to Fay. Especially not after hearing many stories of how hard it is for a mother to be away from her children. But today, Fay explains it just as it is: a together-based decision about who is going to work abroad for the wellbeing of their family.²⁰

The conversation I have with Fay, and similar conversations with other Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong prove that female labour migration from the Philippines to Hong

¹⁹ The human capital approach treats migration as an individual investment decision to increase the productivity of human capital. It focusses on the labour market, yet it also explains the selectivity of heterogeneous migrants.

²⁰ Informal conversation with Fay on April 22, 2018.

Kong is a family decision, rather than an individual decision. In the first respect, both in the literature on migration decision-making and during the field research, the economic motives seem the most important reasons for female labour migration. Nauck and Settles (2001) argue that we should not necessarily understand female labour migration as a direct response to the labour market opportunities, but thus as a family decision.

To understand female labour migration, I acknowledge the importance to draw on different models than the ones used for male labour migration (cf. Kofman et al. 2012; Tyldum 2015). The emphasis on male labour migration is mainly on access to opportunities for migration through e.g. labour market access, social capital, and networks. Diverse migration scholars describe male labour migration as an opportunity-driven and a rational individual decision to migrate (see for instance Boyd and Grieco 2003; Kofman 2011; Kofman et al. 2012; Massey et al. 2008; Portes 2010; Tyldum 2015).

Boyd and Grieco (2003) show that ‘migrants and their families’ is a code for ‘male migrants and their wives and children’ in the 1960s and early 1970s. In the last decades international migration theory is more gender sensitive (Boyd and Grieco 2003). The predominant view of women as simply the wives of male migrants changes to the “incorporating explanations of the unique experiences of women migrants themselves” (Boyd and Grieco 2003, 3). As Boyd and Grieco show with this quote, there is more and more emphasis on the narratives of female labour migrations themselves in the literature on migration. The experiences of female labour migrants are becoming more visible in international migration theory and there is more emphasis on the situation of female labour migrants (see for instance Boyd and Grieco 2003; Constable 2003; Lau et al. 2009; Tyldum 2015; Van der Ham et al. 2015).

Yet, it is important to emphasise that experiences and expectations of migration differ from person to person, as migration is not based upon a general set of elements or agreed rules (De Haan et al. 2002). As an anthropologist, I am aware that making generalisations is almost impossible, for all human-beings and their actions are unique. My aim is thus not to explain (individual) migration motives, but to discuss diverse aspects that influence the construction of the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

In this chapter I focus upon the construction of the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in the sending country (the Philippines) and in the first stage of migration (pre migration) from the perspective of Filipino domestic workers, by showing two narratives on female labour migration for a better life.

Female labour migration as an opportunity for a better life

*“Working in Hong Kong is an opportunity for a better life for us. Because in Hong Kong, the money is better.”*²¹ Ashley, one of the Filipino domestic workers I meet in the beginning of my fieldwork, explains to me that the main reason to migrate from the Philippines to Hong Kong is for economic motives. Sarah, another Filipino domestic worker and Ashley’s friend, confirms this when she says *“We can earn more money here [in Hong Kong]. So we can send the money back to the Philippines and have better opportunities there, for our families..”*²². Discussing the differences between the Philippines and Hong Kong, the economic opportunities are often the main (or only) motive for female labour migration.

Migration scholars argue that economic motives (e.g. financial needs, the improvement of living conditions, unemployment, the high rate of poverty, and the lower salary in the home country) are the most important reason and the “main push factor” for female labour migration (Fokkema and de Haas 2011; Iqbal and Gusman 2015, 170). All Filipino domestic workers who I talk to during my field research confirm that the economic motives for migration are made for their families (or children in specific), rather than for themselves.

Family and parent support has been one of the push factors for female labour migration. Not only society forms push factors for female labour migration, “yet deeper than it, is formed from family culture” (Iqbal and Gusman 2015, 172). Iqbal and Gusman (2015) discuss how family and parent support, as one of the push factors for female labour migration, is culturally expected within the family. Religious and cultural ideas of the contribution of women to family livelihoods construct the meaning of female labour migration (Barber 2009). Family and parent support through female labour migration is a highly valued motivation in Filipino culture. As Constable (1999, 212) states:

“It is considered honourable and admirable for a daughter to delay or scarce marriage in order to work abroad for the sake of her parents and siblings. The sacrifice of a married women who misses the day-to-day experiences of “family life” in order to provide her family is also appreciated.”

²¹ Interview with Ashley on March 3, 2018.

²² Interview with Sarah on April 14, 2018.

As Constable (1999) states in her quote are the sacrifices of both daughters and married women seen as respectable and for families livelihoods. Daughters work abroad to support their families instead of (immediately) getting married, and married women sacrifice being with their family, and work abroad for the wellbeing of their family. Most stories during my field research illustrate the sacrifices of married women or mothers for their families (see chapter 3). The narratives from Ellen and Nina show the sacrifice of daughters to provide their parents and siblings.

I meet Ellen for the first time on the last Saturday in March. She is one of the youngest Filipino domestic workers I meet in Hong Kong (27 years old) and in contrast to most Filipino domestic workers I meet, she does not have a husband or children. Her story illustrates the honourable and admirable idea for a daughter to delay marriage for the sake of her parents. Ellen tells me that her parents separate when her father leaves her mother alone. From that moment on she takes care of her mother, *“to return for what she always did”*. Migration to Hong Kong is the consequence of the separation of her parents and the need to take care of her mother. *“If I was alone and if I didn’t need to take care of my mother, I would have stayed in the Philippines. I would live and work in the Philippines, because I would be able to take care of myself and start a family. But now, I also take care of my mom.”*²³

Nina, another young Filipino domestic worker in Hong Kong (28 years old) who has no children or husband, explains her story to me. Her story illustrates how the meaning of female labour migration can change from migration as an opportunity for a better life for her family to migration as an opportunity for a better life for herself. Nina works in Hong Kong as a domestic worker to take care of her siblings and parents in the Philippines. She tells me that she ‘likes’ the life in Hong Kong, but that it is not what she actually wants. Nina has the opportunity to migrate to the Netherlands to work as a domestic worker. Her dream is to work in the Netherlands for a short term and move to Switzerland in the future. The process of working as a domestic worker in the Netherlands is not easy according to her. *“We have to apply for the job first. Then we have to do interviews and some tests [e.g. language tests]. So many people apply for this position in Europe every time, and only a few are good and lucky enough to get the chance.”* Nina is one of them. One of the few girls who gets the opportunity to work in the Netherlands.

