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Global Care Crisis

A Problem of Capital, Care Chain, or Commons?

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More and more of the world's migrants are mothers who leave their families in the villages of the South to take up jobs caring for families in the North. Most current research on this trend focuses on the conditions of work that such migrant mothers face in the North or on the children she leaves in the South, understood as a rearrangement of roles in the family. Here, the authors call for a macro-analytic theory of the effect of such migration and consider two alternate views. According to one, the care of children in the South involves a transfer of "social capital" from South to North. According to the other, it involves a more fundamental erosion of the "commons" of the South by the markets of the North. The latter, the authors propose, best captures the full nature of this important hidden injury of global capitalism.

Keywords: *global care; social capital; commons; migration; women; children*

An increasing proportion of the earth's population—180 million people—move each year from one country to another. An increasing proportion of these migrants are women (Castles & Miller, 1998; United Nations, 2002). Of such women, an increasing number migrate not to reunite families but to seek jobs far from them (Zlotnik, 2003). For many, these jobs are to care for the young, elderly, sick, and disabled of the First World. Thus, many maids, nannies, eldercare workers, nurse's aides, nurses, and doctors leave their families and communities in the weak economies of the South to provide care to families and communities within the strong economies of the North. In such countries as the Philippines and Sri Lanka, female migrants outnumber

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male migrants, and many are young mothers. Once in the North, female migrants also tend to stay longer than male migrants do. Just as poor countries suffer a brain drain, as trained personnel move from South to North, so too they suffer, we argue, a care drain (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Hochschild, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Momsen, 1999; Parreñas, 2001). Both sexes contribute to the brain drain, but due to the power of custom in both sending and receiving cultures, it is overwhelmingly women who take care with them wherever they go.

Women are moving in five main migratory streams—from Eastern Europe to Western Europe; from Mexico, Central America, and South America to the United States; from North Africa to Southern Europe; from South Asia to the oil-rich Persian Gulf; and from the Philippines to much of the world—Hong Kong, the United States, Europe, and Israel (Castles & Miller, 1998; Zlotnik, 2003). In the villages of western Ukraine, for example, the *Christian Science Monitor* recently reported (Farnam, 2003),

> Most of the adults in the mountain villages have made the crossing in order to work illegally in Central and Western Europe. But the price is high; a generation of children left behind with grandparents, and a region increasingly drained of its working population. (p. 4)

Many factors cause people to have to—and to have to want to—migrate: stagnation or collapse of Second and Third World economies, political unrest, and enormous gaps between life as it is lived in rich and poor nations. Migration also has many effects, both positive and negative.

Until recently, labor migration scholars focused on men who took agricultural or industrial jobs in the North, remitting wages to wives and parents who cared for their children in the South. Migrant man was economic man (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Scholars of female migration focus either on wives who joined their husbands in the North to reunify the family (Djamba, 2001) or on female solo migrants who moved for work. As Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994, 2003) notes, women increasingly fit the “male model” of migration (Anderson, 2000; Khruemanee, 2002). Those who study women who migrate in order to work—that is, who follow this male model—often focus on the poor pay, long hours, and sexual exploitation that the female worker faces in the North (Anderson, 2000). Missing has been any inquiry into her relationship with her children or other family and friends left behind.

Here, we focus on the missing piece—the family life of global working mothers. Among Filipino migrants, for example, more than half are women (Erista, Tia, Sevilla, & Orteza, 2003). Their median age is 29 and they have, on average, 2.74 children who stay in the Philippines (Morales, 2001; Parreñas, 2001, 2003).

Migrant woman was, thus, family woman or economic woman, but not family and economic woman. Valuable as this research is, it leaves a large hole—the story of the global fathers and the story of working mother (Anderson, 2000; Momsen, 1999).

Migration and Work–Family Balance

In her pioneering work, Parreñas focuses on both the Filipina migrating mother and the children she leaves behind. Building on Parreñas's work, Hochschild proposes the concept of "global care chains"—the series of personal links between people across the globe based on paid or unpaid care. A Sri Lankan nanny may leave her children in the care of her sister and a nanny in Colombo, for example, and take up the paid care of twin sons of an upper-middle-class couple in Los Angeles, the wife of whom gives, as a personnel officer, her "care" to a multinational company. Meanwhile, the second nanny (who may come from a rural village outside Colombo) may leave her youngest children in the care of her 15-year-old daughter and leave a sickly mother in the care of a neighbor.

Meanwhile, another set of scholars focuses on the two-person balancing act in the North, omitting from the picture the child-care worker and her children living in the South (Hood, 1983; Huber & Spitze, 1983). The concern for work–family balance so freely applied to families in the North is often somehow missing from more economically focused research on migrant women of the South.[1]

Global care chains have long existed within given regions and countries and were common in the United States among African American women from the 1860s through the mid-20th century. But, they have also long crossed national boundaries as well. Between 1850 and 1970, for example, thousands of women from rural Slovenia migrated to Egypt to take up positions as domestic servants and wet nurses, leaving their own children behind. As one Catholic nun in Saint Francis Asylum in Cairo, Egypt, observed (Barbic & Miklavcic-Brezigar, 1999, cited in Momsen, 1999),

> We witnessed the sufferings of these young mothers on those Sunday afternoons, as they were giving their own body and milk to the child that was not their own, for the sake of their family. In spite of their suffering, they returned to Egypt as wet nurses after each baby, for they were well paid, and the family property was enlarged—but their suffering was too high. Let not this situation happen again, never more. (p. 169)

So, how can we best understand such transfers of care? In "Global Care Chains: Critical Reflections and Lines of Inquiry," Nicola Yeates (2004) systematizes the idea of care chains, broadens the scope of its applicability, and adds to it a clearer picture of global labor networks. Here, we extend Yeates by offering a conceptual picture of what it is that anchors care chains: the socio-emotional commons. Care chains are not free-standing strips of relationships; they are anchored in a commons—a community of give and take of which any individual is one small part.

