Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis

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Publication details
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Published online on: 24 May 2012

How to cite:- Ligaya Lindio-McGovern. 24 May 2012, The migration of reproductive labor from the periphery to the core and semiperiphery under neoliberal globalization from: Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis Routledge
Accessed on: 14 Sep 2023

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Part VI
Society
14. Individuals and families
The migration of reproductive labor from the periphery to the core and semiperiphery under neoliberal globalization

Ligaya Lindio-McGovern

Neoliberal globalization has exacerbated class, gender, and racial inequalities between the North and South and within regions (Lindio-McGovern and Wallimann 2009). One of the conceptual sites to examine this pattern is the migration of reproductive labor from the periphery to the core and semiperiphery. Neoliberal globalization is conceived here as the global expansion of capitalism through the promotion of neoliberal policies of deregulation of the market, privatization by dismantling state-owned or state-subsidized enterprises, economic liberalization on the global mobility of capital and goods, and labor flexibilization to create an abundant supply of cheap labor (Lindio-McGovern and Wallimann 2010). Reproductive labor refers to wage labor in households that usually includes the care of children and the elderly members of the household, cooking, cleaning, and other tasks involved in maintaining the household.

Women’s participation in the international labor migration has increased, mainly for economic reasons. Their global migratory flows variably range from 50 to 70 to 80 percent (UNESCO 2006). Globalization has accelerated women’s migration, as it simultaneously demands the cheap labor of Third World women in the “secondary tiers of the manufacturing and service sectors in advanced capitalist countries.” (Parrenas 2000)

The structural adjustment policies of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO in the labor-sending countries result in debt crisis and increased unemployment—creating the precondition for overseas migration and labor export (Lindio-McGovern and Wallimann 2007). How is this precondition created? It is an inherent contradiction of capitalist globalization to create surplus labor in its persistent search for cheap labor. Capitalist imperialism creates surplus labor through its logic of “accumulation of power through dispossession” (Harvey 2007). This is clearly illustrated when transnational corporations acquire land in Third World countries and displace peasants and indigenous communities. It is not a mere historical coincidence when neoliberal states violently preclude agrarian reform that will redistribute land to landless peasants. Land redistribution will diminish the creation of surplus labor that can be made to supply cheap labor in transnational corporations’ agribusiness that largely employ men and in Free Trade Zones that largely employ
women, many from the rural areas. Surplus labor that is not absorbed in this transnational circuit of capital and labor displaced from the local industries destroyed by the dominance of transnational corporations now becomes the potential labor for export—to provide cheap labor for the maintenance of capitalism in the core, in the heartland of empires, and in the New Industrializing Countries. Labor export then becomes a neoliberal instrument to maintain global capitalism, coupled with privatization that opens new spheres for capitalist penetration of the whole world. Men and women are entangled in this circuit, but migrant women’s experiences get complicated as they confront oppression and discrimination based on class, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and immigrant status.

Labor export has “commercialized migration of domestic workers” (UNESCO 2006), resulting in their commodification as governments and employment agencies profit from the trade. This commodification is even more reinforced when their cheap, flexible, and disposable labor in effect subsidizes the privatization of care work in the core and semiperiphery countries.

Women’s migration to domestic work is predominantly from the periphery to the core of the global North, but there is also a trend of regionalization: the flow from poorer countries to richer countries within regions, for example, within East Asia, Southeast Asia (Piper 2003), or southern Africa (Ally 2009). Capitalist globalization is not only reinforcing the inequality between the North and South, but it is also producing inequalities within regions wherein there develops an urban hub where women from poorer countries within regions migrate to work as domestic workers in middle-class or wealthy households. This is exemplified by the migration of Filipino, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, and Nepali women to work as domestic workers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore (Lindio-McGovern and Wallimann 2005) and the black African women from the poorer neighboring countries of southern Africa (Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Bosotho) to the urban hub of Johannesburg, South Africa (Ally 2009).

In conclusion, the increasing migration of women to work as low-waged domestic workers from the periphery to the core and semiperiphery of the global capitalist system is indicative of the growing gendered, raced, and classed inequalities between the North and South and within regions under neoliberal regimes. Therefore, it is still appropriate to talk about core, periphery, and semiperiphery in the dynamics of the world-system, as forms of inequality continue to be configured and reconfigured under capitalist globalization.

References