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Migration and the accentuated ambivalence of motherhood: the role of ICTs in Filipino transnational families

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Abstract This article is concerned with the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on Filipina transnational mothers' experience of motherhood, their practices of mothering and, ultimately, their identities as mothers. Drawing on ethnographic research with Filipina migrants in the UK as part of a wider study of Filipino transnational families, this article observes that, despite the digital divide and other structural inequalities, new communication technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, allow for an empowered experience of distant mothering. Apart from a change in the practice and intensity of mothering at a distance, ICTs also have consequences for women's maternal identities and the ways in which they negotiate their ambivalence towards work and family life. In this sense, ICTs can also be seen as solutions (even though difficult ones) to the cultural contradictions of migration and motherhood and the 'accentuated ambivalence' they engender. This, in turn, has consequences for the whole experience of migration, sometimes even affecting decisions about settlement and return.

Transnational mothering (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), made increasingly prevalent due to the feminization of migration, is often considered one of the hidden injuries of globalization. What has changed since the intensification of research on transnational families over the past 15 years is the explosion of opportunities for

cheap communication. To the availability of cheap calls through international pre-paid call cards (Vertovec 2004) a plethora of technologies and platforms have been added, notably mobile phones, instant messaging (IM), video-calls through VOIP and social networking sites. This article is concerned with the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on Filipina migrant mothers' assessment of their ability to mother their left-behind children. Have new communication technologies such as the internet and mobile phones changed women's experience of motherhood, their practices of mothering and, ultimately, their identities as mothers? Drawing on ethnographic research with Filipina migrants in the UK as part of a wider multi-sited ethnography of Filipino transnational families, this article will argue that ICTs not only change the practice and the intensity of mothering at a distance, but also have consequences for the way that women see themselves as mothers and the ways in which they negotiate the cultural contradictions of migration and motherhood and the accentuated ambivalence they engender. This, in turn, has consequences for the whole experience of migration, sometimes even affecting decisions about settlement and return.

The article brings together and contributes to the literatures on transnational families, ICT consumption and motherhood with special reference to the Filipino context. Following this discussion I will present the study's methodology together with data on Philippine migration, which exemplifies the phenomenon of transnational mothering (Parreñas 2001). The empirical section of the paper is divided into two parts: the first focuses on the women's own accounts of the 'hidden motivations of migration' which reveal the complexities and contradictions of transnational motherhood and the way in which migration accentuates maternal ambivalence. This context is crucial for understanding migrant mothers' communication with their children, which is explored in the second part of the results section. After presenting how ICTs change mothering practices and women's identities, the paper considers the consequences of transnational communication in the context of migration.

Transnational families, ICTs and the cultural contradictions of Filipino motherhood

Transnational families: towards an ethnographic perspective

Families whose members are temporally and spatially separated have long existed (Thomas and Znaniecki 1984), but transnational motherhood is more recent (Hondagnau-Sotelo and Avila 1997), a consequence of the feminization of migration where women seek employment in the global north, leaving their children behind. An influential approach for understanding transnational families has been the 'care chains' approach (Hochschild 2000; Parreñas 2001) and the related notion of 'care drain' affecting developing countries which experience a 'care deficit' by exporting their mothers and care workers (Hochschild 2000; Widding Isaksen et al. 2008). The work of Parreñas (2001) on Philippine migration has acquired paradigmatic status in exemplifying the connections between different people across the world based on paid or unpaid relationships of care. These care chains are initiated by the demand for domestic and care work in the developed world, while migrant women delegate the care for their own families to other women. This international division of reproductive labour (Parreñas 2001) heightens existing gender hierarchies whilst starving a generation of children of emotional nurturing (Parreñas 2005a).

Gender has been key to understanding dynamics in transnational families. In her study of Filipino left-behind children Parreñas (2005a) noted that when mothers migrate they are expected to perform both the caring and emotional work typically associated with their maternal role, but also take on the traditional male breadwinning role. That globalization and female migration have not challenged traditional gender roles and hierarchies is a finding shared by Hondagnau-Sotelo and Avila (1997) in their study of Latina transnational mothers in California as well as Fresnoza-Flot (2009) in her research with Filipina migrants in Paris, although McKay (2007) and Pingol (2001) have observed a more balanced gendered division of domestic work in Northern Luzon (Philippines) as a result of female migration.

The political economy of care and the feminist critique on which the care chains approach is based have made a significant contribution to the literature on migration, which has been dominated by economic analyses, for example, regarding the motivations for migration. However, the focus of the care chains approach on structural factors does not acknowledge the complexities of transnational mothering and does not grant much agency to migrants themselves. Recognizing their perspective matters, particularly when the research agenda concerns sensitive and emotive issues such as family separation. The research reported in this article adopts an ethnographic perspective which recognizes migrants as reflexive subjects albeit ones positioned in structures of power. For example, crucial for understanding the relationships and communication between mothers and left-behind children is the analysis of the context of migration including the reasons why women migrate in the first place. The bottom-up ethnographic perspective followed here can uncover the contradictory and perhaps less socially acceptable motivations for migration and cast light on the processes through which women negotiate their various roles, identities and relationships.