The term *commons* originally referred to land on which 15th-century English villagers could freely graze their sheep and cattle, collect firewood, and hunt game. It was shared land. Through the Enclosure Acts, the British Parliament privatized this land, preventing commoners from using it (Bollier, 2003; Rowe, 2002). But, the term

commons can refer to other physical resources held in common (Internet access to data, the ocean, nature preserves). It can also refer to social resources held in common—a community. By socio-emotional commons, we refer to a group of people whose actions express a principle of "generalized reciprocity." Each individual in a commons is poised to give to others in the community because that individual—and those close to her or him—have received something from the community in the realm of random small favors in normal times and big favors in times of emergency. Just as public spaces can be placed off-limits to commoners, so too can communities and the help they promise to provide.

In showing how care chains are anchored in such commons, we hope to open up a conversation about social policies that inadvertently distort or erode them, for migration has, we argue, become a private means of coping with the global wage gap, and the costs of migration are mainly counted as private costs. But, when enough people—adults and children alike—become part of a private problem, it becomes a public issue to which we need thoughtful public answers.

Obstacles to Open Discussion About Migrant Mothers' Children

The first task in researching lives of migrants' children is to analyze why participants sometimes find the topic so hard to talk about and researchers find it difficult to research. Indeed, the very issue of ease of conversation about migrants' children should become, itself, an object of study. One reason for some anxiety about the topic is surely the fact that the Third World state, the First World employer, and often the migrant herself clearly want this global arrangement to work. Given the huge financial incentives, workers badly want the jobs. Domestic workers migrating to the United States and Italy—interviewed by Rhacel Parreñas in the 1990s—had, back in the Philippines, averaged $176 a month as teachers, nurses, and administrative and clerical workers. But, by doing less skilled though no less difficult work as nannies, maids, and care-service workers, they earned $200 a month in Singapore, $410 a month in Hong Kong, $700 a month in Italy, and $1,400 a month in Los Angeles. The Sri Lankan Muslim maids studied by Michele Gamburd (2000) and Grete Brochmann (1993) migrated to pay for basic food and shelter. Most lower-middle-class and middle-class Filipina migrants studied by Parreñas (2001) and the medical workers studied by Uma Devi migrated to pay for school fees and better housing and to start new businesses.

For their part, the migrant's children, spouse, parents, and such people as the mason who builds her new house and the priest at the village temple who receives a new donation want migration to work, too, because they benefit from it. Third World governments—that of Sri Lanka and the Philippines, for example—also gain enormously from the inflow of taxable hard-currency remittances. According to the

International Monetary Fund, officially recorded remittances in 2005 exceeded $232 billion, two thirds of which went to residents in poor countries. Unofficially recorded transfers are estimated to be an additional $116 billion (Ratha, 2005; see Erista et al., 2003). Remittances make up 24% of the gross domestic product of Haiti, 22% of Jordan, and 16% of Nicaragua.

In the North, employers also welcome the badly needed care workers, to fill the needs of aging societies with high female employment, and do not ask many questions about the family lives of such workers. In sum, many parties—the workers; the workers' kin; the workers' employers; the businesses that arise to train, transport, and house migrants; and the governments—come to have a vested interest in female migration and are less interested in hearing about the costs.[2]

But, as Uma Devi's (2003) research shows, there is a cost. Many migrant mothers who were proud to work overseas also felt bad about leaving their children behind. Relatives, teachers, and child advocates also expressed concern about such children. As a 2003 report of the National Statistics Office of the Philippine government concludes (Erista et al., 2003),

> The country faces huge social costs to migrant families as a result of prolonged separation, the breakdown of families and the deterioration and underdevelopment of the psycho-social growth of their children. (p. 10)

Apart from the alignment of interests in migration, talk about this "huge social cost" is difficult for another reason: shame. Many mothers face accusations of being a "bad mother" or a "materialistic person" and themselves feel anguished about long separations from their children. Indeed, Uma Devi's first discovery, in her interviews with the kin of Kerala female migrant mothers, was the taboo among the kin against talking about "how the children were doing." Mothers felt their departures as a sensitive, private issue, not as a private expression of a larger public issue.[3]

One final obstacle faces those who write about the children left behind—fear of the "misuse" of their findings. Feminist scholars who place, as we do, a personal value on the ability of mothers to work outside the home may fear that their findings will build the "maternalist" case for returning women to the home. Scholars who champion, as we do, the rights of migrants may also fear that scholarship illuminating the family problems of migrant workers could be used against them by nativists of the North. Such fears are understandable and well founded. Even more important, however, is the more basic task of opening up a full conversation about the hidden costs of female migration, both to advance various branches of theory—feminist, migration, and work–family—and to influence global social policy.

Given these obstacles, the small but important line of research emerging to fill this gap is especially welcome. Early studies focus on the effect of departing fathers (Abella & Atal, 1986; Arnold & Shah, 1986; Go & Postrado, 1986), whereas recent studies increasingly focus on the effect of absent fathers and mothers (Aranda, 2003;

Artico, 2003; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Parreñas, 2005; Schmalzbauer, 2004). Some research focuses on children's education. Kandel and Kao (2001), for example, find that the children of Mexican migrants earn better grades in high school and can—given their parents' remittances—better afford to go to college than children of nonmigrants. But, poignantly, compared with nonmigrant children, the children of migrants are less likely to want to go to college.

