

Post-Reunification Reconciliation among PINAY Domestic Workers and Adult Daughters in Canada

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Cet article examine l'impact d'une longue séparation dans les familles chez les Pinay, (Filipina) aides familiales domestiques, qui sont venues au Canada via le mouvement des aides domestiques étrangères Foreign Domestic Movement et de leurs filles adultes. Une entrevue en profondeur avec deux femmes Pinay adultes en Ontario et au Québec, a révélé que leur activisme peut devenir un lieu pour reconstruire les relations mères/filles qui ont été auparavant séparées.

The Philippines is one of the largest organized exporters of human labour in the world (San Juan Jr.). The mass exodus of Filipinos to over 190 countries around the globe has resulted in a crisis of care wherein over nine million children have been left behind by their migrant parents (Parreñas). Particularly striking is the disproportionate number of children being left behind by their mothers, a phenomenon which is directly attributable to the high demand for *Pinays* (Filipino women) in the global labour market, mainly in domestic and caregiving work. In Canada, *Pinays*¹ constitute 97 per cent of domestic workers and caregivers (Kelly, García, Esguerra and CASJ). Moreover, Filipinos comprise the third largest immigrant community in the country (Kelly, García, Esguerra and CASJ). While

leading theorists on the subject of migrant domestic labour in Canada have typically focused on the socioeconomic and political struggles of migrant women of colour (Silvera; Giles and Arat-Koc; Macklin; Bakan and Stasiulus), Canadian feminist geographer, Geraldine Pratt and other theorists like Rhacel Salazar Parrenas and Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo have shifted attention to the experiences of the *families* of migrant domestic workers of colour. With the exception of Pratt, no other theorist has attempted to explicitly examine the impact of long-term family separation among *Pinay* migrant domestic workers and their children in Canada.

Understanding Family Separation from the Perspective of Filipino Youth

Pratt, in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of British Columbia (PWC-BC), argues that Filipino youth previously separated from their migrant mothers often express feelings of “betrayal, of vulnerability ... of bewilderment, of inexplicable fear, of not understanding the sudden departure of one’s mother.” These concerns are reflected in my own findings. For example, upon seeing her mother for the first time, one daughter participant narrates:

[When] I saw my Mom in the airport, it felt strange. Of course, we’ve been separated for months and years. She said we were gonna have all these good things [but] she lied. [Canada] wasn’t what I expected.

This participant exposes complicated feelings of estrangement, betrayal, and disappointment upon arriving in Canada. These responses to immediate family reunification are not isolated incidents. As Pratt et al. argue, familial challenges during the reunification period are “not from inherent deficiencies of these particular individuals or families, or within the Filipino community, but as a direct result of the period of family separation regulated by the Live-in Caregiver Program (1992)” and the Foreign Domestic Movement (1981).

The FDM and the Growth of Pinay Activism in Canada

Various recruitment methods have been adopted by the Canadian federal government to encourage the migration of temporary foreign domestic workers of colour to Canada.² Implemented in 1981, the Foreign Domestic Movement (FDM) marked a surge in the recruitment of *Pinay* domestic workers to Canada, founded upon homogenizing

images of Filipino women as docile, meek, and subservient. However, these images are challenged by *Pinay* domestic workers who represent a long and active history of resistance against domestic worker abuse. With the significant increase in *Pinay* domestic workers in Canada, there emerged several vibrant and thriving migrant workers' organizations designed to improve the

migrant domestic workers precarious and thus restricts them from full and active participation in Canadian society. Moreover, such multiculturalist claims refuse to acknowledge the heterogeneous and nuanced lives of *Pinays* who actively fight for the rights and welfare of Filipinos in Canada. It further ignores first and second generations of Filipino immigrant youth who have founded and sustained

"reconciliation" I am referring to the complex process of rebuilding relationships and resolving conflict and tensions between previously separated family members. I use the term "reconciliation" to highlight the ways in which the post-reunification process is marked by a need to rebuild broken relationships and to repair the violence inflicted upon *Pinay* migrant domestic workers