ICTs: structural asymmetries, dependency and domestication

The challenge of studying ICTs in the context of transnational family relationships is that the technologies themselves are constantly changing and research often seems to be surpassed by technological developments. Just a few years ago, cheap international calling cards were described as 'the social glue of transnationalism' (Vertovec 2004) whilst today in the UK there are specialized mobile telephony networks, which offer the most competitive rates for international calls. Likewise, not long ago, email was the primary platform for transnational communication (Wilding 2006) while today this is almost replaced by instant messaging (IM), videocalling (via VOIP) and social networking sites. Whilst there is an obvious continuity between older and new media, more research is needed to assess the consequences of these new technologies and platforms. As transnational relationships are heavily dependent on new media (most UK-based Filipinos usually visit their families every two years), we urgently need to develop a systematic understanding of the consequences of ICTs on parent–child

relationships. Dependence on ICTs is exacerbated in the cases of irregular migrants who often do not see their families for longer periods (in our sample the longest period without visit was 13 years) (see also Fresnoza-Flot 2009). In such cases ICTs become the only means through which migrant mothers can maintain a relationship with their children.

Research on transnational communication among separated Filipino families has observed that mobile phones actually tie women to their traditional gender roles (Parreñas 2005b), echoing studies about telephone use and the spillover of the domestic into the professional sphere (Rakow and Navarro 1993). Apart from gender inequalities, Parreñas also argues that the political economic conditions of communication determine the quality of transnational intimacy and family life.

As in other developing countries, mobile phones dominate the Philippine media landscape while internet penetration rates remain low due to the scarcity of landlines.[1] In 2006 there were 42 868 911 mobile phone subscribers compared to just over 7 million landlines (most of which in the Capital region) for a population of approximately 88.5 million (National Statistical Coordination Board 2007: 1324). Mobile internet represents an alternative, albeit an expensive one for working or lower middle class families.[2] Thus there is an asymmetry as to who has access to and who can benefit from the developments in ICTs. Of course, the other conspicuous asymmetry is between the Philippines and the UK. For those without easy access to the internet, international calling from the Philippines is prohibitively expensive and therefore the opportunities to initiate communication with a significant other abroad are limited.

However, structural parameters such as gender and the political and economic conditions of the global telecommunications industry cannot fully explain the consequences of ICTs for the lives of the Filipino mothers. In assessing the impact of transnational communication and in line with the ethnographic perspective outlined above, the article draws on the rich tradition of consumption and domestication of

ICTs (Horst and Miller 2006; Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). Consumption, while embedded in economic and other structural conditions such as gender and class, is understood as an active meaning-making process through which individuals appropriate technologies and negotiate their identities. The ethnographic perspective adopted here is also informed by the political and economic analyses of migration and communications as the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but supplement each other.

The cultural contradictions of Filipino motherhood

In order to assess the impact of ICTs on mothering practices and maternal identities as this article aims to do, we need a closer discussion of motherhood. Being a mother is defined by being in a particular 'historically and culturally variable' relationship 'in which one individual nurtures and cares for another' (Glenn 1994: 3). Far from subscribing to any notions of universal motherhood, this article recognizes that motherhood is embedded in social and cultural codes (see Glenn and Chang 1994; Scheper-Hughes 1993) as is the meaning and social value of childhood (Zelizer 1994). The institution of the family is very important in the Philippines as acknowledged in academic studies and also in political and everyday discourse (Asis et al. 2004). Filipino families are often extended and tightly knit as is typical in systems of bilateral, or cognatic kinship (Cannell 1999; Medina 2001). Family relationships are cemented through reciprocal exchanges which create strong bonds of debt and obligation. Family members will promote family interests and it has been argued that migration is often a household rather than an individual strategy (Asis et al. 2004), even though recent research has suggested that motivations for migration are increasingly individualized (although often justified as family strategies [Asis et al. 2004]). The institution of the family fills the gap left by the lack of state institutions (for example, welfare, social security and childcare) providing support in their absence. Because of the closeness of extended families it is common for children to be looked after by the wider family, members of which will often live in great proximity.

Filipino society and family life are marked by traditional gender roles with mothering assumed as a clearly gendered activity (Parreñas 2005a). Mothers are popularly referred to as 'the light of the home' [*Ilaw ng tahanan*] (Arellano-Carandang 2007; Asis et al. 2004) and are assumed as natural caregivers. At first instance such traditional gender roles coupled with the social value of the institution of the family would seem at odds with the state-sponsored female migration and the attendant family separation. However, it is the closeness of family bonds which can explain one of the reasons why women migrate in the first place. By going abroad women can actually care by providing for the extended family and therefore fulfil their roles and related obligations as daughters, eldest sisters (*ates*) and mothers. McKay (2007) has argued that sending remittances is a way of caring and showing emotion towards one's family. This is particularly the case when migration is a family strategy. But even when motivations to migrate are personal, fulfilling one's family obligations is always a ready, and widely accepted, justification for going abroad. At the same time, many of the women who migrate are aware that their children will be looked after by their family network and are often confident about the quality of the care arrangements. In fact, there is a long tradition of internal migration when women from rural areas leave their children behind with their own mothers, or other relatives in order to seek work as domestics in urban centres. It is thus possible to argue that because they are very close to their families, women are able to migrate.