Other studies focus on children's emotional well-being. For example, in their survey of 709 Filipino elementary school children—average age of 11—Battistella and Conoco (1998) compare children who live with both parents with "father absent," "mother absent," and "both absent" children. Most children "show an understanding of the main reason for parents being abroad, that is, to add to the family coffers, and to improve their own education." But, they write, "most also view their parents' departure with 'a sense of loneliness and sadness'" (p. 228). Children living with both parents earned higher grades and a higher rank in class than children with absent parents. Compared to children with absent fathers, children with absent mothers were also more likely to say they felt sad, angry, confused, and apathetic.

In one of the few in-depth studies of what she calls "parenting from afar," Leah Schmalzbauer (2004) studied 154 Hondurans, among whom were 34 care workers living in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and 12 of their family members back in Honduras (and 6 more whose family ties had been severed). Both migrant fathers and mothers, Schmalzbauer discovered, worried whether their children truly understood why they left. In addition, she notes, "Dissension within transnational families is common. The extreme occurs when migrants completely cut themselves off from their families at home" (p. 28). In another study of children of migrant workers, Parreñas (2005) compares the children of Filipino male migrants (usually raised by the child's mother) and female migrants (raised by their fathers, grandmothers, aunts, or others). When husbands migrate, she discovered, wives usually assume the role of father and mother. But when wives migrate, husbands tend to stand aside, leaving child rearing to female relatives. In the end, Parreñas sensibly calls for Filipino husbands of migrant worker wives to face up to the challenge of child rearing just as their female counterparts have done.

The Study: Children in Kerala, Working Mothers in the Persian Gulf

In 2003, Uma Devi and her assistant Ramji interviewed 120 people, 22 of whom were working mothers from Kerala—a state in the southwest of India—delivering health care in the United Arab Emirates. Among these were 6 doctors, 10 nurses, 5 laboratory technicians, and 1 hospital cleaner. For each such migrant, Uma Devi and Ramji averaged interviews with five family members back in Kerala, including children, spouses, parents-in-law, siblings, and other caregivers. They interviewed

the working mothers in the six emirates of the United Arab Emirates (where 9 of the 22 lived alone) and interviewed their children and the kin who cared for them in Kerala, India. Of the 13 children younger than age 5, 7 lived with both parents in the United Arab Emirates, 1 lived with the father and paternal grandmother in Kerala, 2 lived with maternal grandparents and apart from both parents, 2 lived with paternal grandparents and apart from both parents, and 1 lived with another relative in Kerala and not with parents or grandparents. Of the 9 adolescent children, 4 attended boarding school in Kerala and 5 lived with their fathers. In no case did migration sever relations between spouses, despite years of living apart, with occasional meetings.

Migration in Kerala has become an accepted way of dealing with a discrepancy between its strong system of schooling and its weak economy. As a state, Kerala has established a strong educational system, but its troubled economy cannot absorb many of the graduates it produces. One solution to this discrepancy has been to export educated workers. One out of every 5 working adults in Kerala is or has been a migrant worker (Kerala State Planning Board, 2002). One out of every 10 of these migrants is a woman and many of these are mothers. In the Kerala study, the migrant mothers averaged two children each and visited their children, on average, once each year for a month.

Mothers who migrate from Kerala often experience a conflict, Uma Devi found, between wanting to be an "ideal mother" and wanting to be a "community heroine." By migrating, these mothers are defying the prevailing local notion of an ideal mother. To be sure, the idea of an ideal mother differs from one ethnic and religious group to another within Kerala. Sixty percent of Keralans are Hindu, 20% are Muslim, and 20% are Christian. Thus, Keralan culture draws on many different cultural beliefs about motherhood. But, all of them share a vision of the ideal mother as one who lives with her own children. The ideal mother may work outside the home during the day but she returns to her children in the evening.[4] Thus, the cultural acceptance of shared care does not, in Kerala, automatically extend to an acceptance of the prolonged absence of mothers.

Keralans also share an ideal of the joint household, in which elderly parents live together with their sons and their families. The ideal mother within the "ideal joint family household" is one who is physically present and the object of a child's primary emotional attachment while, at the same time, gladly sharing the emotional limelight with loving grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others. Both ideals—that of the extended household and the physically present mother—persist in the popular imagination, but less and less do they persist in reality. Mothers found themselves in a cultural cross-current of criticism and praise, disapproval (as heartless and materialistic), and approval (as heroically sacrificing and generously providing). Although few mothers had been criticized to their face, all of them were well aware of criticisms "going around." At the same time, given the high unemployment in Kerala, many well-trained and able-bodied Keralans from both the middle and working classes—even some who expressed criticism—wished for a chance to migrate.

Migrant mothers and their kin also felt that the negative gossip came out of envy for the larger homes, more lavish weddings, larger dowries, and educational opportunities that migration afforded.

Despite her conflict (Shall I be an ideal mother or shall I be a financial success?), the migrant mother did not feel alone. She was, she and her relatives agreed, following a family plan. She was making a sacrifice for the family.