These claims re-create the mythology of Canada as a just, diverse and benevolent nation that "accommodates" the needs of ethnically diverse communities of people when in fact it hides the very ways in which federally regulated programs render the lives of migrant domestic workers precarious.

working conditions of *Pinay* domestic workers in the country including INTERCEDE, *Pinay*, United Filipino Mothers, *Pilipinong Migrante sa Canada* (Philippine Migrants Society of Canada), and the Philippine Women Centres of British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. But this history is masked under Canadian multiculturalist rhetoric that claims to do the following:

assist in the development of strategies that facilitate full and active participation of ethnic and cultural communities ... and improve the ability of public institutions to respond to ethnic and cultural diversity by assisting in the identification and removal of barriers to equitable access and by supporting the involvement of these communities in public decision-making processes. (Kalayaan Centre)

These claims re-create the national mythology of Canada as a just, diverse and benevolent nation that "accommodates" the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse communities of people in Canada when in fact it hides the very ways in which federally regulated programs like the FDM render the lives of temporary *Pinay*

activist organizations in Canada like *Kabataang* Montreal (Montreal Filipino Youth) and *Ugnayan ng Kabataang Pilipino sa Canada* (Filipino Canadian Youth Alliance), which operate primarily to provide programs and services to the children of migrant domestic workers. Offering a glimpse of the racialized recruitment of *Pinay* domestic workers to Canada allows us to see some of the ways in which Canadian temporary foreign worker policies have systematically curtailed the rights of migrant domestic workers of colour and fostered long-term separation from their families.

Defining Post-Reunification Reconciliation

According to FDM stipulations, once foreign domestic workers are granted landed immigrant status, they are legally permitted to sponsor "immediate" family members to join them in Canada.³ This process can often take several months and even years. Once sponsorship applications are approved, children can "reunite" with their mothers. This moment is known as the "reunification" period. When I use the term "post-reunification," I refer to the period of settlement *after* this initial reunion. When I use the term

and their families by the Canadian nation state. It is this period of post-reunification reconciliation between migrant mothers and their adult daughters that I wish to focus on here. Drawing on in-depth interviews with two *Pinay* adult daughters in Ontario and Quebec, this article focuses on how their growth and development as *Pinay* activists during the post-reunification period enabled them to rebuild their lives with their mothers in Canada.

Informants and Research Sites

Each mother participant migrated to Canada as a hired domestic worker under the FDM during the late 1980s, a few years before the Canadian federal government's institutionalization of the present Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). Both adult daughters were sponsored by their mothers in the early 1990s, settling in two major urban centres, Toronto and Montreal. Since most literature on Filipino family reunification in Canada does not address the experiences of children who have settled in Canada beyond the immediate years following reunification, I selected two *Pinay* adult daughter-migrant mother pairs who had been reunited in Canada for over ten years.

Participant Profiles

Lourdes and Aurora

When Lourdes' mother, Aurora, was first illegally recruited to work an alleged three-month contract as a domestic worker in Brunei, she was detained and forced to remain there for roughly six months before being released. In 1986, after completing a two-year contract as a domestic

Post-Reunification Reconciliation and Pinay Youth Activism

It has been 14 years since Chris and Lourdes first arrived in Canada. Over this period of time, each daughter participant acknowledged that the challenges they experienced immediately following reunification had diminished considerably as a result of their involvement in Filipino

[They experience] the confusion, isolation, and family strains common among many immigrant families" (Lejtenyi). KM's commitment to fighting for the rights and welfare of young Filipinos in Canada enabled Lourdes to find meaning and a sense of belonging among a group of Filipino youth who had also experienced family separation. Through KM, Lourdes expresses heightened awareness of her

Chris recognized that her activist work not only established a broader understanding of her own personal, socio-economic, and political challenges in Canada but also empowered her and enabled her to help others work through some of these same challenges.

worker in Singapore, Aurora returned to the Philippines for a brief family visit and in 1988, migrated to Canada under the FDM. After six long years, Lourdes was reunited with her mother. For Lourdes, life in Canada was challenging. She dropped out of school for the first time when she was 17 years old. She worked a series of low-paying jobs until she finally decided to pursue a degree in nursing. Now at 29 years old, Lourdes is married and works full time as a nurse.