At the same time there is clear evidence to suggest that the dominant and normative (often referred to as the Western) model of motherhood and mothering is also present in the Philippines. Mothering is seen as a natural female practice and traditionally recognized as the mother's prime responsibility. It is thus not surprising that Parreñas refers to the 'ideology of intensive mothering' (Hays 1997) to argue that Filipina transnational mothers 'expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money to raise their children' (Hays 1997: x). Although arguably notions of intensive mothering may apply primarily to middle-class and urban families rather than to rural Philippines, where there are notable variations (see Cannell 1999), it is precisely middle-class women who are most likely to migrate (Constable 1999), although the

notion of middle class in the Philippines does not entail the same degree of security as in Europe or the USA (Parreñas 2001). Contrary to popular perceptions of migrants as coming from situations of destitute poverty, it is well documented that it is those who already possess the economic, social and cultural capital who can undertake the project of migration (Portes and Rumbaut 2006).[3] The prevalence of this dominant understanding of mothering as a highly gendered practice and of motherhood as women's primary identity can perhaps be explained by the dominance of the Catholic Church in the Philippines and the legacies of colonialism. Moreover, Filipina women (and men) become exposed to Western models of parenting through migration while exposure to Western popular culture and the normative representations of motherhood may also be a contributing factor. All these reasons can explain why the feminization of migration and the 'left-behind children', roughly estimated around 9 million in 2004 (Parreñas 2005a), are seen as one of the hidden injuries of migration prompting the establishment of charities and organizations dedicated to addressing this phenomenon.

The accentuated ambivalence of transnational mothers

Literature on motherhood has often taken the perspective of the child, driven by a concern to examine the impact of maternal behaviour on children's development. This has been the feminist criticism of psychoanalysis and developmental psychology (Parker 2005: 15-18). This research recognizes that women who are mothers are not just that, but subjects with multiple identities and needs. The juggling of these different roles and identities is often a source of tension which may translate into ambivalence. Although most writing on ambivalence is located within psychoanalysis (Hollway and Featherstone 1997; Parker 2005), I use the term to refer to the opposing pulls towards work and home which are socially entrenched, resulting in what Hays (1997) terms the 'cultural contradictions of motherhood'.

I argue that ambivalence is particularly relevant to the experience of migration. For mothers with left-behind children, migration can exacerbate their maternal ambivalence due to the deterritorialization of mothering. While ambivalence is a

normal state for many mothers (Hays 1997), most negotiate their contradictory roles as workers and mothers and the related feeling of ambivalence in the context of everyday life. For migrant mothers such negotiation is more challenging because work and mothering are spread across different countries and continents. While the children are in the Philippines, in the case of the present study, work (and the fulfilment it offers) is in the UK. I argue that Filipina migrant mothers experience a form of 'accentuated ambivalence' precisely because of this deterritorialization. The following sections, which aim to illustrate the contours of transnational mothering from the bottom-up, will explore the ways in which mothers negotiate this 'accentuated ambivalence' and the role that ICTs play in this process.

Empirical focus and the study's method

The Philippines arguably exemplifies the phenomenon of feminized migration with over 10 percent of the population working abroad and more than a million new emigrants – the majority of them women – being deployed each year. As a large proportion of these women are already mothers, their migration involves separation from their children. What makes the Philippine case almost unique is that the state actively sponsors overseas migration through concrete policies (Acacio 2008; Asis 2005). Remittances, which account for over 10 percent of the country's GDP, making the Philippines one of the world's highest remittance-recipient countries (Jha et al. 2009), reached $16.5 billion in 2008 (POEA 2009), a record figure to date despite the global economic crisis and the slight decline in Overseas Filipino Workers [OFW] numbers from previous years.

The current official estimate for overseas Filipinos is 8 187 710 (POEA 2009), but there is evidence to support that this number may be considerably higher.[4] Recent years have seen a growth in female migration for nursing, care and domestic work (POEA 2008). In 2006 the Philippine government met its official target of deploying over one million migrants (new hires and rehires) (Asis 2008), while in 2008 annual deployment exceeded 1.2 million. More than half of these migrants are deployed on fixed-term contracts which require renewal. These types of temporary contract

together with other structural and legal factors make it difficult for women to be joined by their families.[5]

The official estimate for 2008 is that there were 203 497 Filipinos in the UK (POEA 2009), making it the sixth most popular destination (POEA 2008), although according to interviews with officials from the telecommunications industry, incoming call traffic from the UK to the Philippines indicates a larger population suggesting a high presence of undocumented migrants. Although the Philippine government has no bilateral agreement with the UK, which means that Filipino migrants often come to the UK following their own social networks, the British National Health Service (NHS) recruited nurses systematically from the Philippines between the late 1990s and mid 2000s. Since the NHS stopped recruiting from the Philippines, Filipinos have come to the UK on student visa schemes which involve a combination of training and up to 20 hours of work per week in care homes for which students receive the minimum wage. Finally, a significant proportion of UK-based Filipinas are employed as domestic workers and nannies. Figures from 2002 suggest that at least 50 percent of the UK Filipino population was female (Asis 2005).