Still, Uma Devi observed that, when speaking of their children in the interview, most mothers teared up or openly wept. Even mothers who had long been reunited with their children expressed anguish when they recalled the separation. A number of nurses worked for hospitals in the Persian Gulf with stringent leave policies for their pregnant workers. Most such hospitals allowed mothers 45 days postpartum leave for the birth of their infants. Thus, mothers would fly from the Gulf back to Kerala, give birth to their babies, stay for 40 days, and then return to their full-time jobs in the Gulf. Many also continued working a year—and in a few cases, more—before they were able to see their babies again. Infants left by mothers at the age of 1 month can develop a wide variety of alternate attachments, depending on the personality, capacity to love, and consistency of care given by the surrogate caregivers. This study does not begin to do justice to that enormous variety.

But, Uma Devi was struck by some of the open statements by older children of migrant workers. For example, Priya, a Keralan college student and the daughter of a nurse practicing in the United Arab Emirates, said,

> I want you to write about the human cost for people like us, to be apart for year after year. I'm living here in this hostel, and my classes are fine, but I can't talk to my mother. I can't tell her things. I can't see her face. I can't hug her. I can't help her. My mother misses me too. My mother will retire at some point, but how old will I be then?

Leela, another daughter of a nurse working in the United Arab Emirates who lives with her father and brother in Kerala, had this to say:

> I cannot go home even for weekends because my father is alone at home and in a traditional setting I would not go and live with him, when he is alone. . . . You know you cannot discuss everything with your father. I wait for my mother's call every Friday, but from the hostel phone. Also, I cannot talk freely with her, because the matron (a nun) is always hovering around. . . . My father is very strict, he has become more strict now and is very conservative. . . . If I do anything non-conventional, he tends to blame my mother for bringing me up the way she has, so I try to be very careful to see that my mother is not blamed. This is a big burden, which I would not have if she was here.

Many children spoke of envying friends who enjoyed the luxury of living with their mothers. When her mother left for a nursing job in the Gulf, Vijaya, now 20, also told of taking her mother's place in the household with her father and brother and of envying the carefree childhoods of friends of nonmigrating mothers. But, as she explained, she also envied them the sheer company of their mothers:

> When I see my classmates accompanying their mothers to church or shopping, I miss my mother badly. . . . Actually, I need my mother now at this age. Anyway, later they would marry me off and I would miss the opportunity of living with my mother. I miss her.

When Vijaya's mother was interviewed in the United Arab Emirates, she asked,

> How is my daughter? I know she misses me. They call me every day in the evening from the STD booth (an outdoor phone store, with a private booth). She sometimes cries. I do too.[5]

Even in their absence, migrant mothers became an emotional presence to their children. Mina, the 2-year-old daughter of a nurse in the United Arab Emirates, for example, daily looked at a blue dolphin toy hung in the center of the living room. Her paternal grandparents encouraged Mina to play with it, reminding her, "Your mommy sent the dolphin for your birthday." When it was decided to take a photo of Mina, her grandmother immediately dressed her in a frilly dress and brought her beaming into the living room. "Tell them who sent you this frock," the grandmother coaxed Mina. Mina, shyly looking down and holding her grandmother by one hand and putting her hand over her face, replied in a whisper, "Ammachi" ("my mother" in Malayalam).

The memory of the missing parent was not suppressed, as can happen in the case of a bitter family rupture, a divorce, or a suicide. Nor was the mother's absence completely normalized as in the case of the absent sea-farer or soldier. Nor, again, was the role of mother fully absorbed by the grandmother or sister-in-law or father. Rather, a place was reserved in the child's heart for a mother who was not there.

At the same time, to varying degrees, children managed their private doubts about the arrangement. Older children recall asking themselves, Why did my mother leave me when the mothers of my school friends did not leave them? Did my mother have to leave, or did she want to leave? Or did she leave *me*? Answers to these questions seemed to differ depending on their cultural image of the parent's role. But, the more the child was exposed to friends whose mothers had not left, the more the question arose. As one child of a migrant worker, now adult, put it, "I wondered why she couldn't have stayed back or I couldn't have gone with her. I still wonder." She was managing doubt.

A few children, Uma Devi found, had moved from doubt to distrust. They felt promised an emotional bond with their mother that had not, in fact, been sustained, and they felt betrayed. This may correspond to what psychologists call "empathic rupture," the breaking of an empathic connection. The headmaster of a boarding school for children of migrant workers in Kerala reported this:

> Most of the children we have in this school have parents working in the Middle East. The children we have here range in age from 5 to 16. Many of them have lost trust in adults. They are very independent, but not always in a healthy way. They distrust adults.

Each relationship between child and migrant mother—like that between child and father—is unique. Not all children of migrant workers are sent to boarding school. Not all who attend boarding school end up losing trust in their parents or in all adults. But the headmaster's comment points to an issue we know far too little about, a hidden price tag of global inequality.

Children find themselves in an emotional commons, one in which there is a busy exchange of favors, large and small, by the adults in their lives. That is, they live in a community of kin, friends, neighbors, and teachers, all of whom exchange favors with one another. This commons is governed by a complex web of understandings. For example, grandparents care for a 4-year-old child. The migrant mother pays a builder to build a house for her brother. The brother and his wife, in turn, stand ready to care for the grandparents as they grow older. The mother finds a job in the United Arab Emirates for the brother's wife, and so the favor exchange goes on. Children face the task of figuring out their footing within this commons.