We leave the rooftop bar at the IFC mall after my birthday party and while we wait for the lift she tells me the ‘good’ news. She is one of the chosen domestic workers for this position. *“I am*

²³ Group discussion with Ellen, Sarah, Liza and Fay on March 31, 2018.

very happy that they choose me, because the chances are so limited and I have only two years left,²⁴ but I told them that I am not ready now. I cannot go to Holland in a couple months, because I have to take care of my family [financially]. If I go to Holland I get housing and food, but no salary. This because it is a very good and rare chance.. Also for me it is a very good and rare chance, but it means that I cannot take care of my family. So I told the agency that I am not ready to go now, even though I would really want to.”²⁵

The stories show how Ellen and Nina make decisions for the wellbeing of their parents and siblings. Nina explains how migration to Hong Kong is an opportunity for a better life for her family. Migration to Europe (in Nina's case) is an opportunity for a better life for herself.

It is not only push factors at the sending country, yet also pull factors at the receiving country that lead to the act of migration as an opportunity for a better life. One of the main pull factors for female labour migration from the Philippines to Hong Kong is the rise in labour demand in the international service sector and the high demand for care²⁶ (see chapter 1) (Castles and Miller 2009; Iqbal and Gusman 2015; OECD 2011; Oishi 2005; Shutes 2012; Song 2015; Zimmerman et al. 2006). Other main pull factors for female labour migration from the Philippines to Hong Kong are more personal motivations, describes as “existential motives” by Fokkema and de Haas (2011, 763), and are e.g. the lure of adventure, the desire to go abroad, or self-achievement. I tell the story of Trisha to show the idea of female labour migration as an opportunity for a better life for personal motivations.

I meet Trisha online, via a domestic-worker-Facebook-group, where she invites me to come to church with her. Trisha tells me that she came to Hong Kong to work as a domestic worker one and a half year ago. She is the youngest in a family with eleven children in which she has always been “*different from the rest*”. She tells me “*I am the only one who is not married, and the only one who didn't want to work on my family's farm. I want to do something different. But, of course, my family*

²⁴ The maximum age to enter the position in the Netherlands is 30 years old.

²⁵ Informal conversation with Nina on April 14, 2018.

²⁶ The high demand for care leads to a care drain in the Philippines and a care gain in Hong Kong. The global care chain approach relates primarily to the transfer of care labour and resources from developing to developed countries through the employment of women as caregivers, nurses and domestic workers (see for instance Parrenas, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Yeates, 2004; Isaksen et al., 2008). The global care chain approach is an inevitable approach in literature on female labour migration. However, to emphasise the perspective of Filipino domestic workers themselves, I will not discuss this approach extensively in thesis.

wasn't happy about that, because all my siblings work for them on the farm except me." She continues *"I was different. I was always hanging with boys, not with girls. I was smoking and drinking a lot of alcohol. At one point, I was also using drugs."* While she looks down she goes on with her story *"That was not a good time for me.. It was a dark time."* Her brother tried to help her and tried to talk some sense into her. He tried to convince her to work for their family and to be with them. Trisha explains to me that she did not listen to her brother, and that her brother gave up. One day he started screaming at her *"Ok! If you want to go, GO! If this is really what you want and it will make you happy, DO IT!"*²⁷

The idea of migration means new opportunities for Trisha. The idea to build a new life away from her family gives her hope. Female labour migration grants Filipino domestic workers an opportunity to obtain economic independence and self-achievement. Iqbal and Gusman (2015) state "therefore the pull factors [...] are not only economic, social and cultural factors but also for self-satisfaction". They discuss that working in Hong Kong is also a personal opportunity for a better life. Fokkema and de Haas (2011) discuss (besides economic and existential motives) the relational motives for female labour migration. I discuss relational motives for female labour migration through the following narrative: migration as an escape.

Female labour migration as an escape for a better life

Liza is both a domestic worker in Hong Kong and a wife in the Philippines. When I first meet Liza, she is video calling with her husband. *"Bhe [baby], are you drunk already? It is only early in the afternoon?"* All the other Filipino domestic workers, her friends, remain quiet. At first, the event seems the reason why Liza's husband drinks this afternoon.²⁸ A couple weeks later, when our relation is getting closer, Liza tells me her story. Fay, our common friend, fills her in where necessary. *"It's okay Rens. My husband and I are okay, but it is not easy sometimes. He drinks a lot. Every time. And I tell him: Why do you drink so much? It is bad for your health. And what if something happens?"* She continues: *"We don't have a lot of money Rens. That is why I am here. To work, earn money, and to send it back to the Philippines. But we still do not have a lot of money. We are not rich. So if he keeps drinking and something happens to his health... What are we going to*

²⁷ Interview with Trisha on March 18, 2018.

²⁸ Field notes about my observations of Liza video calling with her husband on March 3, 2018.

do? Who is going to pay for the medical costs? We do not have that money. So that is why I tell him he should stop drinking..."