The research reported in this article is based on a long-term (2007-2009) ethnography and in-depth interviews with 52 Filipina domestic workers and nurses in London and Cambridge, most of whom are mothers with children in the Philippines and most of whom arrived in the UK following stints in the Middle East or Hong Kong. 28 of these participants arrived in the UK between 1973 and the mid-1990s, while the rest came after 2000. The majority of participants were documented although more had experienced visa problems at some point during their migration. The average number of children per mother was 2.43 (a considerable drop from the average number of siblings per participant, which was 6.04) and the average period of separation was 15.65 years. This first research phase was followed by fieldwork in the Philippines during 2008/9 where, together with Daniel Miller, we interviewed the (now young adult) children of these mothers as well as other left-behind children (53 in total). On returning from the Philippines we re-interviewed and maintained contact with 12 of

our initial participants. This article draws on data from the first and third research phases with migrant mothers while the comparisons between all three phases are developed in other publications (see Madianou and Miller 2011a). The longitudinal dimension in this study has been crucial as it was during the actual research fieldwork that several of our participants adopted ICTs and began to use them for communicating with their children. In total 105 participants (several of whom more than once) were interviewed and the sample contains 20 full pairs of mothers and children. Apart from interviews with mothers and children, whilst in the Philippines we also interviewed representatives from government and migration agencies, advocacy groups and telecommunications companies. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and analysed thematically.

The hidden motivations for emigration and settlement

The reasons why women migrate and why they so often choose to prolong migration are crucial for understanding their relationship to their children, their self-identity and the role ICTs might play in this process. Contrary to popular perceptions and influential approaches such as neoclassic economics and world systems theory (Massey et al. 1993), this research has found that economic motivations, albeit crucial, are not the sole catalysts for migration and in some cases they are even secondary. Parreñas (2001) has already identified some of these 'hidden causes' of Filipino migration, which have not received much attention in the literature. This section will highlight one such hitherto unrecognized cause, which is the importance of personal motivations including a desire for recognition and self-improvement. Such personal reasons acquire even greater significance in shaping decisions about settlement, which will also be explored here.

The first observation when looking into motivations for migration is that several of our participants have migrated a number of times to different destinations (usually the Middle East, or Hong Kong) before coming to the UK. Sometimes these serial migrations are seamless, in that one directly follows the other; in other cases they are interrupted by a stint in the Philippines. A woman may often migrate to the Middle

East on a two-year contract, return to the Philippines, have children and then migrate again to the Middle East and from there to London. The reasons for each migration are usually different and depend on the point in each woman's life cycle.

For example, Edith, a college graduate, first migrated as a nanny to Qatar in order to help her younger siblings. After four years in Qatar she 'got bored' and applied to go to Hong Kong. During one of her visits home she got married to her husband whom she then saw every two years when she renewed her contracts. In 1993 at the age of 39 Edith decided to have a child and went back to the Philippines where she eventually had a daughter, Evelyn. Edith left again for Hong Kong when her daughter was nine months old. At that time her daughter was taken care of by her husband and a *yaya* (nanny), a care arrangement typical of the 'care chains approach' (Parreñas 2001) while Edith continued to visit for one month every two years. When the daughter turned six, Edith decided to return to the Philippines to help Evelyn with school. When Evelyn turned 11, the family encountered hardship so at the age of 51 Edith decided to return to Qatar, 'an easier destination than Hong Kong' where 'one spends too much money'. Although she had applied for jobs in the Philippines, she was unsuccessful because of her age and the lack of 'a political backer'. Leaving wasn't an easy decision for Edith. '[I]t's so painful to leave my daughter [...] so hard to explain to her that I had to go. I had no money to send her to school if I didn't go. I send my daughter to a Montessori private school because I want a good education. It's so expensive.' From Qatar, Edith followed her employers to London, which she describes as the 'greatest blessing of her life'. In Qatar she earned 200 US dollars a month, which is half her London weekly wage. She may earn more now, but she also helps more people, paying her nephews' and nieces' school fees and plans to be in London at least until her daughter finishes college in seven years.

