CHAPTER 5

The Road from Home: Women’s Autonomy, Migration, and the Trapping Mechanism

For most women in developing countries, the decision to work abroad does not come easily. Married women often worry whether their husband will stay faithful and whether their children will be well looked after and able to cope emotionally with their mother’s absence. Single women worry about their elderly parents or younger siblings. The risks of abuse and harassment by foreign employers also cast a shadow on their decisions. In fact, most women perceive migration as a major life-changing event, and thus spend quite a long time contemplating it.

Once their mind is set, however, they become determined to go. Some women migrate over the objections of their parents or husbands. Others do not even consult with other household members. Miriam, a cheerful woman in her early thirties, did not tell her husband she was going abroad until the day of her departure because she thought he would object. With a laugh, she said: “I woke him up early in the morning and said I was going to Malaysia for two years on that day. He was shocked and was trying to stop me, but it was too late!”

While Miriam’s was a rather extreme case, many accounts of migrant women revealed the importance of examining their autonomy in the analyses of international migration. In major source countries of migrant women such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka, most women made their own decisions about migration instead of passively accepting the decisions of others. By contrast, in Bangladesh, from which fewer women emigrate, women had less autonomy over their decision-making. Clearly, then, women’s autonomy and decision-making power are central to the causal mechanism of international female migration. Indeed, as discussed earlier, macro-policies alone
cannot determine patterns of migration because they cannot dictate individual behavior. Women do not simply subject themselves to state policies; they think and act on their own, sometimes in defiance of the state. Women’s agency therefore has to be integrated into the analytical framework.

This chapter shifts the focus from macro-policies to micro-individuals and highlights the role of the migrant women themselves in emigration processes. First it examines the “faces” of migrant women by presenting their socioeconomic profiles and ideal types. Then it scrutinizes the socialization processes undergone by migrants. The roles that social networks play and the effects of “migration culture” on individual women are elucidated. The third section of this chapter analyzes the impact of women’s autonomy on decisions to migrate. It discusses how gender roles and women’s autonomy within households determine patterns of international female migration. Finally, this chapter puts forward a concept that I call “trapping mechanisms,” which lead migrant women to extend their overseas stays, or migrate more than once, or both. Some migrant women return home before the end of the contract because of maltreatment or for other reasons, but the majority of them stay longer than they had initially planned, and take up another contract again to work abroad. The reasons why migrant women become “trapped” in the destination country or migrate repeatedly—the phenomenon called “circular migration”—will also be investigated.

**Migrant Women: Who Are They?**

The monolithic image of migrant women is that they are poor, rural, and uneducated. However, in actuality, they constitute a quite diverse group. They come from various socioeconomic backgrounds, with much depending on which country they are from and which one they are migrating to. Filipinas are at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy of migrant women in Asia; they tend to be better educated and to have more professional experience, and as a consequence, they tend to make higher wages in their destination countries. By contrast, Bangladeshi migrant women occupy the lowest rungs in terms of educational and professional background and, it follows, wage levels. This section is based mainly on my field survey of 116 migrant women from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.¹ As discussed earlier, far fewer Bangladeshi women emigrate abroad than Filipina and Sri Lankan women. The ban on emigration of domestic workers was still in place at the time of my fieldwork. Hence, my sample for Bangladesh is very small—only eleven migrant women. For this reason, whenever relevant, I also include nine cases of “quasi-migrants” in the analyses of Bangladeshi migrant women: two were “prospective migrants” who were about leave the
country; and seven were “attempted migrants” who paid the fees but could not emigrate because the agents cheated them and disappeared without providing jobs. Though not having actual migration experience, these women also provide significant insights for our understanding of international female migration.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Most migrant women were relatively young—a large majority were between 20 and 39 at the time of their migration. Regarding Filipinas, 59 percent of current and former migrants were in the 20–29 age group, and the mean age for all migrant Filipino women was 29.6. Sri Lankan migrants had a similar demographic profile: their mean age was 30.3. Migration scholars have generally assumed that Sri Lankan migrant women tend to be older; recent government statistics indicate they are not. Since the late 1990s, Sri Lankan migrant women have been getting younger. Since 2000, the number of migrant women in the 20–24 group has more than doubled.2

Migrant women from Bangladesh were the youngest, with a mean age of twenty-five; the great majority of them were in their early twenties when they left the country. Bangladeshi women tend to marry young—when they are eighteen on average—and low-income Bangladeshi women marry even younger. This means they often need additional income during their early twenties as their children grow older. By the time they are forty, their children have already grown up and “married out” or become financially independent. The average Bangladeshi woman retires at forty-four.4 When I interviewed slum residents in Dhaka, the capital city, women over forty said they had never thought of emigrating as domestic workers because they were “too old” to do the necessary hard work. In Bangladesh, where the average life expectancy is extremely low—only 59.4—people over forty are normally not the primary workforce as far as the low-income population is concerned.

Most migrant women were married. Bangladeshis had the highest marriage rate: 60 percent were married and the rest were either separated or widowed; none of them was single at the time of emigration. This is due to early marriage and to the strong moral code that discourages single women from leaving home alone. For Sri Lankans, the percentage of married women was also high (52 percent), reflecting social mores similar to those of Bangladesh, although the degree of social pressure on women seems much weaker in Sri Lanka. Filipinas were rather divided: 44 percent of women were married whereas 40 percent were single at the time of emigration.

Previous studies have found a higher proportion of married women among migrants,5 but this composition has been changing. The data from
Sri Lanka indicate that the presence of single women in international migration has been increasing gradually over the past decade. These changes in migrants’ demographics—more young single women among migrants—are related to changes in social environment in the Philippines and Sri Lanka, which I will discuss in Chapter 6.