Is the care they receive from grandparents or aunts, for example, freely given as a gesture of love, or is it a way of "doing mother a favor"? Is this care offered out of commitment or out of desire, or in what measure of each? Migrant mothers often sent caregivers personal gifts; in what sense, the children sometimes wonder, is this a "payment" for their care, or in what measure is it simply a gift? Is the child, he or she wondered, a welcome addition or a bit of a burden? Migration places large new demands on the joint family to care for migrants' children. In taking on this care—especially the care of very young children—kin often feel that they are offering the migrant an enormous emotional gift, regardless of material returns. So, Uma Devi discovered, both the migrant workers and their children often felt beholden to the caregivers. Some children reported feeling "like a guest" in the house or like a "burden." So, some of the migrants' children tried to behave like little adults vis-à-vis their grandparents or aunts and uncles in the household, especially the older girls who tended to make themselves useful as little mothers to younger siblings. Thus, for some children, the emotional challenge was to manage an aversion to feeling like a "charity case."[6]

The migrant mother was also forced to "materialize" love—to express through money and material gifts that which she could not express through talk and hugs. Thus, for the child, the arrival of a package of toys or electronic gadgets could mean, "Mother is thinking of me," or "Mother knows what I like."[7] On the school playground in Kerala, a new toy often made a migrant's child at once a prince and an object of pity, for it meant both that one's mother was absent but also that one's family was richer than nonmigrant families. The socially upheld meaning of a remittance or gift was, "I am devoted to your welfare." But, many also interpreted gifts as guilt offerings, as ways of saying, "I'm sorry," or "Here is this gift instead of me." Some children of absent parents continued to feel ambivalent about gifts they'd received from parents even many years later. For example, Divya, now 26, had grown up separated from both her parents who worked in the Gulf in order to accumulate a large dowry for her in the form of a "Gulf house" (the name given to large,

upscale houses built with remittances). With this dowry, Divya indeed married well and now raises her newborn son in this house, still never having opened the small gifts her parents had sent to her during their long absence. As she told Uma Devi during the interview, "My parents sent me many glamorous pens and pencil boxes from the Middle East. But I never used them, even now 20 years later. I've never used them."

The children of Kerala migrant workers, thus, faced a number of emotional issues related to the departure of their mothers: the management of sadness at the lost company of one whose emotional centrality remained in absentia, envy of children with resident mothers (and this despite an official acceptance of the trade-offs of migration), doubt about why a mother had to leave, and an aversion to being a burden to surrogate caregivers. They also developed a sensitivity to the meaning of material gifts, because they were offered, as one mother explained, "because I couldn't be there in person."

The migration of these mothers also led to shifts in the family system and the community beyond it. Although other research has uncovered stories of ruptured relations between wives and husbands, and even between parents and children, Uma Devi came across no such stories in her Kerala interviews (Schmalzbauer, 2004). Migration did not divide the community between the migrating rich and the nonmigrating poor, as in some countries, for most families at each occupational level had one migrant contributor to the family coffers. At the same time, it created cross-currents of envy (of the migrants' money) and criticism (of the migrants' maternity) through communities of kin and family. It also unsettled the footing of children throughout the migratory system, for if the mothers of some children could leave, then other mothers might also leave as opportunities opened up. Most important, migration stripped away the patterns of care that would have taken place—between a woman and her child, her husband, her parents, her neighbor, her friend, and her temple—had she not had to migrate.

Uma Devi's fieldwork opens a door into a large world of unanswered questions. At the very least, it suggests a strong basis from which to argue that there are vitally important emotional—and not simply economic—realities unfolding with the feminization of migration.[8] Although children have in the past and still today miss their migrant fathers, in most Third World cultures, the export of care work involves the export of women. Given local tradition, at least in Kerala, the export of women removes those who have been central in the care of children.

Transferring Care Capital or Eroding a Third World Commons?

The nurse who leaves her children in the care of relatives in Trivandrum, Kerala, India, while she cares for patients in Dubai on the Persian Gulf is part of a care chain. But, how do we conceptualize this care chain? Should we understand it as the transfer of "care capital," like a transfer of social capital from one family and nation to another family, workplace, and nation? Or, is it best understood as an erosion of a

"life world," to quote Jurgen Habermas, a socio-emotional commons within which capitalization takes place?

We can speak of migration as leading to a transfer of a migrant's care capital—caring skills—from South to North. But, this transfer calls, at the same time, for new kinds of exchange—between migrants in the North and kin in the South—of social capital. The already overstretched metaphor of *capital*, we argue, both illuminates one small part of the picture and obstructs our vision of the bigger picture. So, a brief word about social capital is in order. The concept of social capital draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), James Coleman (1988), and Robert Putnam (1993, 2000), and it has been applied to migration by Alexandro Portes (1998).[9] Putnam (2000) defines social capital in a variety of ways: as the number of a person's social contacts, as the sum of one's organizational memberships, and as the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from these contacts and memberships.[10]

More useful for our purpose is Alexandro Portes's (1998) definition of social capital as the accumulation of "social chits." People with many chits are high in social capital, and those with few are low. As Portes notes, "Social capital (is) primarily the accumulation of obligations from others according to the norm of reciprocity" (p. 7). The normal exchange of social chits in families or communities differs from pure economic exchange, he argues, in two ways. In a pure economic exchange, we borrow money and we repay money. The currency remains the same. In the exchange of social chits, we give in one currency but repay in another. Again, in a pure economic exchange, if we borrow money, we pay it at a specified time. In the exchange of social chits, we leave open the time for repayment.