Edith's life history reveals a myriad of reasons for migrating or prolonging migration, different for each period of her life. As a single woman and eldest daughter, Edith had to fend for her siblings. Constrained by her low wages as a civil servant, her only option was to migrate even if that meant downward social mobility in terms of her

education. At the same time, her move from Qatar to Hong Kong was driven by her
desire to discover a 'more exciting' place. After motherhood her obligations further
increased while the demands of her now extended kin multiplied. Even though she
returned home to devote herself to her daughter's upbringing, economic, social and
cultural reasons forced her to apply for another contract at the age of 51 when it was
impossible to find a job in the Philippines. Although economic need is a very
significant factor, it cannot solely explain Edith's persistence in going and staying
abroad. For her, being in London is a 'blessing' and despite her daughter's recent
school problems, she does not intend to return. She feels she can help her family
better through her remittances. Moreover, to return to the Philippines would mean
giving up her empowered status as the relative who helps the family, and the resultant
respect.

Economic motivations for migration are the most commonly reported in the literature
for obvious reasons. The diversity of the OFW experience means that the precise
nature of economic need to be fulfilled by migration varies widely. While some
women migrate because of urgent needs (for example, facing debts, or crippling
health bills), for most the prime motivations are the desire to afford better (private)
education for their children and a bigger family house. Linked to both is often a desire
to increase one's status. The extent to which these goals are achieved is a separate
discussion explored elsewhere (Madianou and Miller 2011a), but it should be noted
here that for some, such as those who arrive to the UK on student visas, migration can
turn out to be a false calculation. Such schemes require hefty agency and visa fees,
plus money for airfare, course registration and tuition. Given that students can only
work for up to 20 hours a week on the minimum wage, it can easily take them two
years or longer just to break even before beginning to save any substantial amount.

Economic reasons are closely linked to other structural factors such as the lack of
employment opportunities in the Philippines. Gender inequalities, evident in
relationship breakdown and the attendant financial strain on women who are expected
to look after the children, as well as domestic violence and abuse were the other major
motivations which have been recognized (Parreñas 2001) as 'hidden causes' of

migration. Relationship breakdown as a motivation for migration is a case where personal and structural reasons converge. Remarkably, several of our participants experienced highly abusive relationships before emigrating. Vicky told us that her family lived relatively comfortably with her husband's policeman salary and her own as a teacher. She would not have emigrated had it not been for the collapse of her relationship. But it would have been impossible for her as a single mother to sustain her children and she would have had to depend on the generosity of her in-laws who either wanted her to tolerate her husband's antics or to go abroad. Even her own parents encouraged her to migrate: 'My mother said, "You go abroad and try to make things for you, perhaps you will be happier there".' The fact that divorce is still almost practically impossible in what is a deeply Catholic country means that many women have few options when they find themselves in abusive, humiliating, or unsatisfactory relationships.

One of the recurrent themes in several life histories was women's desire for self-improvement, which is not a commonly acknowledged motivation for migration in the literature. Several participants expressed a frustration and dissatisfaction with their lives in the Philippines prior to migrating. This frustration often arose as a consequence of the gendered division of labour. Several of our participants were graduates whose successful careers as teachers, nurses and administrators came to an end when they had children. Greta, for example, resigned from her job as a teacher after becoming a mother as she could not afford childcare.

> And I was in the house, taking care of the children. […] I missed my job. I was always upset. Always not in the mood. I was telling myself that my degree was wasted. My brother [in London] said I have a friend here looking for a domestic helper, and he was […] a diplomat. He can easily get people from the Philippines.

So when Greta's family ran into difficulties following her husband's redundancy and her son's health problems and concomitant medical bills, she 'found the courage' to follow her brother in London to work as a domestic for the diplomat's family. Even

though as a domestic she was doing precisely the same chores as a housewife in the Philippines, she did not feel that her degree was wasted, but rather felt appreciated and valued. What mattered to Greta was her new-found recognition and appreciation among her family in the Philippines who now consult her on every single decision. Since meeting her, Greta has trained as a childminder and received an English Language diploma, qualifications which have allowed her to work in childcare, which she describes as the 'dream of her life'.

Similarly, Nelia also felt frustrated that her husband had actively prevented her from returning to work after giving birth to their son. So when she heard about the possibility of a direct-hire nanny job in Taiwan she took the decision to go before telling her husband, who eventually gave in. Nelia stayed in Taiwan for one year and then followed her employers to London where we met her working as a domestic. Just like Edith and Greta, even though she is overqualified for her job, she sees being in London as an opportunity not only to make money, but also improve her skills by taking English and IT lessons. This desire for self-improvement and the new-found sense of personhood is a significant factor in women's decision to prolong migration and often eventually settle in the UK, however painful the separation from their families. Although several participants hoped to bring their families over, few had been able to achieve that. This was easier for nurses and particularly difficult for live-in domestics who cannot afford rented accommodation unless they change their job situation. Ironically, by the time the mothers are in a position to bring their families over it is no longer possible for the now adult children to get visas as dependents.