EDUCATION LEVEL

With regard to education, Filipina migrant women are the best educated relative to Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi women. However, this does not mean that all Filipina migrant women are well educated. Filipinas often describe themselves as having a “college education,” but in fact, most of them are college drop-outs. In my simple, only 13 percent had a college diploma; a further 15 percent attended college without completing a degree. Other studies have found that there are more college drop-outs than graduates among Filipina migrant domestic workers. Many of them had wanted to continue their higher education but were compelled by financial difficulties to drop out and seek work. In a diploma-oriented society such as the Philippines, those without a college diploma are treated the same as high school graduates even if they have spent few years in college. Furthermore, given the tight labor market, high-paying jobs in the formal sector are always allocated to the graduates of the top universities, not to those who have graduated from middle- or lower-ranked colleges unless the latter have strong family connections. Educated women who cannot find employment in the Philippines seek alternative opportunities abroad.

Sri Lankan migrant women tend to be less educated than Filipinas, although relatively well educated compared with women in most developing countries. Sri Lanka has long been known for its high literacy rate among women, which is a legacy of past socialist rule. The literacy rate for women was 80 percent as early as the 1970s and had increased to almost 90 percent by 2000; that year the average female literacy rate in all developing countries was only 66 percent. In my sample, 63 percent of Sri Lankan migrant women had a college education; 10.4 percent had passed the “A level” exam (the equivalent of grade twelve); and 52 percent had passed the “O level” exam (the equivalent of grade ten). The percentage of college-educated women was not very high; even so, most women had at least a secondary education and had attained a sufficient literacy level. Yet it must be noted that high literacy and adequate education levels have not often worked to the advantage of Sri Lankan women who are employed overseas. My respondents with ten years of education did not understand or speak English well because they had been taught only in a local language, either Sinhalese
or Tamil. Most of them could hold a simple conversation in English and read some words; but around one-quarter of them had been unable to read their employment contract and for that reason had signed many documents and bank checks blindly both before and after departure.

Bangladeshi women were the least educated of the three groups: only one of the eleven migrants and one of the nine “quasi-migrants” whom I surveyed had any formal education. And even they had completed only grade three and five respectively. The rest had no education at all and were completely illiterate; not one of them could even write her name, let alone read or write. It was entirely impossible for these women to understand the contract documents. All of this reflects the low education levels from which Bangladesh suffers in general. In 1980, when most of my respondents were of school age, only 26 percent of all Bangladeshi women had reached the education level of grade five. The literacy rate for Bangladeshi women is still low. In 2002 it was only 31.4 percent for adults and 41.1 percent for youth—far below the average for women in developing countries.

Education is a vitally important factor for the process of female migration. It does not directly affect women’s decisions to migrate, but it does much to shape their mentality, life attitudes, and orientations for upward social mobility. In the Philippines and Sri Lanka, education helps women develop an interest in foreign cultures and languages. Education also empowers women by giving them the self-confidence to try new experiences as well as the courage to face challenges. Furthermore, it gives women motivation to seek better life. They know the importance of education in obtaining a high-paying job, and are thus willing to pay for quality education for their children or siblings. Such education, however, is often costly, and this compels women to work abroad.

In Bangladesh, by contrast, most low-income women are illiterate, which tends to make them passive as well as indifferent to the world in general. Low-income Bangladeshi women even lack general knowledge about their own society. During the interviews, I was often stunned that some women did not understand the difference between recruitment agencies and the government. Many women fear strangers outside their own village, let alone employers in foreign countries.

Women with little education are generally not interested in taking up new challenges to improve their lives. Upward mobility is often foreseeable for those with education. Bangladeshi women in slums and poor villages spend most of their lives in the “culture of poverty” where education—a hope for upward mobility—is rarely available. They also never learn that hard work can be often rewarded. The lack of experience with success dis-
courages them from developing ambitions or high goals. Most of them accept impoverishment as their destiny. Clearly, education shapes women's mentality and their motives for seeking overseas employment.

**OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND**

The three groups of women also varied greatly with regard to their past occupations. This reflected the differences in education. Most of the Filipina migrant women had worked in white-collar jobs: sales clerk, secretary, nurse, teacher, and so on. In my sample, only 15.1 percent had been housewives. By contrast, most of the Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan migrant women had been housewives—60 and 55 percent respectively—before taking employment overseas.

The results from my own study (and from others) belie the long-held assumption that many migrant women are young single women—often former production workers in export processing zones (EPZs). It was assumed that the employment practices of EPZs generated a pool of potential migrant women. EPZs hired a large number of young single women from rural areas who were easy to fire when they got old or became pregnant or when factories relocated elsewhere. Women who left EPZs then stayed in the urban area, where they joined the ranks of the unemployed because of the “cultural distance” from their communities of origin. It was hypothesized that these women comprised the pool of prospective emigrants.13

Perhaps some migrant women fit this description, but the empirical data show that the occupational backgrounds of migrant women are far more diverse than was previously assumed. Many case studies point out that only a small fraction of migrant women are former factory workers.14 In my sample, only 17 percent of Filipinas, 8.5 percent of Sri Lankans, and 5 percent of Bangladeshis had worked in factories. Moreover, most of these workers had been employed mainly outside EPZs. As I will demonstrate later, EPZs indeed employ many women, but these women are still a very small percentage of the overall female workforce. My fieldwork also suggested that most former EPZ workers did not emigrate overseas but found local jobs instead. The EPZs have done much to increase acceptance of female labor force participation in general—a subject I discuss further in the following chapter—but the data show that there is no direct linkage between the EPZs and international female migration.