Liza being here in Hong Kong, far away from her husband, does not make it easier to handle this situation. I can see her concerns of 'sacrificing everything for nothing' by her posture and facial expression. What if her husband gets sick? What if something happens to him? Then this - working and living in Hong Kong - is all for nothing? Liza looks worried, but immediately assesses her thoughts. She needs to accept this situation. *"There is nothing that I can do."* She explains to me that there are no other options and that she has to keep doing what she does. She ends the topic with her honest thought: *"I have to stay strong and hope that it is all worth it..."*²⁹

In the beginning of my fieldwork Liza tells me multiple times how much she loves her husband and how happy she is with their relationship. Stories that she also tells to other Filipino domestic worker in Hong Kong. Yet, these stories are in contrast to the two stories that she tells me at the end of my fieldwork (when our relation is closer) about her addictive husband and about how she cheated on him. Not just Liza, but many Filipino domestic workers discuss their marriage with me, instead of with other Filipino domestic workers. Afraid that other Filipino domestic workers judge them for making a decision that is not accepted in the Philippines.

In the Philippines it is legally and religiously prohibited to divorce. "The state aims to protect the integrity of the family through the legal system with laws that are considered even stricter than those of the Catholic Church" (Constable 2003, 165). The quote of Constable (2003) illustrates that the unity of the family is one of the most important core values of the Philippines. The legal system and laws concerning marriage are even stricter than the laws of the main religion in the Philippines, that is still followed by more than 80 percent of its population (Philippine Statistics Authority 2014). Both the Catholic Church and the Philippine state officially prohibit divorce. Article 1 of The Family Code of The Philippines sees marriage as the foundation of the family. The special contract of permanent unification between a man and a woman is an inviolable social institution (Jones in Constable 2003; Lauser 2006, 2008). It does not, however, mean that all couples remain together and have good relationships.

Fay tells me her personal story of how she gets pregnant while she is in another relationship. A marriage with the father of their child is the response, even though they do not know each other well at that time. Fay tells her story to me as if it is the biggest regret

²⁹ Group discussion with Ellen, Sarah, Liza and Fay on March 31, 2018.

of her life. My observations and other conversations with her prove this. She gives me advice to not to make the same “*mistake*”³⁰ as she did, and encourages people to date for a long time, before making future-based decisions. Migration to Hong Kong to work as a domestic worker is Fay's solution to escape her marriage. As she explains “*I do not want to separate, for my child. So instead of fighting a lot and separate, I decided to go to Hong Kong. So for my son, his parents are still together*”³¹. Filipino domestic workers do not just migrate to Hong Kong to avoid separation. They often migrate to actual separate from their husbands.

The prohibition to divorce is a serious obstacle for many married women back in the Philippines. The Philippines has different implications in annulments and legal separations for men and women (Constable 2003), or as Parreñas (2001, 68) refers to a “double standard in male and female sexual practices”. The double standard that Parreñas (2001) describes shows how men who have more than one family are envied or admired for their masculine image. Women, on the contrary, with failed marriages are often blamed for not maintaining their marriage together (Aguilar in Constable 2003). In contrast to the aim of the Philippine state to keep families together, the prohibition to divorce often leads to the temporary or permanent migration of Filipino women.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I discussed how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers is constructed in the first stage of their migration journey: the pre migration stage. The perspective from female labour migrants in the Philippines themselves is central through looking at the construction of the meaning of female labour migration from the sending country. In the pre migration stage Filipino women decide and prepare to migrate to Hong Kong for a better life. They have certain ideas, expectations and motives before they actually migrate.

The literature on migration shows different approaches on female labour migration. The most important approach that I discussed in this chapter is the push-pull framework. It shows the favourable and unfavourable factors that influence the migration decision and female labour migration as a social and family based decision, rather than an economical and individual based decision.

³⁰ PAR exercise and discussing the drawing with Fay on April 21, 2018.

³¹ PAR exercise and discussing the drawing with Fay on April 21, 2018.

To follow a more gender sensitive approach with more emphasis on the narratives on female labour migrants themselves, I showed two narratives in this chapter. Both narratives show the ideas and expectations of female labour migration for a better life.

The first narrative shows how Filipino domestic workers construct the meaning of female labour migration as an opportunity for a better life. In this narrative it is not just the economic motives that lead to better opportunities, but also religious and cultural ideas about family obligations for wives and daughters. Besides the push factors that focus mainly upon the wellbeing of the family as a whole, rather than the wellbeing of the female labour migrant as an individual, I also discussed the most important pull factors for Filipino domestic workers. These pull factors are the increasing care demand and personal motives for female labour migration (e.g. new opportunities, building a new life away from family or husbands, self-achievement, and self-satisfaction).

The second narrative shows how Filipino domestic workers construct the meaning of female labour migration as an escape for a better life. In this narrative I discussed female labour migration as a response to 'failed' marriages and female labour migration as an escape to separate from their marriage, since it is legally prohibited in the Philippines to divorce.

Chapter 3 - Expectations versus reality

Life in Hong Kong: the second (and third) stage of the 'migration journey'

The previous two chapters show how transformations in the past decades and diverse push and pull factors shape the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. Motives for migration in combination with certain expectations lead to the actual act of migration. Female domestic workers migrate from the Philippines to Hong Kong for a better life. This chapter questions the idea of a 'better life'. By discussing the hardships and experiences for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong I argue if female labour migration really leads to a better life. Does life in Hong Kong meet the expectations of Filipino domestic workers and is living and working in Hong Kong actually better than in the Philippines? To answer this question I look at diverse outcomes of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Female labour migration as an act of sacrifice

The diverse push and pull factors, discussed in the previous two chapters, are part of the first stage of migration: pre-migration. The decisions and preparations to move to another country lead to the second stage: migration.³² Migration is the stage when Filipino domestic workers live in Hong Kong. In the second stage of migration Filipino domestic workers are forced to learn societal and cultural frameworks of Hong Kong. The second stage of migration often shows the differences between the ideas and expectations of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in the pre migration stage and the reality and the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in the migration stage. Adapting to a new country and culture, and being away from home and family costs migration distress for many Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. Diverse literature discuss (the causes of) migration distress e.g. the loss of valued societal roles,