Of course, these personal ambitions should not be interpreted as selfish desires as they are coupled with economic need and a strong sense of obligation that is fulfilled by the sending of remittances and, as we will see later, communication. What Nelia, Greta and many other of our participants share is a tension between their roles as mothers and their identities as women. The difference for these transnational mothers is that, because of the lack of employment opportunities in the Philippines and other structural push factors, they cannot reconcile this tension easily. Their jobs (and the

respect and satisfaction they derive from them) are in England, while their children remain in the Philippines. I call this deterritorialized ambivalence, 'accentuated maternal ambivalence' to highlight the particularly challenging nature of reconciling the two identities that seem to pull our informants in two directions. Similarly, that personal reasons contribute to decisions to migrate should not be seen as a confirmation of what some Filipino commentators would call 'bad mothering' (Parreñas 2008). On the contrary, all our participants were deeply affected by their separation from their children, often becoming very emotional when the conversation turned to them. Their ambivalence is not evidence for their lack of love, but precisely the opposite: these mothers love their children and often migrate because of a desire to provide for their children. At the same time, their own personal desires and fulfilment which comes through work can only be pursued by being away from their children. That the Philippine government explicitly gives mixed messages to mothers 'to be good carers' and 'to serve the country as heroines of the economy' (Parreñas 2008) only exacerbates the double bind which women find themselves in.

The difference that ICTs make

Intensive mothering at a distance

Every evening at about 10pm GMT when it is 6am in the Philippines, Donna, a care-home worker on a student visa in Cambridge, videocalls her husband and two eldest sons, aged 12 and 10, whilst they are having breakfast and getting dressed for school. Early mornings used to be Donna's favourite time when she was back home. Now she will always make sure she is in front of her screen at that time in order to admire her sons in their school uniforms. This is the time when she asks about school and gives them advice on their homework. After videocalling her husband and sons, Donna videocalls her mother who looks after her eight-month old daughter. She asks her mother about how her daughter slept and what she will eat. She sings songs to her daughter and they often play peek-a-boo. Donna can stay up for hours chatting to her mother and playing with her daughter, but the thought of her early shift finally forces her to quit the call and go to bed. When she wakes up in the morning the first thing is

to check for her sons' texts. She made them promise before she left that they would text her at least once every day and she sends them extra money for this purpose. They text her on her roaming phone which is the only affordable way to send an SMS message from the Philippines to the UK. Donna almost always texts her second son to remind him to take his asthma medication. Donna will then call her husband and mother to ask about how their day has been. If they are at home she will video-call them briefly before going to work. And then she will briefly call again during her break at work just to say *Kumusta* [how are you]. During Sundays, when all her siblings visit their mother she will videocall and talk to everyone, including her husband and sons. They often leave the camera on for hours, sometimes even eight hours. Donna knows what her children have for dinner and what they do at school. She is heavily involved in the Facebook role-playing game 'café world' where she 'owns' her own café. Donna has made one of her sons her 'virtual employee' and they also interact daily through this online game.

Donna's intensive mothering extends to her attempts to monitor her sons' activities from a distance. She has both her sons' Facebook and email passwords and once a week she will check their accounts to monitor what they have been involved in. She justifies this as her way to check on them from a distance. To date nothing worrying has come up, but Donna regularly asks her husband and mother to make sure they keep an eye on the boys and ask their teachers about their performance.

However, not all our participants have regular access to the internet. Those whose families in the Philippines do not have landlines, which usually translates to no internet access at home, resort to mobile phone communication which entails a higher cost. Moreover, not all UK participants were digitally literate, or with easy access to a PC. This would mostly be the case for live-in domestic workers who would mainly access the internet through cafes or the Centre for Filipinos in London and for whom mobile phones represent the bridge to their families, but also their social networks (Madianou and Miller 2011b; see Merla and Baldassar 2008 on how occupation constrains transnational communication). Nelia calls her family several times a day as

will Judy and both reported significant budget issues, having spent at times up to £400 per month on phone bills and telephone cards (although a more typical average is £150- £200, still high for their salaries). However, the recent emergence of UK networks dedicated to international calls at competitive rates (usually 10p / minute) has made a difference.

The difference between being able to use the internet or not is not just a matter of higher cost incurred by mothers. It makes a significant difference to their families in the Philippines for whom calling is prohibitively expensive. The only way in which children can initiate communication with their mothers is by sending an SMS on their roaming phones. According to interviews with telecommunications officials the ratio of inbound/outbound calling between the Philippines and the UK is 7:1 and this communicative asymmetry was at times a source of frustration for some of the left-behind families. Internet access corrects this asymmetry significantly. Even though the cost of internet connection is higher in the Philippines than in the UK, those with internet access can reach their relatives abroad with the same ease that their relatives can reach them.

For those mothers who have access to numerous platforms, mothering, in the words of Donna, has become 'more complete' as each technology is used for different purposes (see Madianou and Miller 2011a). Video-calling is particularly popular and successful with the parenting of younger children as the visual aspect better meets both children's and mothers' needs. For example, mothers use video-calling for specific practices, such as helping with homework and generally for generating 'a feeling of co-presence', especially when they leave the camera on for hours. Mothers whose children are older prefer phone calls especially when they wish to discuss family problems, or money. Generally, even for mothers who are regular internet users, mobile phones remain the preferred medium when it comes to understanding how their children 'really are' and for conveying depth of feeling. Mothers also prefer mobile phones because of their synchronicity and mobility as calls do not need to be planned in advance, which suits their busy schedules and allows for some spontaneity.