**PROFILES OF MIGRANT WOMEN BY DESTINATIONS**

As noted earlier, Filipina migrant women have the highest socioeconomic profile among the three groups, followed by Sri Lankans and then Bangladeshis. While these are general group characteristics, the profiles of migrant
women can significantly differ by country of destination. For instance, migrants in Hong Kong tend to have a white-collar background and to be better educated than migrants in the Middle East. According to my survey, 57 percent of Filipinas in Hong Kong had attended college and 79 percent had been white-collar workers at one time. By contrast, only 8 percent of migrants in the United Arab Emirates had some college education and only 12.5 percent had a white-collar background. Similar differences were observed among Sri Lankan migrant women. Hong Kong apparently attracts migrant women with higher profiles because the wages are higher there and the working conditions are better. In addition, recruitment agencies tend to select women with higher profiles for Hong Kong because Hong Kong employers prefer better-educated workers with a good command of English (see Chapter 2). Many poor women choose the Middle East as a destination because jobs are easily available and the fees are lower. Filipinas need to pay only US$250–400 to work in Middle Eastern countries; to work in Hong Kong, they need to pay US$1,100–1,300. Sri Lankans pay US$250–$300 for the Middle East, whereas to work in Hong Kong, they must pay US$800–$925 in cash or $1,100–1,900 in salary deductions. Clearly, the Middle East is a more affordable destination for low-income women. Such affordability is an indication of unpopularity among migrants; educated ones especially prefer not to work in the Middle East because of its notorious working conditions (no holiday, long work hours, and high risk of harassment) and wages.

This geographical stratification is not limited to Asia. In fact, female migration has become globally stratified. For instance, migrants in the United States, Canada, and Europe tend to have the highest socioeconomic status—that is, the highest levels of education and occupational status prior to migration. This is partly a result of demand-side factors, but it is also a function of the migration fees that migrants must pay. When I interviewed recruitment agencies, I learned that they were charging more than US$7,000 per individual for positions in the United States and Canada, and US$3,000–5,000 for Italy. While the full amount was not due at the time of application, the migrant was required to pay a large cash deposit prior to departure. Many Filipinas—even those with a middle-class background—took out high-interest loans to pay such a deposit. Low-income women find it almost impossible to take out loans for this purpose because they do not have sufficient savings or collateral. Some people, of course, find ways around this problem—for example, they arrive in the destination country as tourists and seek illegal employment, or they find jobs through personal networks and thereby avoid having to pay fees (a system often called “direct hire”). In general, however, migrant women who work legally in North America and
Europe occupy the highest rung on the socioeconomic ladder among the world's migrant women.

By contrast, most migrant women in Asia are less qualified and belong to no higher than the lower-middle class. Many of the women I interviewed in Asia dreamed of going to North America or Europe but could not afford to do so. Migrant women in Hong Kong and Taiwan were relatively well educated and skilled, but because they lacked capital, they were unable to migrate to the United States, Canada, or Europe. Migrant women in the Middle East were the poorest and least educated. It is important to take such differences into account when analyzing the backgrounds and motives of female migrants.

**Why Migrate? The Ideal Types of Migrant Women**

Why on earth do women leave home for foreign countries? The primary reason is an economic one—all of them expect to earn money to support their family, build a house, purchase land, pay for their children's education, repay debts, and so on. However, it is not the only reason as the levels of economic need can vary. For some middle-class Filipinas in North America and Europe, migration tends to be a matter "of social mobility at the household level and of adventure and experience at the individual level."  

Many migrant women in the Middle East, on the other hand, belong to the low-income class and migrate because their families are in serious financial need.

Given all this diversity among migrant women in Asia, it is difficult to generalize about motives for migration. These women's economic needs vary not only with the destination country but also with age, marital status, and stage in life. Nevertheless, I still think it useful to categorize the underlying orientations of migrant women. One way of doing this is to construct "ideal types." I use the Weberian term "ideal types" because they do not necessarily represent the exact situations of individual migrant woman. It is impossible to construct typologies into which all migrant women can be classified perfectly, since the motivations of human beings are so often complex. Having interviewed many migrant women, I can say that the reasons for migration are not simple and straightforward. Of course, the vast majority of migrants expect financial returns from working overseas and want to save money for themselves and their families. However, financial needs are sometimes mixed with even superseded by factors other than economic ones, such as family problems. From this I conclude that the best way to clarify the underlying causes of female migration at the individual level is to extract the overriding motives of each migrant and mold these findings into ideal types that represent sets of orientations of migrant women.
Based on my fieldwork, I put forward five ideal types: (a) “adventurous women,” (b) “dutiful daughters,” (c) “good mothers and wives,” (d) “distressed women,” and (e) “destitute women.” Because these are merely ideal types in the Weberian sense, some women may fit into two or more categories. In fact, I expect most of them fit multiple categories because individuals’ motivations are so complex. Single “dutiful daughters,” who say that they migrated mainly in order to help their family, often admit later that they also wanted to see a foreign country and experience a different culture. However, ideal types are still useful to highlight specific orientations of migrant women. Below I describe the five ideal types and give examples of each in the form of profiles of actual migrant women who seem to epitomize the orientation.

“Adventurous Women”

The first ideal type is “adventurous women.” These are the ones who decide to work overseas to seek some adventure in life. Adventurous women fall into two groups. The first is comprised of young single women with a moderate level of education. It also includes college dropouts and graduates of minor colleges who have been unable to find a decent job locally. Younger daughters of large families of the lower-middle class fall in this category as well. These women became interested in working overseas while learning about foreign countries at school, or they heard exciting stories from their friends and relatives who had worked overseas. The second (and smaller) group includes older women who are unmarried and have no children. Some are separated, divorced, or widowed and live with their parents or siblings. Many of them are teachers, administrators, or sales clerks—white-collar jobs that pay little and offer limited career mobility. Although most women in both groups do not have any acute problems with daily survival, they belong to the lower middle-class and cannot afford to travel much even within their own country, let alone overseas. Overseas employment, which involves the opportunity to fly on an airplane and live in a foreign country, is appealing to them.