Chris and Tessie

When Chris' mother, Tessie, migrated to Singapore as a domestic worker in 1986, Chris was eleven years old. From Singapore, Tessie migrated directly to Canada under the FDM. Tessie and Chris were finally reunited in 1994 when Chris was **nineteen** years old. Adjusting to life in Toronto presented many challenges for Chris. To get away from the recurring arguments and familial tensions, Chris moved to Ottawa for four years but ultimately returned to Toronto in order to remain close to her family. She is now 33 years old and works for a government agency. She lives with her partner and family in a home co-owned with her younger sister.

activist organizations. This is, of course, not the case for all children of *Pinay* migrant domestic workers. Some find it far more difficult to cope with the challenges of family separation many years after reunification. Clinical depression and suicide are more severe examples of what can happen to youth separated from their migrant parents.⁴

Lourdes is a founding member of *Kabataang* Montreal (KM). The Filipino youth outreach group and drop-in centre was formed in Côte-des-Neiges, Montreal in 1999. One of KM's key objectives is to address the needs of an overwhelming number of Filipino youth who have undergone separation from their mothers, often former or current live-in caregivers and domestic workers in Canada. One of the leading members of KM describes the organization as "a progressive, politically active organization that deals with the realities [of] drugs, teen pregnancy, ethnicity, [and] parental problems" (Lejtenyi). As Lourdes confirms: "There's other Filipino youth [groups] but this was the only politically aware organization that's involved [in their] rights and welfare" (Lourdes). According to a cover story in the alternative news-weekly, *The Montreal Mirror*, "Most of the members have similar histories.

situation as one child out of many who had been left behind: "Right now I can relate, I can really understand why it [separation] happened. It's when I joined KM. That's when they explain why the separation had to take place" (Lourdes). Working with KM enabled Lourdes to understand her mother's reasons for leaving the Philippines. Her involvement in mass protests and community projects aimed at fighting against discriminatory Canadian foreign domestic worker policies helped her name her childhood pain and understand the structural causes behind it.

Similarly, adult daughter participant, Chris, explains her own involvement in Filipino advocacy groups as part of an important process of rebuilding her relationship with her mother. She states:

It's a big contribution to my relationship with my Mom. Now she's like a friend. [If] there's some disagreement we can just try and talk—not the yelling. Before it was like, "I disagree and you took me to Canada and I don't want to go here!"

Like Lourdes, Chris' experiences with Filipino advocacy groups strengthened the bonds between

herself and her mother, Tessie. Chris now sees her mother as a friend. Over the course of time, Chris and Tessie have learned to deal with their disagreements in more constructive ways. Chris adds that she was in fact introduced to Filipino community advocacy groups through her mother whose own story of activism is worth highlighting here. Tessie recounts:

I started organizing the United Filipino Mothers just basically to share experiences—your joyful moments, your hurting moments. I did not have any understanding of advocacy. I just see the spirit—that there's power in the community.

Tessie was intent on creating a space where mothers under the FDM could gather to share their experiences, as well as their frustrations. Tessie's advocacy work helped nurture what she calls the "spirit" of the Filipino community in Toronto and encouraged her own daughter to get involved in *Pinay* activist endeavours. Chris affirms:

Introduction to this group of people was through her and also these other support groups. But it was already in me because of what I experienced back home. I thought, "I have to do something."