Texting often has a phatic function, an emotional reminder of the distant significant other, while social networking sites, such as Facebook or Friendster, provide context and an opportunity to share children's social life, although that is not uncontested as Donna's earlier example suggests. Although 'intensive mothering' is performed by mothers who only use mobile phones, the combination of different ICTs, each offering additional cues and structuring communication differently, seem to empower women to perform mothering in ways that suit them.

Although generally welcomed by mothers, the proliferation of ICTs does not just solve relationship problems: on the contrary, it may allow for the emergence of problems, or often amplify conflicts. In the past, because communication was infrequent and asynchronous, it was easy to conceal problems; now, such concealment has become more difficult. In fact, our interviews suggest that in previous decades the main purpose of letter-writing was to reassure the family that 'all-is-well'. Mothers did not want to divulge the difficulties of life abroad so as not to burden their families, whilst children recall being told by relatives to only focus on good news so as not to sadden their mothers who are working so hard. Although not wanting to burden one's family is still valued today, the constant and interactive nature of communication (not just with one's children, but a number of relatives) has made hiding problems more difficult, although, of course, still possible as other studies have observed (Baldassar 2007: 399). When Mimi's son, Raul, dropped out of high school it was impossible for her not to find out as she chats with her children on Yahoo Messenger everyday where she immediately noticed that her son was online when he was supposed to be at school. But even if ICTs make conflict more present in parenting, mothers often accept it as an inevitable aspect of parenting, suggesting that ICTs allow for a more 'real' experience of mothering. For mothers, knowing is about being in control, which is preferable to the past situation. Transnational communication often emerges as a struggle as each family member tries to control communication, and thus their end of their relationship, by taking advantage of each medium's affordances.

The main instances when the communicative opportunities afforded by ICTs are experienced as a burden by the mothers is when the requests for help from other family members proliferate, something which can become a source of stress. Of course, most women, especially those with younger children, agree that the most difficult aspect of ICTs in the context of separation is the realization that they cannot actually hug, kiss or smell their children. Although one can simulate a situation of co-presence through having a meal in front of a webcam, the experience falls short of being physically present and this realization is painful for mothers, who often cry after a video-calling session.

Developments in ICTs have changed the way that women can mother at a distance. Mothering is practiced intensely with women doing most of the caregiving and emotional work (Parreñas 2005a), which is associated with the traditional gender roles present in the Philippines. At one level this finding is in agreement with Parreñas' observations about how mobile phones tie women to gender hierarchies and perpetuate gender inequality despite the fact that through migration they are also the primary household breadwinners. Yet women themselves say that they find this ability to micromanage their households and control their children's upbringing empowering. They feel they now have a better idea of where their remittances are spent. While we have several examples of how women in the past returned to the Philippines only to find their children wearing the same old clothes despite their mothers' hard toil and remittances, such examples of deception and abuse do not seem to be as common today when women can ask their children directly how much money they received and even see them online.

Maternal identities and ambivalence
Apart from being empowered through being 'in control' and from being able to perform mothering in a more 'complete' way than in the past, mothers take pleasure from seeing their children and from being recognized as the ones who care and provide. This is linked to their identities as mothers. One of the most poignant moments in several interviews with mothers who had first migrated before the ICT

explosion was when they described their first visit back home (in our sample on average 2.6 years after leaving) and their deep sadness when their then young children no longer recognized them. When Vicky first returned to the Philippines after six years, her children called her 'auntie' while they called their grandmother '*inay*' (mother). Likewise, Elisa, who had left when her son was 10 months old returned two years later to find that he no longer recognized her. She was devastated that he cried whenever he was left alone with her. Although Vicky and Elisa managed to re-establish a rapport with their children, they described their experience of 'mothering' as incomplete. Sandra, whose six-year old daughter ordered her to return to Hong Kong during one of her visits, said, 'I gave to them whatever I wanted, but my presence. I didn't feel [like] a complete mother.' Mothers, especially those with younger children, experienced a sense of failure in their role as mothers, encapsulated in this rejection.

Contrast this with the situation today when Donna proudly announces that her eight-month old daughter, whom she left when she was six weeks old and whom she sees daily through webcam, points to the PC screen when her *lola* (grandmother) asks 'where is your *ma*?' Donna tells me that her daughter does not confuse her mother with other female relatives and always smiles when she sees Donna's wedding picture in her *lola's* sitting room. For Donna, apart from her own desire to admire her baby daughter growing up during this period of rapid transformation, the fact that her daughter recognizes her as her mother through the webcam is also a confirmation of Donna's own identity as a mother. Being able to reclaim their identity as mothers is something which matters a lot to the women I worked with and something which extends beyond the performance of dedicated mothering.