Most of these women are seeking a new experience overseas, but this does not mean they do not have economic motives. On the contrary, many of them dream about living the “middle-class life” so often depicted in the media—purchasing a nice house and stocking it with electronic appliances (a TV, a VCR/DVD, a stereo) and luxury goods (jewelry, cosmetics, designer clothes). Most young single women with no children have fewer financial responsibilities than married women and thus have a stronger orientation toward consumerism. They want more disposable income for conspicuous
consumption. Older single women with no children share this tendency to
some extent, but generally, they are more worried about financing their re-
tirement and see overseas employment as a means of saving enough money
to start a business. In developing countries where social security is limited,
many elderly people depend financially on their children. Women without
children need more financial resources for their old age. Elenita and Kanthi,
whose life stories are described below, are typical “adventurous women.”

EL ENITA: A YOUNGER SINGLE “ADVENTURER”

Elenita is a charming young Filipina living in a village outside Manila. She
worked as a dancer in Cyprus for two years. She was only nineteen when
she left the Philippines. After she graduated from high school, she dreamed
of going to Europe. A friend of hers was already working in Cyprus as a
dancer and encouraged Elenita to join her there. Soon after that, a recruit-
ment agent (a Filipino woman married to a Greek) came to her village to
meet applicants. Elenita went to see her and learned that she would not have
to pay any recruitment fees if she went to Cyprus as a dancer. Therefore, she
decided to go there and signed a contract.

She arrived in Cyprus and began working four hours a day at a dance
club, for which she was paid US$350 a month. Although she had a large
family including a little brother, she did not often think about supporting
them. Only a few times did she send them small sums of money. Nor did
she save or invest any money for herself. When I asked her what she did with
her salary, she laughed and said: “I bought CDs, appliances, and lots of jew-
elry!” When she returned to the Philippines, she had to sell all of her jew-
elry to pay the recruitment fees for her brother’s migration to Saudi Arabia.
What she earned in Cyprus is now all gone. “But at least it was an expe-
rience,” she said. “I met many people from different countries. My colleagues
[dancers] were Macedonians, Yugoslavs, Thais, and so on. I also sat with the
customers of different nationalities—Arabs, Europeans, [and] Japanese. I
learned a lot.” She was very happy with her experience and is willing to
work abroad again.

KANTHI

Kanthi is a Sri Lankan domestic worker in Hong Kong. She never mar-
ried and is now forty-six years old. In Sri Lanka she had a good job as an ad-
ministrator at a maternity hospital. She left that job and emigrated in 1982
because she “wanted some adventure.” She emigrated first to Kuwait, and
worked there as a domestic worker for three years. Then she moved to Jor-
dan in 1986 to work as a caregiver for another two years. She came to Hong
Kong in 1989 and had been there for ten years when we met. Her parents
had passed away long ago, and her only sister was married, so for a time there was no one she needed to support. Then in 1989 her sister got divorced, and since then Kanthi has been supporting her and her five children. After working overseas for seventeen years, she took her savings and bought a house and a piece of land in Sri Lanka. “Now I really don’t need money,” she said. “People ask me why I work [in Hong Kong]. I say I am trying to learn many things. I have so many friends to take care of, too.”

As an old-timer, Kanthi helps many young Sri Lankan domestic workers who have recently arrived in Hong Kong. Every Sunday she attends a gathering of Sri Lankan migrants in a downtown park; there, she listens to her friends’ problems and offers them advice. She feels happy and fulfilled by helping them, and she enjoys being respected as a community leader. I asked her if she wanted to go back to Sri Lanka anytime soon. “Not for a while,” she said. “I feel free here. In Sri Lanka, people ask me [too] many things.” In Sri Lanka, the social pressure on women to get married is so strong that people ask her why she is not married and why she is working abroad. Kanthi does not want to confront those questions, nor does she want to face the stigma that is attached to single women working abroad. She feels much happier in Hong Kong where no one bothers her about these things. She said she wanted to live in Hong Kong as long as she could.

“Dutiful Daughters”

Many scholars have pointed out that women in developing countries are not necessarily more family-oriented than those in industrialized countries. Many of them do seek their own income, freedom from parental control, and new experiences.17 I fully concur with these findings, but among some migrant women, filial piety and family obligations can still be the driver (at least the initial one) for migration. Women of this ideal type tend to be single and from a large family with many younger siblings or small nieces and nephews.

“Dutiful daughters” often say they migrated overseas mainly in order to support their parents or help with the education of their siblings. Sometimes they have family members who are sick and need expensive medications that the family cannot afford. So they consider it their duty to work overseas and earn money for everyone in the family, since they are single and have no one they need to take care of. They think they are in the best position to migrate overseas. Once they do migrate, they send home large sums of money (almost their entire salary) every month. However, this money is sometimes misused by family members, as I will describe in a later section.