³² It is important to highlight that there are different definitions or explanations about the stages of migration. One theory frames the stages of migration as pre-migration, in-transit, and post-migration. The in-transit stage is often discussed in e.g. refugee migration, since the in-transit consists of a long journey and living in refugee camps. Another theory explains the stages of migration as pre-migration, migration, and post-migration. In this theory, the second stage is the actual act of migration and the third stage is the act of returning back to the home country. For Filipino domestic workers who move to Hong Kong is the in-transit mostly quick, easy, and by plane. Besides, the actual act of migration is more often and more extensively discussed during my field research because of the bigger physical and social impacts for Filipino domestic workers than the in-transit. I therefore build upon the theory that frames the stages of migration as pre-migration, migration, and post-migration.

social isolation, poverty, identity confusion, and the loss of family members and cultural community (see for instance Friberg 2012; Keyes and Kane 2004; Khawaja et al. 2008; Miller et al. 2002; Wessels 2014).

Filipino domestic workers migrate to Hong Kong for a better life. Some of them see migration as an escape from their life or marriage in the Philippines. Others see it as an opportunity for the future of their children, family or themselves (see chapter 2). All of the Filipino domestic workers who I talk to in Hong Kong agree that female labour migration is an act of sacrifice. They sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of their families. From many conversations and observations I understand that the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is not only about the better opportunities that migration brings. It is certainly also the hardships, the sense of loss of family, home, and country, challenges of adaptation to the receiving country, and other different outcomes which they experience when they migrate. Many scholars link migration to high levels of stress and increased mental health problems (see for instance Bhui et al. 2003; Hovey 2000; Torres and Rollock 2004; Van der Ham et al. 2015). The sense of loss of family, home or country is one of the migration related stressors according to Van der Ham et al. (2015) and all Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong whom I talk.

The loss of family, home and country

In chapter 2 I show how family relations influences the pre-migration stage for Filipino domestic workers. A better future for their children, family, or themselves or escaping their marriage are important push and pull factors for female labour migration. Van der Ham et al. (2015) show in their study that being married is associated with high stress levels before and after migration, but not during migration. They state “the lack of options for divorce in the Philippines can play a role, by providing a liberating alternative to women whose relationships or marriages have failed” (Van der Ham et al. 2015, 18). Despite their finding that being married only costs high stress levels before and after migration, is the sense of loss of family one of the most important stressors of female labour migration in the literature on migration distress. Many Filipino domestic workers leave behind families and young children in their home country who financially depend on their incomes (Holroyd et al. 2001). During my field research I notice that it is especially the sense of loss of children that plays an important role in everyday life in Hong Kong.

Trisha became a single mom with two kids and no financial support after she found out that her husband was already married to another woman. She first went to the Middle East to work as a domestic worker in Kuwait and then came to Hong Kong. *“It is not easy” she says. “Because I have to leave my children behind and I do not get to see them growing up. But it is the sacrifices we have to make every day for our families.”* When I ask her what she means by sacrifices, she simply replies *“oh, everything... Everything! We have to make sacrifices to go to Hong Kong, to get to know this new place, to learn the culture, to adapt to this culture and the life in Hong Kong, and then, there is the sacrifice to not be with my children, which is very hard”*.³³

During my fieldwork I have many conversations like the one above, concerning the sacrifices that Filipino domestic workers make in Hong Kong. Missing their children and not being able to see them growing up, is the main sacrifice and hardship according to all Filipino domestic workers to whom I speak. Lau et al. (2009, 574) state that “when psychosocial stressors were analysed, home/family problems came out top of the list rather than work difficulties”. As they show in their study home and family issues distress Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong more than the job itself. They state that the fundamental values to have a stable family and marriage are important to female labour migrants who come from a country as the Philippines, where society remains family-centred. Holroyd et al. (2001, 196) state “a woman’s separation from her family, in particular anxiety about children left behind in the Philippines [...] contribute to isolation, loneliness and poor mental health adjustment among Filipino's working in Hong Kong”. They show that a lot of Filipino domestic workers experience sleep difficulties. The findings about tiredness among Filipino domestic workers in their study also concur in Constable's (1997) ethnographic fieldwork concerning the sleeplessness through worry and broken patterns of sleep through long hours of work. During my fieldwork I notice that tiredness indeed mostly relates to the long hours of work and the heavy physical activities during their work days. Sleeplessness, however, relates often to the mental hardships and worrying about (not being with) their children back in the Philippines. The following vignette shows one of the many conversations I have with Filipino domestic workers about missing their children and not being able to be with them.

³³ Interview with Trisha on March 18, 2018.

It is another sunny Saturday in mid-April, and Fay's holiday. As usual we spend our day at the rooftop of the IFC mall. Fay and I share some Filipino snacks and soda, while other Filipino domestic workers chat away on the background. It seems like a good day, however, Fay does not seem happy. When I ask her what is going on, she tells me that she feels bad about her son. "*Why? What happened?*" is my first response, a bit worried while I take her hands. "*Nothing happened Rens. It is just hard for me. I miss him [her son].*" She explains me that she is very tired and sad, and that she slept really bad last week. I look up and realise just now how sunken and pale her face is and how dark the circles under her eyes are today. She continues "*because my son has his recognition day in school and I cannot be there for him*". This is one of the many conversations I have with Fay about her son. She always tells me how hard it is for her, as a mother, to be away from her son. Not being able to see him growing up, and missing important dates such as his birthday or first day of school.³⁴

Not only Fay, but many (if not all) Filipino mothers that work in Hong Kong as domestic workers suffer for the sake of their own family. The hardest part of their job is to take care of children who are not their own, or to work long hours for six days a week while they miss their own children. Hovey (2000) argues that depression is closely related to family functioning. The relationship is not surprising, considering the importance of the family as as a core characteristic of Philippine culture.