Between migrant mother and caring-giving kin, there is an exchange of social chits. A favor is freely given (the relatives care for the child) but is also eventually repaid (the mother pays various expenses and gives various gifts). For example, the migrant health worker Sujatha asked her sister and the sister's stepdaughter Prithi to care for her 6-year-old daughter Anitha. Sujatha sends money for her daughter Anitha's upkeep and education. She also pays for her sister's medical treatment and for Prithi's education. Sujatha also sends Prithi golden ornaments as gifts. Note that Sujatha does not send simple checks but, rather, designates a purpose for money, making the transfer more personal (this is often but not always done). Prithi is hoping that one day Sujatha will be able to find her a job in the United Arab Emirates. But, as Sujatha told Uma Devi, "I know Prithi expects me to bring her over to Dubai, but if she comes [to Dubai], who would look after my daughter Anitha? So I don't want to help bring Prithi here now." In this case, giving one chit prevents receiving of another.

As for other migrant families, what was an informal exchange of chits, an expression of the principle of reciprocity, comes one step closer to a market exchange. This is not because money is, in every instance, depersonalizing. Rather, it is because other forms of sociality—the simple keeping of company—have been subtracted

from the overall human exchange. There is no sharing of dinners or birthday celebrations, no daily conversation, no visual or physical contact. In this instance, children, as well as their caregivers, can come to experience money as a substitute for shared experiences and love. Paradoxically, as such, it can even loom larger as a symbol of love even as it can, at the same time, also depersonalize and commodify love.

The accumulation of chits between Sujatha and Pritha implies a hidden inequity between Sujatha and the other player in the game—the employer in the North. Sujatha comes to her employer unencumbered by children: Pritha, half a world away, is invisible to her employer in the North. But, her caregiving is utterly necessary to liberate Sujatha for her 50- or 60-hour weeks of childcare in the North. Were Sujatha to "hire" her sister's stepdaughter, for example, it would be seen as necessary to add the cost of that childcare to the wages Sujatha is paid in the North. That cost might be passed on, in turn, leading to raised costs of medical services in the Middle East. But, because the exchange of social chits is invisible, Sujatha cannot "cash in." The employer in the North does not see the need to pay. This is an argument of displaced cost: The caretaker back in Kerala is absorbing a cost that the Northern employer should rightly pay. The idea of social capital—like that of costs of reproduction, in the Marxist framework—illuminates this inequity.

At the same time, the (care and social) capital framework inhibits us from appreciating, and thus theorizing, the communal world in which children and their chit-exchanging mothers and relatives actually live. Therefore, it hides yet another, yet more basic, inequity—access to an integral collectivity that gives a social chit meaning in the first place. The idea of social capital leads us to imagine that social chits are individually owned and therefore independent of life in a community. It is as if one person could put capital in their suitcase, get on a plane, and go. We are led to forget all the favors, the chits, that would have been exchanged and would have enriched the community had the person stayed. Social chits—gifts, favors, and kindnesses—operate in, derive from, and are sustained by family and community and are nothing whatsoever outside them.

As the socio-linguist George Lakoff (1980) argues in his book, *Metaphors We Live By*, every metaphor implies a cognitive frame, itself based on assumptions about reality. Social capital is part of the same cognitive frame as material capital, that is, money. It describes what a migrant mother or child has, not who she is, as defined by participation in a social whole.

If family and community are absent from the picture as basic social units to begin with, there is nothing there to be distorted, strained, or eroded by a Third World "care drain." To put it another way, we cannot see the effect of pollution on the ecology of the lake if we only focus on each individual fish. Similarly, social chits operate in, derive from, and are sustained by family and community.

If we apply a market metaphor to a communal reality, we blur Portes's distinction between the two and the meanings attached to that distinction. As the economic anthropologist George Dalton (1971) notes,

> To employ market terms to the non-market sectors of primitive and peasant economies is as distorting as it would be to use the concepts of Christianity to analyze primitive religion. (p. 185)

Only with concepts true to their collective context can we understand the feelings of doubt, sadness, and envy that Keralan children report. We argue that migration can, in Polanyi's (1944/2001) and Giddens's (1991) sense, "disembed" social chits and turn them into social capital. But, this is not a process we see—or appreciate the cost of—if we assume that they are, and only are, social capital to begin with.

Finally, the concept of capital (social or care) turns the camera's eye away from children and from the split-family context as children experience it. It leads us to gloss over that of a child's relational world, which is not exchangeable or unalienable, and the feelings in response to that relational world, including feelings of anguish, doubt, envy, and sadness.[11]

We propose, then, another concept that focuses the camera's eye on the very way migration disembeds relationships of family and community, shifting the terms on which it is based away from chit and toward capital. South–North migration of mothers over long periods of time, we argue, attenuates, distorts, and sometimes ruptures the socio-emotional commons (Polanyi, 1944/2001; Rowe, 2002; Tronto, 1993).[12] The concept of the commons focuses our attention on the very "for-itself-ness" of family and community.[13]

We are looking, as Marx and others have, at inequity, at the gap between haves and have-nots. But, what is there to have or not have is a commons. That is, what is missing from the capital/market view is the opportunity to live as part of an integral whole—a family and community. One thing that makes a whole into a whole is being together, seeing each other, talking directly, physically touching—in a word, co-presence. We can imagine a family gathered around a table or a community celebration as expressions of a socio-emotional commons.[14] It is clear that there are many other bases for a commons, material and nonmaterial, existing in the past and today, although this discussion falls beyond the scope of our article.[15]

But, the commons can become "fodder" for the market.[16] Indeed, it is our thesis that just as the market eroded the commons in 18th-century Europe, so the market of the North is eroding the commons of the South today. Looking at the growth of market capitalism in Europe, various observers noted that the market relied on—and then, in a sense, used up—preexisting nonmarket social ties based on trust and mutual commitment (Durkheim, 1984; Polanyi, 2001). As Durkheim noted, contracts were first based on precontractual solidarity. To lend money, tools, or labor to a neighbor, a man relied on a culture of trust and the watchful eyes of an embedded community. From this original basis, contracts, courts, and jails were derived. But, once established, these impersonal mechanisms tended to undercut the trust, which had been based on primordial ties (Fevre, 2003). In *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi (2001) argues much the same thing. Speaking of the market in 19th-century European society, Polanyi noted,