Some single Sri Lankan women emigrate partly in order to assemble a
dowry for themselves. Dowries have been legally abolished in most South Asian countries, yet the custom is still alive among all social classes. Typically, the dowry is provided by the parents for their daughter’s marriage. In cases where parents cannot afford to offer very much, daughters will be under great stress and worry since too small a dowry (or none at all) can lead to problems in the marriage, to conflicts with in-laws, and sometimes even to physical abuse. In Bangladesh, despite the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 and the Cruelty to Women Act of 1983, the dowry is still the primary cause of violence against women. Dowry-related violence against wives has been on the rise in Bangladesh in recent years; this is considered a serious social problem. 18

In Sri Lanka dowries need not be too high, but many people still believe that providing a sufficient dowry is important for securing a happy marriage and placing a woman on a good footing with her in-laws. A woman whose parents are poor or who has many sisters may have to either accept a dangerous marriage or prepare her own dowry. Some daughters take the latter course and migrate overseas to work. For example, Lalita, a twenty-three-year-old Sri Lankan woman who worked in Hong Kong, said she needed to earn 15,000 rupees (US$210) for her dowry and 25,000 rupees (US$350) for her future. Women who earn their own dowry are looking out for themselves, but they are also helping their parents who otherwise would have to work extremely hard to earn enough money for dowries. These women feel guilty that the entire family has to suffer because so much income must be set aside for dowries. In this sense, dutiful daughters have mixed motives: both self-serving and altruistic.

Filipina domestic workers do not have to worry about dowries because there is no such practice in the Philippines. However, many of them migrate mainly to support their parents and siblings. Amelia is a typical “dutiful daughter.”

AMELIA

Amelia is a Filipina domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates. She is from a large, poor family. Before she went to the UAE, she lived with her parents, brother, sister, and two nieces. As soon as she graduated from high school, she looked for a job but without success. She recalled: “Even the places like shopping malls hired young college grads, not high school grads.” Her father was a landless farmer and had been having a difficult time making ends meet. Her brother worked as a tailor and her sister as a beautician, but both jobs were part-time and poorly paid.

Amelia had cousins in Hong Kong and a niece in Saudi Arabia; all of them were employed as domestic workers. To her “they seemed pretty suc-
cessful,” and she developed an interest in working abroad. When one of her cousins came back from Hong Kong and started working for a recruitment agency, she told Amelia about her work experience and suggested that she apply for a job that was available in Singapore. “We were a poor family and [our] parents were old,” she remembered. “I wanted to give them a good life before they died.” In 1991, after consulting her brother, sister, and friends, she decided to take a domestic worker’s position in Singapore for two years. She knew it would be a challenge for her since she did not even know how to cook, but she decided to try anyway. She did not tell her parents about her decision until the day before her departure. When she informed them, they were shocked but did not try to stop her. Amelia recalled: “My parents only cried and said, ‘Sorry that we are so poor.’”

Amelia paid 7,500 pesos (US$180) to a recruitment agency as a fee down payment and went to Singapore. The rest of the fee was deducted from her salary over six months. Since she did not have any savings prior to leaving for Singapore, she borrowed money from her cousin. She worked hard in Singapore and remitted her entire salary to her sister, who was managing the family’s finances. Her sister used the money for food, clothes, a television, and her own daughter’s education. But she did not invest or save any of the money. By the time Amelia finished her two-year contract in Singapore and returned to the Philippines, all the money was gone, and the family went back to the same living conditions as before.

“Good Wives and Mothers”

Migrant women who belong to this ideal type are married and often have children. They want a better life for their family members, and they realize they are not earning enough to make ends meet or to provide good education for their children. Some of these women were forced to become breadwinners when the husband fell ill or lost his job. Most “good wives” and “good mothers” say they would never have migrated if circumstances had not required it. While foreign culture was appealing to a few, the vast majority of the “good wives and good mothers” never sought adventure or new experiences. Many of them looked upset when I asked if they were interested in experiencing a different culture. Typically they replied: “I am working here only for my husband and children’s future, not for myself.” They feel guilty about leaving their children at home and working overseas; yet they also have a strong desire to give their children a better future. By “better future” they often mean a private education in both high school and college. Especially in the Philippines, where the quality of public education is not considered very high, many people try to send their children to private
high schools and colleges. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, a “better future for children” includes a large dowry. As discussed earlier, some daughters migrate to save money for their own dowry; in the same vein, some mothers work abroad in order to save for their daughters’ dowries. When there are a number of daughters in the family, the mother may need to stay abroad for years in order to save up enough dowry money.

“Good wives” are also willing to help their husbands. Some of my respondents migrated in order to cover their husband’s debts or medical bills. Many migrant women from the Philippines were entrepreneurial; they saved money for their husband to start a small business. Some of them purchased a jeepney (a converted jeep for local transport) or tricycle (a motorcycle with a covered passenger seat attached) for such purpose. Others started a sari-sari store (a small grocery shop) for themselves when they returned home.

“Good wives” in Sri Lanka were not as interested in starting a business. Generally, their goals were to meet the needs of their husband and children— to pay their husband’s debts, to cover the family’s living expenses, to buy a parcel of land, to build a house, to pay their children’s tuition, to save for their daughters’ dowries, and so on. Some used their overseas earnings to open a dress shop, but none of them helped the husband start his own business.

Bangladeshi women were the least entrepreneurial. None of them showed any interest in starting a business or investing money for themselves or their husbands. Their overriding goal was daily survival: to feed and clothe the family. The money they earned overseas was too little to start a business in any case, but their lack of entrepreneurship was perhaps due to the lack of education. Without basic education, it is difficult for anyone to develop the ability to set goals and plans in life. Most of my respondents could not think in terms of objectives and strategies. Dire poverty was also a major factor. Since all of them were landless, their first priority was buying a house and land so that they would not have to worry about paying the rent.

The following cases of Cecile and Amelia are typical examples of “good wives and mothers” from the Philippines. Amelia, who was described above as a “dutiful daughter,” reappears in this section. Her case illustrates the process of circular migration and changes in migrant women’s life stages.