To understand how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong in the stage of migration is constructed, I cannot avoid nor deny the many literature that aims to explain the motives for female migration by focusing on migrants as mothers (Parreñas, 2001, 2002; Peng and Wong, 2013, 2016; Tyldum 2015). Approaches in the literature that focusses on migrants as mother are e.g. the unfavourable impacts on children who are left behind, sons and daughters who beg for their mothers return (Parreñas 2001, 2002; Peng and Wong, 2013 Suzuki 2000; Tyldum 2015), the theorising of mothering, and the empirical study of the experiences of mothering (Arendell 2000, Tyldum 2015).

The literature on migrants as mothers generally assumes an ideology of intense mothering that is not based on the child care practices of the sending country, but on Western middle class ideals of child care practices (Tyldum 2015). The Western ideology of intense mothering constructs the role of a mother as the sole identity of a women.

³⁴ Informal conversation with Fay on April 21, 2018.

During my field research I realize that I am unconsciously biased by this Western view of motherhood, as Fay tells me her considerations for the best future of her son. Fay and I are talking about the education systems in the Philippines and the difference between public and private schools. Fay explains me that she works in Hong Kong so that she can earn more money, and send her son to a private school. *“I could not go to a private school when I was a small child, because my parents did not have the money to send me there. I remember I always wanted to go there and I was sad that I could not go. I want my son to have this opportunity that I never had.”* This sounds logic to me, but when we go deeper in the conversation I realize that we have different views on this topic. Fay tells me that another reason to send her son to a private school, is because students get more attention and follow-ups during their classes. *“If I send my son to a public school, I need to do the follow-ups at home, and since I am not there I need to hire someone to do the follow ups, which costs me money again, so it is better to send him to a private school.”* I find myself thinking *but if she sends her son to a public school, she has to pay less money, which might make it possible for her to just work in the Philippines and be with her son.* But apparently, Fay does not think that way. Being able to send her son to a private -and thus in her eyes- better school seems one of the most important things for her son. Even more important than being in the Philippines to help him herself with his study.³⁵

The vignette above shows that ideas of care and motherhood differ depending on economic, cultural or historical context. Yet, most of the time I notice the similarities of the Western ideology of intense mothering and the ideas of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. Many Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong either explicit tell me or implicit show me that it is their duty to raise their own children. Not being able to do this, is the main grievance for most of them. Sometimes Filipino domestic workers even show me their concerns about the idea of other family members who raise their children. Doubts about the capacity of husbands or siblings who raise their children are common. As well as the daily hardship of raising other children instead of their own. I cannot speak for all the non-Western countries, nor the Philippines in general, but all Filipino domestic workers whom I talk to during my fieldwork show that the ideology of intense mothering is not just a ‘Western ideology’.

The struggle of mothers who leave their children behind, as referred to by many Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong seems often ignored in the media, society and the literature on migration. In the media female labour migration is mainly seen as a problem,

³⁵ Informal conversation with Fay on April 21, 2018.

rather than a solution for family situations and the future of their children. Concepts as 'abandoned children' in the Philippines refer to children who are left behind without 'proper care' (Parreñas 2002). One of the most common stereotypes about Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is that they are viewed as poor and willing to leave their families behind in order to send money home (Constable 1999). The absence of mothers and the impact of their absence on their families often make headlines and sometimes even front page news (Parreñas, 2002). The literature mainly focusses on the experiences, effects, and quality of mothering on a child, yet it excludes the experiences of and effects on mothers themselves. On the other hand, literature that focusses on the living and working conditions of female migrants evades the critique of the ideology of intense mothering. I therefore, want to combine the experiences of and effects on mothers, concerning the ideology of intense mothering with the living and working conditions of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

All Filipino women who are both domestic workers in Hong Kong and mothers back in the Philippines tell me that it is not easy for them to leave their children behind. It is their 'biggest sacrifices' as they refer to themselves, to work and live in Hong Kong instead of being with their children. They call it a sacrifice, since it is an act that they do not do for themselves, but for the sake of their families at the expense of themselves. Fay's perspective on migration as a mother is similar to the story of Trisha (see page 39). She tells me *"I sacrifice for my family, because here the money is better. So I have to sacrifice and I have to work here... For the money, and for them [her family]"*.³⁶ Ashley, another Filipino domestic worker who works in Hong Kong for 2,5 year, joins our conversation and tells me about her family. She tells me about her two children: a five-years old daughter and a 10-years old son. She gets pregnant when she is only 17. To earn money for her family, she goes to Hong Kong when she turns 24. In her eyes, it was her only option. She *"surrendered"* for her family, *"because in Hong Kong the money is better."*³⁷ Fay and her friends tell me that it is very hard for them if they think about home and their family. Fay explains: *"you should not think about your family too much, because then it is very hard. The work is very hard.. So you cannot miss them."*³⁸.

³⁶ Informal conversation with Fay on March 10, 2018.

³⁷ Informal conversation with Ashley on March 10, 2018.

³⁸ Informal conversation with Fay on March 10, 2018.

Literature on migration distress commonly discusses the idea of loss of home and country (see for instance Friberg 2012; Keyes and Kane 2004; Khawaja et al. 2008; Lau et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2002; Wessels 2014). As shown earlier in this chapter home and family problems distress Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong more than the job itself. Homesickness, loneliness and difficulties in adjusting to a different culture and country are commonly identified as stressor rather than work related difficulties (see for instance Bhugra 2004; Hovey 2000; Lau et al. 2009; Ritsner et al. 2000; Torres and Rollock 2004). Lau et al. (2009, 572) state “abandoning their professional jobs in their home countries for inferior domestic work abroad is a deeply frustrating experience”. As they show in the previous quote is it a frustrating experience to work as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Most Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong have more than a high school education and work experience in the Philippines in industries other than domestic work. I meet a group of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong who all worked together in the hospital. They explain that work in Hong Kong is harder, physically heavier, and mentally draining. They will not grow or learn more in their current jobs, and most of the Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong do not get as much appreciation for their work as they got in their previous jobs the Philippines.