> A principle quite unfavorable to individual and general happiness was working havoc with his social environment, his neighborhood, his standing in the community, his craft; in a word, with those relationships to nature and man in which his economic existence was formerly embedded. The Industrial Revolution was causing a social dislocation of stupendous proportions, and the problem of poverty was merely the economic aspect of this event. (p. 129)

For Durkheim and Polanyi, both society and the market existed in the same place, Europe. But, the relationship between them changed from one time to another, roughly from the 1800s to the 1900s.

In the global migration of women today, we argue, a different form of the same process is taking place. Only now, the places are different and the period of time is the same. Now, the market of the North is indirectly eroding the social solidarities of the South.

Mothers are still mothers. But, children forget what they look like. Mothers make great sacrifices for their children but the trust concerning that great sacrifice has been undermined. Absent mothers leave for their children's sake, but children manage private, often profound doubts about why, in fact, their mothers left. Just as a person's relationships to others and nature were disembedded in Polanyi's quite general terms, so, we suggest, the relationship between parent and child is disembedded by migration. This happens "in" the family, but family theory, per se, is missing a picture of both the context—the backstage of globalization—and the process by which that context disembeds relations between parent and child. It is when we introduce the idea of a commons that we see how the distorted and eroded family ties of the South support the market of the North.

In addition, if the early European commons were sustained mainly by men, the commons we describe here are sustained mainly by women. In a sense, global economic circumstances have "thrown off" migrants from their Third World commons, even as they continue to contribute materially to it. The vast majority of migrant mothers of Kerala, Thailand, and Latvia would far rather work at adequate jobs near their families than at jobs far from them. To be sure, migrants are "choosing" to migrate, but only in the limited sense that 18th-century European peasants "chose" to seek jobs in the margins of the expanding cities of the day. Similarly, most migrants see themselves as using their remittances (the market) to better their families (the commons). But, over their heads, so to speak, a more powerful process is simultaneously at work—the distortion and erosion of the Third World commons. Indeed, as whole villages in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Kerala, Latvia, and the Ukraine are emptied of mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and daughters, it may not be too much to speak of a desertification of Third World caregivers and the emotional commons they would have sustained had they been able to stay.

In the end, the global care crisis raises issues for both social theory and social policy. For social theory, it raises the vital issue of what market-derived concepts

prevent us from grasping. For social policy, it raises the issue of what we can do to reduce the hidden injuries of global capital. At the very least, we can call for arrangements by which children and perhaps other caregivers can follow mothers to their new place of work. More basically, we can call for measures to be taken by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the North American Free Trade Agreement aimed at reducing the economic gap that motivates much migration to begin with. That is, we can call on the nations of the North to provide more benign ways of redistributing the resources of the North to the South. But, it takes seeing a problem to solve it, and it takes the right concepts to see it.

Notes

1. Yet, another group of researchers studies Third World women who do not migrate at all but, instead, face the hardships imposed by underdevelopment and "structural adjustments" imposed by World Bank lenders (Kabeer, 1996). Thus, as an issue for research, the relation of migrant mothers to their children has remained curiously hidden from view.

2. Some economists dispute the economic benefits of remittances for the country's economy. Economists at the International Monetary Fund and Duke University argue, for example, that remittances are "wasted on big-screen TVs and faux-adobe mansions" instead of being invested in new businesses at home (Frank, 2001, p. 2; Wheatley, 2003).

3. Many social problems have a "shame wrap around." Homeless people are ashamed of being homeless. Poor people are ashamed of being poor. The imprisoned are ashamed of being in prison. In each instance, to different degrees, the victim is led to violate some norm for which they experience shame. But, erased from the picture is the larger pattern that led to that violation, that shame in the first place.

4. The prevailing ideal in marriage also calls for co-residence and monogamy. Migration prevents the first and strains the second. Although this was not a focus of the Kerala research, Parreñas (2005) found many husbands of long-absent Filipina migrant mothers setting up house with other women in villages apart from their own children.

5. In *Tahitians*, social anthropologist Robert Levy (1973) speaks of whole realms of human feeling for which given cultures have few or no words. For emotions in the upper range—joy, happiness, euphoria—he observed, the Tahitians had many words. But, for the lower range—sadness, regret, longing, depression—they had only one word, *sick*. Where there are few words, Levy reasoned, there is a cultural under-acknowledgement of feeling, an under-articulation of experience. In Malayalam, too, there is no special word for a feeling many children in Kerala experience, "mother-envy." For in the context of a highly educated population and stagnant economy in which the desirability of migration goes largely unquestioned, such feelings clearly exist, but with a cover over them, so to speak.

6. Parreñas, for example, found that relatives who cared for migrants' children often came to resent negligent fathers who either disengaged from their children's daily lives or drank, gambled, and carried on extramarital affairs (Constable, 2003; Parreñas, 2005). Such male avoidance of care may express not simply a traditional reluctance to do "women's work," then, but a backlash at lost privilege. Kin must then add to their caretaking responsibilities the task of dealing with a husband-father who feels he has lost his place.