CECILE

Cecile is a thirty-five-year-old Filipina migrant in Hong Kong. She has been working as a domestic worker for six years. She is married and has three children—one boy and two girls—who are waiting for her to return home. Cecile had a difficult time finding a well-paid job in the Philippines, partly because she did not have a college degree. She spent one year in college but could not finish her studies because of financial problems. After earning a
secretary's certificate from a vocational school, she worked in a shoe factory in Quezon City for a while. Later, she found work with an NGO. However, her salary there was the minimum wage, and even after she added it to her husband's income, the family found it difficult to make ends meet.

Their financial situation deteriorated suddenly when her husband's business ran into trouble. With three friends, he had opened a store selling bamboo furniture. Since one of them was a local government official and community leader, Cecile's husband and the others trusted him completely and poured most of their savings into the business. Soon after they pooled their money, that person took it all to use for his own business, leaving the store bankrupt. Her husband and the other two partners tried to get the money back but did not succeed. In this way, they lost all their savings.

Cecile decided to work abroad to pay off her husband's debts and overcome the financial setback. Her two sisters were working in Hong Kong at that time, so she asked them to find a job for her. Some time later, one of them told her she had found one for her. Cecile immediately moved to Hong Kong and began working. "It was very hard to leave my family," she recalled, "but I had no choice." She was planning to work in Hong Kong for two more years. "By then, I will be able to save enough money for my family."

It is important to note that the goals of migrant women can change over time. Some single "adventurous women" and "dutiful daughters" turn into "good wives and mothers." After they get married, they emigrate again, but this time their goal is not to support themselves or their parents, but to support their own husband and children. In other cases, their family situation changes as their overseas stay is prolonged. Some women become separated or divorced because their long absence has strained their marriage (the most common cause of marital collapse is the husband's infidelity). At that point, they become the "official breadwinner" and their goal shifts to supporting themselves and their children. Amelia, whom I described earlier as a "dutiful daughter" who wanted to help her parents, made this transition.

AMELIA: FROM A "DUTIFUL DAUGHTER" TO A "GOOD MOTHER"

After Amelia finished her two-year contract in Singapore, she returned to the Philippines and got married. Soon after that, her husband decided to work as a waiter in Malaysia. Therefore, she followed him there and worked as a waitress from 1994 to 1997. They had a daughter in 1997. However, their relationship went through some turmoil, and they separated in 1998. Amelia faced financial instability and realized she would have to work overseas again.
Her goal had shifted from helping her parents and siblings to ensuring a better future for her daughter. She applied through the same recruitment agency as before and found a job as a domestic worker in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. Amelia’s mother tried to convince her not to work abroad again, saying, “Don’t go. You stay here. You can just help your sister [with her work].” Her father had passed away by then, and Amelia thought that her mother probably wanted her to stay close by. Nevertheless, she left home because she wanted to earn more income to give her daughter a better education and a better life.

In Abu Dhabi, Amelia earned 740DH (US$185) a month, working from 5:30 in the morning to 11 at night. She was allowed no holidays. She slept on the floor because there was no bed in her room. Her employers gave her very little food—sometimes none at all. She could not stand these working conditions and ran away to the Philippine Embassy. Despite the hardships she encountered, she remembers her experience as a positive one. She feels that she became more independent and gained self-confidence. She wants to leave the UAE as soon as she can and apply for another job in Hong Kong, and to continue to save money for her daughter.

“Distressed Women”

“Distressed women” have emigrated in order to free themselves from problems at home. Some of them have problems with their in-laws and want to escape their bullying. Others have a husband who is abusive or alcoholic or who is having an affair or has multiple wives. In this last case, women often have to assume a breadwinner’s role, since the husband is financially unable to sustain the family. Distressed women have tried in vain to resolve the situation. Thus they see working overseas as the best means to escape from their harsh reality. Often these women hope to save enough money to start a business, become financially independent, and leave their husband and in-laws for good. They see working overseas as a solution to many of their problems. Pacita and Mercedes were such distressed women working in the United Arab Emirates.

**PACITA**

Pacita is a twenty-seven-year-old domestic worker working in Dubai. She is originally from Manila and arrived in Dubai in October 1998. At the time of the interview she had been working there for just over a year. She is married and has two children, who are being taken care of by her mother-in-law in the Philippines.

Pacita left home to work overseas in order to escape her husband. Her
marriage was difficult from the start. Her husband, a fisherman, lost his job soon after they married. After that, he worked at odd jobs and made some money, but never enough to support the entire family. For four years, Pacita worked in a garment factory in a neighboring village, where she made 130 pesos (US$3) a day. Their income was just enough to make ends meet. In fact, money was not really a major source of conflict for them. “I had lots of problems with my husband,” she recalled. “He had many girls.” In addition, he was sometimes abusive; he beat her whenever they had quarrels.

When friends told her that life was good overseas, she immediately jumped at the idea. She visited a recruitment agency where a friend worked and immediately found a job as a domestic worker in Dubai. Pacita only told her sister about her new job before she left home. “My sister was supportive of my decision, but I didn’t let my mom know. She didn’t know about it until I came here.” She did not even inform her husband of her migration until she arrived in Dubai. When I asked her how he reacted to her working overseas, she said: “He said nothing.”

**MERCEIDA**

Mercedita comes from a poor family. She started working in a garment factory in Manila when she was seventeen, as soon as she graduated from high school. She wanted to go to college, but her family could not afford the tuition. After working for a few years, she met her husband; soon after that, she got pregnant. After she gave birth to a son, she moved in with her husband and his family. At the time, he was still a student in the police academy; they were not yet married. They were only engaged, and married after he graduated.