For mothers who had migrated before the recent explosion of communicative opportunities, ICTs represent a chance to feel like mothers again. In this context it is not surprising that once they access these technologies they often go on what we can call a 'communicative binge', frequently texting, calling or video-calling their loved ones. Whether this is welcomed by their children is a different matter explored

elsewhere (Madianou and Miller 2011a), but the gap opened up during the period when communication was scarce often proves hard to fill. For those who left after the mobile phone boom, keeping in touch has always been taken for granted and it is perhaps not surprising that women themselves referred to ICTs and the possibility to communicate and see their children as one factor when making the decision to migrate. All participants viewed communication with their children as their duty and as important as sending remittances.

When I asked Nelia, whose story we discussed earlier, whether migration had been the right decision given that she missed her son so much she said: 'Yeah, for me it's the right decision because if I was still there I might have lots of children, but my life might involve just staying at home and not having time for myself. I've [achieved] more here. As long as I support them. I give them what they need, and I keep calling them.'

Nelia's quotation sums up the ambivalence at the centre of several women's experiences. On the one hand, she feels valued and respected for her work in London, not just by her employers, but also by her family in the Philippines. This respect and fulfilment coupled with her family's continued economic need make her think that her return to the Philippines is unlikely. Like Edith earlier, Nelia describes coming to London as 'a blessing'. At the same time, Nelia loves and misses her nine-year old son, often crying when talking about him. Nelia is torn in two. Her identity as a breadwinner and independent worker is at odds with her identity as a caring mother. What makes this conflict particularly salient is that the two identities are spread geographically across two continents. Work is (and can only be) abroad, while her child is in the Philippines. As a live-in domestic she cannot afford to bring her son over, unless she finds a regular job paid well enough to allow her to bring over and support her family in London. This geographical splitting is what accentuates Nelia's maternal ambivalence in the sense that it cannot be negotiated in a situation of co-presence. Thus ICTs do not just allow for the performance of intensive mothering at a distance; they are also the main vehicles for the negotiation of this ambivalence. If

women return to the Philippines, they will be with their children but lose the economic capital and autonomy that comes through work; staying abroad is one way of reconciling both, given that they can, from their point of view, mother at a distance. ICTs are crucial in this regard and it is not surprising that women refer to the new communicative opportunities when they justify their decisions to prolong migration. This is not to say that ICTs are responsible in determining migration patterns, but that they have become a justification for such decisions points to an important, yet so far unacknowledged, aspect of their power.

Conclusion

This article has investigated the consequences of ICTs for Filipina transnational mothers. In order to do so, we first explored the contours of transnational motherhood and female migration, unearthing the often hidden and contradictory motivations for female emigration. I have argued that migration accentuates the ambivalence of motherhood by deterritorializing the opposing pulls between work and family. This discussion opened the way for understanding the difference new media make for transnational mothers. We saw that ICTs allow for the practicing of intensive mothering at a distance, empowering women to be in control of their households and children's upbringing. Asymmetries in digital literacy, both transnationally and nationally, have implications for the type and cost of distant care, affording more opportunities to those with access to internet-based platforms. However, intensive mothering is also performed though the widely available mobile phones which represent a significant improvement from the past situation when communication was asynchronous and prohibitively expensive. Notwithstanding cost issues, mobile phones are actually the mothers' most preferred medium for gauging emotion and expressing depth of feeling. Here I have only examined the consequences of ICTs for migrant mothers and, therefore, do not argue that transnational communication is always successful, or symmetrically experienced by those left-behind (Madianou and Miller 2011a).

Even though the frequency of communication through ICTs can often involve conflict and disappointment, for mothers it represents a more realistic experience of mothering and an opportunity to 'feel like mothers' again. In this sense, ICTs have implications not only for practices of mothering, but also for maternal identities, suggesting that transnational communication cannot simply be understood as confirmation of asymmetrical gender relationships (Parreñas 2005b). I have argued that ICTs have become pivotal in the negotiation of the 'accentuated ambivalence' of migrant women by allowing them to maintain and negotiate a plurality of roles and identities across distances. Hence, ICTs can also be seen as solutions (albeit painful) to the cultural contradictions of migration and motherhood. Evidence suggests that ICTs feature increasingly in women's justifications for settlement and return, pointing to the inextricable way in which migration is linked to transnational communication.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Data for internet users are not readily available. The latest official figures for subscriptions to registered ISPs are from 2004 when there were 1.2 million subscribers (NTC 2010). According to media reports, the industry estimates users between 24 and 35 million, that is anything between 30 and 44 percent of the population. According research by AC Nielsen most users (70 percent) access the internet from cafes. http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/250369/philippine-internet-numbers last accessed 30 July 2010

2 For example, in early 2009 a dongle cost 2,800 PHP excluding the connection cost. At that time, a teacher's monthly salary was around 8,000 PHP.

3 For many Filipinos migration represents downward social mobility offset by an increase in financial status – what Parreñas terms 'contradictory class mobility' (2001: 150).

4 For example, interviews with telecom officials based on inbound/outbound call traffic roughly estimate irregulars as 30 percent of the whole, bringing the total to approximately 12 million.

5 The Philippine government has bilateral agreements with receiving countries to provide workers on limited-time contracts.

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