"Most women around here aren't that lucky"

Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong are often marginalised in many ways (Lau et al. 2009). Diverse literature on migration show that there is a close relation between Filipino domestic workers and discrimination, exploitation, isolation, abuse, high vulnerability, and adverse effects on their wellbeing (Ahonen et al. 2010; Anderson 2001; Gibson et al. 2001; Holroyd et al. 2001). Murder of domestic workers is also not uncommon (Lau et al. 2009). As (Holroyd et al. 2001, 184) argues Filipino domestic workers are “doubly marginalised by virtue of their gender and social position”. Filipino domestic workers have their immigrant status on a contractual basis, which excludes the possibility of ever properly assimilating into a host country.

Isolation, homesickness, loneliness, discrimination, problems in adjusting to a different culture, poor working conditions, worrying for personal safety, and financial issues are the biggest stressors for female labour migrants (Hovey 2000; Ritsner et al. 2000; Torres and Rollock 2004; Van der Ham et al. 2015; Wong and Song 2008). In this section I highlight how diverse factors influence the stress and distress for Filipino

domestic workers in Hong Kong, which questions the idea of female labour migration for a better life.

Discrimination, isolation, homesickness and loneliness

As Lau et al. (2009) show deal many (if not all) Filipino domestic workers with discrimination against sexually, socially, and racially because of their skin colour, gender, and employment status in Hong Kong. Within the workspace there is often the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, which means “they were seen as ‘less than a person’” (Ahonen et al. 2010, 412). Ahonen et al (2010, 412) continue “being treated well or badly in the workplace was a matter of “luck” that depended on the personalities of their employers”. During my field research I observe a similar idea of ‘luck’ for Filipino domestic workers. When we talk about their employers or working conditions (e.g. a decent place to sleep, a ‘normal’ time to eat breakfast and dinner, free time or breaks in their workday) there are two main opinions coming from the perspective of Filipino domestic workers themselves. Discrimination and the poor working conditions are either “*normal*”³⁹, and “*part or our jobs/lives*”⁴⁰ or Filipino domestic workers are “*lucky*”⁴¹ because they have a “*very good employer*”⁴² when there is no (or less) discrimination and better working conditions. Liza tells me the first time we met “*I am just lucky. I have a good employer who treats me nice. And, I have my own bedroom to sleep. I am very lucky. Most women around here aren’t that lucky!*”⁴³

Filipino domestic workers are since 2003 contractually required to live and work in their employer’s residence. Employers have a corresponding duty to furnish their workers with an appropriate living space. The reason behind the so called live-in requirement is to ensure provision of a full-time, live-in domestic service for Hong Kong residents. The live-in requirement results in a number of problems for Filipino domestic workers according to the Asian Migrant Centre (2016). Firstly, there are concerns of increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse, because Filipino domestic workers have to work for long periods of time nearby their employer.

³⁹ “Normal” and “lucky” is referred to over 25 informal conversations or interviews with at least 15 different Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

⁴⁰ Referred to in diverse informal conversations and interviews by Fay, Liza, Nina and Trisha.

⁴¹ See footnote 25.

⁴² Interview with Fay on April 7, 2018.

⁴³ Informal conversation with Liza on April 4, 2018.

Secondly, the government has to establish a mechanism to enforce the provision of appropriate living spaces. It is not uncommon for Filipino domestic workers to share rooms with co-workers or young children. Some Filipino domestic workers get even non-designated rooms such as kitchens, toilets and corridors. The Asian Migrant Centre (2016) shows high-profile cases of extreme abuse for Filipino domestic workers that arouse concerns (both local and international) with regards to the maltreatment of Filipino domestic workers who work and live in their employer's residence.

Thirdly, the live-in requirement relates closely to workspace isolation. The live-in requirement isolates Filipino domestic workers and makes them vulnerable to abusive working conditions (Ahonen et al. 2010; Holroyd et al. 2001; Lau et al. 2009). Many Filipino domestic workers have no co-workers or other people to talk to or to interact with. Ahonen et al. (2010, 413) explain how many domestic workers describe that they are "prisoners" in their workplaces. They continue that "one participant described an impulse to jump from the balcony of the house in which she worked, so urgent was her need to form 'part of the world' outside her workplace" (Ahonen et al. 2010, 413). My informants commonly explain to me that they feel lonely, have no one to talk to, or "*want to be more than just a helper who is inside everyday*"⁴⁴. Whereas the live-in requirement's goal is to create better circumstances for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, it is often counterproductive.

Financial issues

Concerns about income and financial security dominate the causes of stress for Filipino domestic workers in all three stages of migration (Van der Ham et al. 2015). Yet, financial concerns are often a bigger issue in the pre- and post migration stage. In the first and last stage relate the financial concerns to supporting their families. While the second stage of migration means more financial security for female labour migrant's families, do I often observe their personal financial concerns during my fieldwork. Most Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong try everyday to spend as less money as possible, so that they can send as much money as possible back to their families in the Philippines. During my field research I observe how Filipino domestic workers daily make many choices to save money, e.g. they do not buy new clothes, they travel long but cheaper journeys by bus instead of by metro, and they spend hours to reach the cheapest wet-market in Wan Chai instead of

⁴⁴ Informal conversation with Trisha on March 24, 2018.

going to the supermarket nearby. Not just the daily financial concerns, but also the anxiety because of insecurity and job cause stress and distress for Filipino domestic workers. They have extremely limited incomes and high economic responsibilities in the Philippines. As Ahonen et al. (2010, 412) state “they carried a burden of money-related pressure”. The burden, as Ahonen et al. (2010) refer to is something that makes all Filipino domestic workers to whom I talk worry almost every day, and in cases such as Liza’s (see her story about her addictive husband in chapter 2) the question arises if it is all worth it.