Mercedita’s parents-in-law gave her and her husband a small one-room house directly across from their own house. Her husband had four brothers who were already married and had children. They were all living nearby and often interfered with Mercedita’s life. This gradually became stressful for her. Furthermore, her husband was a student whose only income was a stipend from his parents, which also caused problems. “My husband asked his parents [for money] whenever he needed something,” she recalled. “I didn’t like it because my mother-in-law did ‘talk-talk-talk’ [behind her back] with other in-laws about it and blamed me.” Her in-laws thought she was spending too much money, even though the money she received was barely enough to cover basic needs.

Finally, she could not stand the situation any longer. “I thought I should earn money for my own family.” When she told her husband she wanted to work overseas, he objected. “He said, ‘I will marry another woman if you go to other country.’ But I said, ‘That’s fine. Go ahead.’ I didn’t think that
he would really do it.” In fact, he did. After Mercedita went to Singapore, he married another women without telling her. She only found out when a friend wrote to her in Singapore and explained what happened.

“Destitute Women”

It has been generally understood that migrant workers are not the “poorest of the poor.” However, this assumption requires careful examination. For instance, the payment schemes faced by migrant workers have been changing in recent years in ways that have altered the composition of the migrant workforce. Intense competition has driven many recruitment agencies to pursue a new labor supply—the destitute—in order to increase the number of their clients. Aware that these women cannot afford high migration fees, the agencies demand only a small cash deposit, or none at all, for some destinations in Asia. They do not of course lower the total fees; they simply deduct those fees from the migrants’ salaries, in the worst cases for six months or more. This turns these women into semi-indentured laborers. These salary deductions and loan schemes have enabled more poor people—including the poorest of the poor—to join the migrant workforce. Especially in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the recruitment of the poor and the destitute has been accelerated by local “sub-agents.” Some sub-agents are contracted by agencies; others operate independently. They approach destitute women in the neighborhood and lure them into migration by promising high wages and a better life. They are known for charging exorbitant fees and for defrauding those who sign with them. Since most of them operate illegally, it is very difficult to control their activities. More and more destitute women have been resorting to them.

Destitute women emigrate to escape extreme poverty and because they lack other means to survive. Most of the destitute women I encountered were in Bangladesh; there were only a few in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. They were migrating in order to achieve a short-term goal—to feed themselves and their children. None of them was interested in investing their income in a business, or in their own career development, or in private education for their children. In addition, many of them were separated, divorced, or widowed or had been abandoned by their husbands. In developing countries, the lives of low-income working-class women are very difficult even when they are married. Their lives are even harder when they become household heads. It is extremely difficult for them to find employment opportunities because of gender and age discrimination in the labor market. In Bangladesh, 96 percent of female-headed households live below the poverty
line and 33 percent are chronically short of food. The story of Salma is a common one among migrant women from Bangladesh.

Salma

Salma is a thirty-year-old Muslim woman living in a small village south of Dhaka. She was an orphan and never attended school. She got married but was divorced fourteen years ago and has been raising three boys since then. Because she has no family or relatives, there was no one to help her financially. “I have no husband,” she said. “I had no money or property to inherit. I had no savings. And I had to keep paying the rent for a small room. The life was hard.”

At first, Salma did household work for a wealthy family in her village, but this did not bring in enough money to feed her children. She quit that job and began selling vegetables. She made 2,000–2,500 taka (US$40–50) a month, but it was still not enough. One day, she went to sell vegetables to a wealthy family in the village. The “madam” suggested that she consider working abroad and offered to introduce her to an agent. Salma immediately agreed and met the agent. He told her that the fee to secure a job as a domestic worker in Bahrain was 50,000 taka (US$1,000)—a lot of money. She borrowed it from a local moneylender at high interest, left her children with her ex-husband’s mother, and left for Bahrain in 1996.

Having had no knowledge in Arabic, Salma had a difficult time communicating with her employer at the beginning. Her “madam” used to get angry and beat her whenever she was unhappy. The food was another problem: she could not eat the Arabic food because it was so different. She was only eating some bread every day. But after three months, she had learned some Arabic words and had grown accustomed to the local diet. She worked very hard, rising at four every morning and working until one the next morning. She was being paid only 3,000 taka (US$60) a month even though she had been promised 4,000 taka (US$80). However, her salary was raised to 4,000 taka the following year. She sent 3,000 to 4,000 taka home every three or four months and saved the rest for herself. She stayed in Bahrain for two years and seven months, until she fell ill. Because she had no health insurance and the employer would not pay her medical costs, Salma ended up paying 40,000 taka (US$800) for medical treatment. After paying the recruitment fee of 50,000 taka with interest, she had little money left. Although she wanted to continue working in Bahrain, her illness forced her to return home. She has since recovered from her illness and is planning to work overseas again.
Chapter 5

Emigration Processes: Social Networks and the Culture of Migration

As seen above, the profiles of migrant women are extremely diverse. However, the migration process itself—especially the ways in which prospective migrants find information about jobs—is quite similar: they find jobs overseas through personal networks or recruitment agencies. As many migration scholars have pointed out, social networks play a major role in migration. The “harbingers” who emigrated earlier provide those still at home with information about employment opportunities abroad, and in this way link prospective migrants with destination countries.

In Sri Lanka, the majority of the migrant women in my sample (56 percent) found work through personal networks—through family members, relatives, friends, and so on. Even recruitment agencies, which are usually not considered social networks, have personal components. Among Sri Lankan migrant women who obtained a job through an agency, 73 percent had a relative or friend who worked there, and 15 percent knew someone who migrated through the same agency. All in all, only 12 percent of migrant women from Sri Lanka found work without any personal contacts.