Chris emphasizes that she already possessed a desire to "do something" for her community based on her own struggles coping with family separation. She further explains: "What helped was my four years of living away from home, trying to find myself, plus more exposure to community building in Ottawa" (Chris). During the four years that Chris lived in Ottawa, she joined a community organization called *Pilipinong Migrante sa Canada* (PMSC). PMSC was formed in 1996 as a support group for Filipino migrants and their families. Chris highlights her leadership role in PMSC:

I got exposed to the Pilipinong Migrante sa Canada or PMSC. I had a good understanding of how it worked because of [what] my Mom went through and so I would give out orientations [and] workshops.

Chris recognized that her activist work not only established a broader understanding of her own personal, socio-economic, and political challenges in Canada as the daughter of a former domestic worker but also empowered her and enabled her to help others work through some of these same challenges. Chris states:

Before it was just too personal but then I got exposed to all these other children who were separated, and parents or mothers who came to the program, and how that wasn't their choice to leave the country or leave the family. I got a better understanding and so, it's solved.

Chris now describes the experience of being separated from her mother as, quite simply, "solved." Moreover, involvement in Filipino-based organizations enabled both Chris and Lourdes to meet others faced with similar struggles, allowing them to feel a greater sense of belonging among fellow community activists. Indeed, many of the relationships that they have built through these organizations are some of their strongest. Significantly, Chris and Lourdes have both found their present partners through their activist work. In the following excerpt, Lourdes describes her relationship to her husband as it relates to their involvement in *KM*:

We have the same story. He was separated from his Mom too so it made our relationship more stronger 'cause we're politically aware of what's going on. If I was dating a guy who's not with KM, it would be difficult.

It is evident that the relationships

Lourdes values most are strengthened by a political awareness around issues faced by migrant Filipino communities. Chris reflects on her own relationships in similar terms: "My friends were the other participants too 'cause I can only relate to children who were born and raised in the Philippines" (Chris).

Lourdes and Chris' participation in the formation and preservation of Filipino community activist organizations in Ontario and Quebec allowed them to thrive in supportive environments surrounded by other Filipinos who have similarly coped with the pain and isolation associated with long-term family separation. Their involvement enabled them to build lasting bonds of friendship with other Filipinos but most importantly, nurtured possibilities of post-reunification reconciliation between themselves and their mothers.

Conclusion

Drawing on in-depth interviews with two *Pinay* adult daughters, this article examined possibilities of post-reunification reconciliation through *Pinay* activism. Lourdes and Chris' involvement in organizations like *KM* and *PMSC* helped them understand the reasons why their mothers left them behind in the Philippines. Being able to name their pain allowed them to rebuild their relationships with their mothers and let go of earlier sentiments of frustration and resentment. Their activist pursuits further encouraged them to meet other Filipino migrant youth thereby nurturing a sense of belonging and empowerment to take on leadership roles in their communities. While most existing literature on Filipino family separation and reunification in Canada have focused on the children of *Pinay* migrant domestic workers, this article focuses on the children of *Pinay* migrant domestic workers as adults. And while analyses on the post-reunification period remain relevant, this article shifts focus

away from post-reunification struggles to post-reunification *reconciliation*. Ultimately, in foregrounding the post-reunification activist endeavours of *Pinay* adult daughters, I expose the ways in which Canadian multiculturalist rhetoric continues to ignore the heterogeneous and nuanced lives of *Pinays* and mask the challenges faced by *Pinay* migrant domestic workers and their families in Canada.

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¹Filipina.

²For an historical analysis of temporary foreign domestic worker schemes in Canada, see Audrey Macklin. "On the Inside Looking In: Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada," *Maid in the Market*. Eds. Wenona Giles and Sedef Arat-Koc. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1994.

³The Canadian government defines the term "family" under Eurocentric terms. In short, Western conceptualizations of the nuclear family ignore the complexities of extended kinship networks among Filipino families.

⁴For more information on depression and suicide as it affects daughters of Filipino immigrant parents in California, see Wolf.

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