Not just the financial concerns towards their families back in the Philippines, but also the feeling that they are underpaid is something that I observe and hear often during my field research. Many Filipino domestic workers believe that their work, sacrifices and effort is not recognized by their employer or the families who employ them. Before and after my field work I often read in the South China Morning Post that domestic workers demand a pay rise or higher food allowance. It is an ongoing ‘battle’ between domestic workers and the government in Hong Kong and one that would probably never come to an agreement. The minimum wage for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong does not go far to meet the cost of living (Holroyd et al. 2001).

Poor working conditions

Both the literature on (causes of) distress for female labour migrants, and observations and participation in my field research show that working conditions are an important source of stress and distress. According to Van der Ham et al. (2015, 17) this refers to among others strict employers and a lack of rest and food.

‘Strict employers’ is a topic that Filipino domestic workers commonly discuss during my fieldwork as an important source of stress. Stories about discrimination and screaming or “*unhappy*”⁴⁵ employers is something that Filipino domestic workers talk about every holiday. Trisha tells me multiple times how her employer screams at her, often for small things such as a dirty glass on the kitchen counter or flowers that need more water. Yet she also tells me stories about bigger things e.g. that she needs to clean the whole house with a dishcloth, because the vacuum cleaner (that is for a matter of fact present in her employer’s residence) is “*too expensive to use, because of the electricity bill*”.⁴⁶ Besides, the appreciation for the work is low for many Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

⁴⁵ Informal conversation with Trisha on March 24, 2018.

⁴⁶ Trisha’s employer, quoted by Trisha in an information conversation on March 24, 2018.

Ahonen et al. (2010, 412) state “they [domestic workers] were made to eat separately from the household members, or to wait until after they had eaten. Sometimes their employer’s children were rude to them without consequences.” As they show in the previous quote, there is often a relation between strict employers, discrimination and low recognition or appreciation for the work of Filipino domestic in Hong Kong.

Lack of rest is another topic that is commonly discussed during my fieldwork as an important source of stress. As I describe in the introduction, Filipino domestic workers have long days with working hours from 6am until 10pm, with only a short break, or no break at all. The live-in requirement often leads to more responsibilities and expectations that employers formally add to the tasks of Filipino domestic workers. Employers initially hire Filipino domestic workers to clean, but these tasks often expand to cooking, caring for relatives, other household tasks, and sometimes even construction jobs. Liza tells me one day that her whole body hurts because she needs to paint the house of her employer. When I ask her if that is a part of her tasks she replies “*No. It is not, but my employer asked me to do this, so I have to do it. I cannot say no.*”⁴⁷ Many of my informants tell me that work never ends and their work tasks are often at the expense of their chances to sleep or rest.

Other important sources of stress that relate to the working conditions of Filipino domestic workers are e.g. the feeling of depression and frustration with the lack of future that they see in their work and feelings of sadness of being unable to meet the economic needs of their families.

The third stage: post migration

I show the experiences of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in the second stage of migration, which differs from the expectations in the first stage of migration. The third stage of migration: post migration, refers to the stage where Filipino domestic workers return to the Philippines (Van der Ham et al. 2015). Although I did not focus on the third stage of migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong during my field research, this stage is inevitable in the whole migration process. Female labour migration is rarely conceptualised as a permanent relocation. Many Filipino domestic workers to whom I talk admit that they often consider moving back to the Philippines. The Philippines remains the primary point of reference. Filipino domestic workers who work in Hong Kong and return to the Philippines have two main reasons to do so. The main

⁴⁷ Informal conversation with Liza on April 21, 2018.

reasons are (1) the termination of their contract and no renewal or new contract to work in Hong Kong, and (2) their own decision to stop working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong due to reasons that I mention in this chapter. While most of the stressors that I discuss in this chapter do not play an important role in the stage of post-migration, the financial concerns back in the Philippines are often higher and more important. Financial concerns for their families lead in most cases again to female labour migration, either back to Hong Kong or to a different country. I argue that female labour migration, therefore, needs to be seen as a never ending journey in the search for a better life.

Concluding remarks

This chapter questioned the idea of female labour migration for a better life. The expectations of female labour migration for a better life in the pre migration stage seem very different to the reality of female labour migration in the migration stage. In this chapter I discussed diverse causes of migration distress and I showed how Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong see female labour migration as a sacrifice for their family.

The loss of family and home is one of the most important causes for distress. Discussing (the causes of) distress for female labour migration and motherhood from the perspective of Filipino domestic workers, I showed that female labour migration is an act of sacrifice. Filipino domestic workers do not leave to make their own lives better. Their main goal is to (financially) improve the lives of their families. Yet, they are the one who pay the price. The sorrow and grievance for mothers who are not with their children is something that I observed and noticed, and repeatedly talked about with many Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. All of them tell me that being away from their family is the hardest thing for them. Something that they struggle with almost every day.

One approach of literature on female labour migrants as mothers discusses the experiences and effects for mothers who leave their children alone. Another approach of literature on female labour migrants as mothers discusses the living and working conditions of female labour migrants themselves. In this chapter I showed how these two approaches are inextricably linked to each other.

I further discussed that there is a close relation between Filipino domestic workers and discrimination, exploitation, isolation, abuse, psychiatric problems, high vulnerability, and adverse effects on their wellbeing. The live-in requirement often leads to high vulnerability, isolation and poor working conditions. Many Filipino domestic workers deal

with stress, the feeling of sadness, or even depressions. However, returning to the Philippines is for many Filipino domestic workers no option. Filipino domestic workers who do move back to the Philippines experience the financial concerns for their families again, from the moment when they do not have their job anymore. The results in the last stage of migration are often the decision to start the circle again. I therefore, explain female labour migration as a never ending journey.