7. In this sense, migrant parents and children are subject to the same materialization doubts as absent or divorced fathers. An 18-year-old daughter of a divorced father interviewed for a previous study told Uma Devi, "Every time I talk to my dad on the phone, the conversation begins, 'Do you need money?' It's as if he thinks that's all he could give me."

8. We need highly sophisticated research comparing children of migrant mothers with those of non-migrant mothers and of migrant fathers. We also need work comparing children who experience various kinds of nonparental care.

9. Following Putnam, Dutch labor economist Irene van Staveren (2000) makes a well-meaning, but we feel misguided, attempt to apply the idea of social capital to the realm of domestic care. As she puts it, "Through mutual gift-giving in the care economy, mainly shouldered by women, . . . social capital accumulates" (p. 12). Citing the classic study by Richard Titmuss (1971) on blood donation, she observes that gifts freely given often get the job done more "efficiently" and with lower "transaction costs" than services paid for (van Staveren, 2000). As van Staveren notes,

> The more human capital (say a particular skill) is used, the faster it accumulates: practice increases returns to skills. . . . Similarly for social capital: the more social capital (say the bonds in a neighborhood) is used the faster it accumulates . . . so, the value of social capital is generated in the care economy through the complementary caring characteristics of the goods and services produced. This leads to increasing marginal returns, in analogy to the increasing returns of human capital. (p. 12)

Van Staveren focuses on (a) the efficiency of care, (b) care as a possession given or received, apart from the context, and (c) care as therefore barren of personal meanings.

In this framework, no loss to the character of family solidarity is visible. If the nanny of an aunt takes the Keralan child to school through the school years, it adds up to the same amount of "care" social capital as if the child's mother did it. Personal meanings are erased.

10. Actually, Putnam (2000) is confusing on just this point. He sometimes refers to social capital in the way the metaphor suggests—as the property of an individual. Other times, he seems to be referring to social capital strictly as the attribute of a collectivity. Scholars applying the concept to the Third World tend to see social capital as the attribute of an individual (Harriss, 2001). As many social critics have noted, the concept of social capital is overly broad. One World Bank economist, Woolcock (cited in Harriss, 2001), says this:

> Several critics, not without justification, have voiced their concern that collapsing an entire discipline into a single variable (especially one with such economic overtones) is a travesty. But others are pleased that mainstream sociological ideas are finally being given their due at the highest levels. (p. 81)

In "Social Capital: The World Bank's Fungible Friend," economist Ben Fine (2003) notes that the concept, initially applied to economic growth and school performance and job placement, is not being related to infant mortality and solid waste management and communal violence. The concept has also been critiqued for its wooliness, lack of empirical specificity, decontextualization (our concern), and depoliticizing implications. The more social capital, Harriss (2001) reasons, the more the World Bank feels it can press for reduced government aid in Third World countries and for liberalization of trade. "Is it a coincidence," Fine (2003) speculates,

> that social capital has come to the fore just as the World Bank is proposing to reallocate billions of dollars for infrastructural funding from IDA (International Development Assistance) which makes concessional loans to governments to IFC (International Financial Corporation) which lends exclusively to the private sector? (p. 600)

11. The concept of social capital, let us hasten to add, was not originally designed to obscure the human cost of global migration. On the contrary, those who first added social capital to the conversation about Third World development and care did so with the idea of adding a human touch to the economic discussion of money, bridges and factories, and the like. Paradoxically, though, "the human side" was introduced in such a way as to obscure it. The market metaphor has nonetheless been making its way

through social science through what we might call the “capital series.” The series begins with material capital and extends to human capital (Coleman, 1988), social capital (Putnam, 1995, 2000), emotional capital (Nowotny, 1996), and pugilistic capital (Wacquant, 2004).

12. Theorists of the commons, for their part, offer us two pictures. One is a positive picture—a commonly shared set of resources or relationships—for example, the simple facts of trust and co-presence of mother and child. Here, the emphasis is on sharing a sense of in-commonness. The second is negative—a commonly shared set of resources that people, each thinking of their private good, ultimately abuse (Harden, 1995). Here, we extend the first picture.

13. To be sure, individuals on both sides may betray a shared trust. A parent may fail to share his or her earnings. An aunt may neglect her nephews. But, these acts are tacitly understood as betrayals of a trust that was strongly valued, reinforced, collectively shared, nonfungible, and deeply rooted in time and place. This was the taken-for-granted social fabric within which migration took place and to which—as the interviews so poignantly show—it did harm.

14. Some commons are temporary and emergency based (as in response to natural disaster); others establish expectations of long-term reciprocity.

15. Most commons of which we speak are based in reality, but many are based in fantasy. Many migrants forced off the land into the city, or out of their country into another, look back with longing and nostalgia at the community of their dreams back home. Indeed, many migrants wax lyrical about the folkways of the communities they left behind in Estonia, Tunisia, and Uruguay. As whole villages have been emptied out by migrations, the idea of an imaginary commons emerges to absorb the yearning for community. But, the discontent of the displaced, and its resulting—often retrograde—nostalgia, is out of public view. Indeed, it may be that it is when a desire for community is suppressed, an imaginary commons tends to arise as the object of yearning. This yearning then becomes a tool in the hands of conservative forces. This is because, in the brave new world of the market and capitalized self, these yearnings have nowhere else to go. The point here is that this entire scenario is hard to grasp if we only see the world through “market eyes.”

16. To World Bank economists, indicators of social capital are also seen as a sign of “good prospects” for foreign investment in the Third World. But, little analysis is devoted to how immigration erodes the very community and family life—the social capital—they see as the “missing link” in economic development (Fine, 2003; Harriss, 2001; Woolcock, 2001).

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