Conclusion - A never ending journey

Female labour migration as a visual circle: the never ending 'migration journey'

The debates on meaning-making and on motives for migration might never come to a solid conclusion. The Hong Kong Government and Filipino domestic workers who are currently in the discussion about providing more rights, better working conditions and a higher minimum wage to Filipino domestic workers may never come to a conclusion either. Life is not static, nor is migration. This thesis aims to show how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers is constructed. It shows how the search for a better life for female Filipino labour migrants is an ongoing search with no end in sight. Meaning is not a fixed concept. It is influenced by diverse developments and alters over time and place, and in different circumstances. This thesis discusses how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong is constructed in multiple ways and not limited to one. The below points highlight the most important conclusions to the question: “How is the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong constructed?”.

1. Female labour migration is: a solution for economic insecurities and unemployment, and a response to globalization

The meaning of female labour migration in the Philippines changed throughout the years. A long history in the Philippines and diverse national push factors such as the economic situation in the Philippines, high unemployment rates and the economic and political changes throughout the years constructed the meaning of labour migration as a solution for a better economic situation.

Times changed and so did the meaning of labour migration. Four main trends (an economic decline in the Philippines, the rise in labour demand and employment in the international service sector, the decline in male labour migration in the construction sector, and the global labour marketing campaigns) increased the global demand and employment of Filipino women and led to the switch from male labour migration to female labour migration as an answer to economic insecurities and unemployment in the Philippines.

2. Female labour migration is: an opportunity or an escape for a better life

The meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong changed in the different stages of migration. There are three stages of migration: pre migration, migration, and post migration. In the first stage of migration Filipino women decided and prepared to migrate in order to achieve a better life abroad. The push-pull framework showed how Filipino women had certain ideas, expectations and motives for female labour migration to Hong Kong. It showed the favourable and unfavourable factors that influenced their migration decision. The meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers was constructed as a social and family based decision, rather than an economical and individual based decision in the migration literature and in the sending country: the Philippines.

The perspective of Filipino domestic workers themselves confirmed the meaning of female labour migration as a social and family based decision. I showed how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers is constructed as an act for a better life for themselves and their families. Two main meanings of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers were constructed: migration as an opportunity and migration as an escape. I showed how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers can be the same (migration for a better life) and yet can also be different: as an opportunity or as an escape. Diverse factors (economic motives, religious and cultural ideas about family obligations, the wellbeing of the family, the increased demand for care, new opportunities abroad, separation from husbands, self-achievement, and self-satisfaction) influenced the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers. Irrespective of all the factors mentioned above, the push and pull factors and motives for female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers constructed the meaning of female labour migration as an act for a better life.

3. Female labour migration is: an act of sacrifice for the wellbeing of the family

In the second stage of migration, the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong changed again. Whereas different ideas and expectations shaped the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in the first stage of migration, in the second stage of migration changed the ideas and experiences of migration into other meanings of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

The idea of female labour migration for a better life was questioned in the second stage of migration. Stress and distress due to poor living conditions in the receiving country (Hong Kong) showed how the expectations and reality of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong were starkly different. According to Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong themselves, female labour migration meant an act of sacrifice for the wellbeing of their family. They did not leave the Philippines to make their own lives better, but their main goal was to improve the lives of their families. Yet, they were the one who paid the price. The meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong in the second stage of migration is constructed on the basis of the following: the sorrow and grievance of mothers who are away from their children, discrimination which they experience in Hong Kong, exploitation, isolation, abuse, high vulnerability, adverse effects on their wellbeing, poor working conditions, strict employers who do not treat them fairly, and stress, sadness or even depression.

4. Female labour migration is: a never ending journey

The last stage of migration is the stage when Filipino domestic workers returned to the Philippines. It led to a decrease of most of the stress factors from the second stage of migration. Yet, it was not the end of female labour migration since migration is a vicious circle. Once Filipino domestic workers move back to the Philippines, they consider the motives for female labour migration from the initial stage of migration again. Economic, existential and relational motives, push and pull Filipino domestic workers towards the decision of female labour migration for a better life again. I therefore state that female labour migration is a never ending journey for many Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Critique and recommendations for future research

This research took both the process of female labour migration decision-making, and the impact for female labour migrants into consideration. It showed not one part of the migration journey but aimed to combine the causes and consequences of female labour migration in all three stages of migration. I emphasised the importance of the dynamism and diversity of female labour migration through life stories and ethnographic observations. In doing so, I showed how the meaning of female labour migration for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong has changed over time and place. I described how Filipino women migrate for a better life and yet I also questioned the idea whether female labour migration leads to a better life. Through combining historical, social, and personal influences but focussing on the emic perspective of Filipino domestic workers this thesis explained the complete female labour migration journey from the Philippines to Hong Kong and then back to the Philippines for Filipino domestic workers.

A point to be made is that this is an anthropological ethnography that observed and showed how the meaning of female labour migration is constructed through an emic perspective from Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. At least, that was the aim for me as a researcher. From the perspective of my informants, it is my subjective experience that resulted from participant observation. Ethnography is subjective, however with an academic supportive scope that is crucial to understand daily phenomena at a more personal and in-depth level.

Finding the right academic support without deviating from the perspective of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong was challenging. Perhaps it resulted in research that only focussed on the perspective of Filipino domestic workers and therefore left out crucial theories or concepts from the migration literature. However, it covered every aspect of the migration journey according to my informants, and it combined diverse approaches of female labour migration that are not combined extensively in migration literature (yet). I believe more research that combines the act of female labour migration and its impacts on female labour migrants from an emic perspective is necessary.

I further suggest that more research that focusses on the third stage of migration (post migration) is necessary. An multi-sited ethnography both in Hong Kong and in the Philippines that looks at the motivations for and impacts of female labour migration for female labour migrants would be able to show an even more complete answer to this research question.

To conclude it is important to mention the pitfall that I could not avoid. I am aware that, by focussing too narrowly on women, migration, marriage and motherhood, I placed myself on the side of female migration as motivated by familial and individual concerns. Yet, I tried to show the historical, economical and political influences that shape female labour migration as well. Female labour migration is never simply economic, and motivations for and effects of migration are deeply intertwined with global, local and personal factors.

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