In the Philippines, where recruitment agencies are thriving, a large majority (76 percent) of migrant women found work through a recruitment agency. But again, the majority of them had a personal connection with the agency staff. Only 17 percent of the respondents found work without any networks. Recruitment networks in Bangladesh exist as well, albeit to a limited extent; 25 percent of migrant women obtained their jobs through direct personal networks and 75 percent through sub-agents who knew them or a family member.

Most migrant women were acquainted with “harbinger migrants”: 79 percent of Filipinas and 70 percent of Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis in my sample had friends or relatives who had worked overseas. Women in the Philippines and Sri Lanka were especially entangled in a broad, dense web of current and returned migrant women. At the time of the interviews, the vast majority of them had more than one family member and many friends who were working abroad or had done so in the past.

In the case of Ligaya, a twenty-seven-year-old Filipina domestic worker, both parents and an elder brother had been working in Hong Kong for fourteen years—her father as a factory worker, her mother as a domestic worker, her brother as a chauffeur. As a child in the Philippines, her uncle had taken care of her and her three siblings. “I was a mother, father, and big sister to all my two younger brothers and sister,” she recalled. After finishing her train-
ing as a midwife, she began to think about joining her parents and brother. “I missed my parents so badly and wanted to be with them,” she explained. “That’s why I decided to move to Hong Kong.” In 1992 her brother found a job for her as a domestic worker in the same house where he was working. Ligaya has been working there ever since. Although her salary is below the official minimum wage, she cannot complain; she is afraid that doing so might affect her brother’s job.

Such networks can cross generations. Indrani, a twenty-two-year-old Sri Lankan woman, had a grandmother, an aunt, and three cousins who were working as domestic workers in Hong Kong. She became interested in joining them after one of her cousins found a job for her. Her father did not like the idea of her moving to Hong Kong, but the presence of these relatives softened his opposition and he finally agreed to let her go. Once she arrived in Hong Kong, however, Indrani’s relatives, especially her aunt and grandmother, began controlling every aspect of her life. “They are much more powerful than my own employer,” she sighed, “but at least I have some support whenever I get into trouble.”

Over time, these family traditions of migration affect the values and behavioral systems of communities, forming a “culture of migration.” As the number of migrants increases, migration “becomes deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people’s behaviors, and values associated with migration become part of the community’s values.”

When migration was still dominated by males, young men perceived migration as a rite of passage to adulthood. Later, as migration became more feminized in the Philippines and Sri Lanka, it also affected women’s values and behaviors, and this forged a new culture of migration. In Bangladesh, where very few women emigrate compared to men, this culture has yet to develop.

Without necessarily providing a “rite of passage” to female adulthood, migration penetrates into the socialization process of girls. This is linked to heightened consumerism. During my fieldwork in a Philippine village, I found that girl children were already deeply embedded in and influenced by the migration culture. Nena, a nine-year-old whose mother is a domestic worker in Hong Kong, was already employed part-time as a domestic worker in her neighbor’s house. According to the neighbor, Nena and her younger brother had not seen their mother for seven years. When I spoke to them, they said they liked their mother more than their father who lives with them. I asked them why. “Because mom buys me Hello Kitty,” Nena answered. The neighbor explained: “Their mom sends them a lot of toys from Hong Kong and the kids love that.” Sending many toys to children is a very common practice among migrant women. They try to compensate for their absence by fulfilling their children’s material desires. Many migrant women ad-
mitted that this was not good for their children, but they still did it because they felt guilty about being away from home. They had few other ways to show their love. As Parreñas pointed out, this sort of “commodification of love” is the only way these transnational mothers can establish concrete ties of familial dependency with their children.

Having been brought up with material comforts since early childhood, many children of “transnational families” associate migration with wealth and happiness. When I asked about her dreams for the future, Nena told me without hesitation that she wanted to become a domestic worker in Hong Kong like her mother because she could make a lot of money that way. Indeed, migrant mothers often become role models for their daughters. Yolanda, a returned migrant woman in the same village, has a daughter who is planning to work in Singapore as a nurse. The daughter has chosen to go to nursing school, expecting that a nursing diploma will enable her to find a job overseas like her mother. Yolanda is supportive of her, especially since her daughter plans to work as a professional nurse, not as a domestic worker. Most girl children of migrant women want to follow their mother’s footsteps. They fantasize about the money they will be able to earn as migrants.

Materialism can have a strong impact on children’s attitudes toward life. Children who are raised to be consumers tend not to incorporate lessons about working hard for the future. When the father and relatives in a migrant woman’s household show little interest in education, the children often become disoriented and drop out of school—a serious problem in Sri Lanka. The attitude of the father as a role model can be another factor. A recent study found that remittances reduce the labor force participation of men left behind more than that of women left behind. In other words, when a wife starts working abroad, the husband at home tends to stop working. Gamburd has observed that a wife’s overseas employment poses a serious challenge to the masculinity of a husband, and to compensate, he indulges in drinking, gambling, and womanizing. Such behavior of the father also leads to the loss of motivation for study and work among children.

Many children of migrants are aware that the material comforts they are enjoying will not last very long after their mother returns home, and that their standard of living cannot be maintained with the more modest earnings from local jobs. Often, the mother has only modest ambitions when she leaves home as a migrant worker; then she starts sending money back, and the children develop material desires and higher expectations that cannot be met without her overseas earnings. Hence, once grown up, they migrate overseas, which starts a cycle of intergenerational migration.
Decision-Making Processes:

Household Strategies versus Women's Autonomy

It is perhaps relatively easy for migrants' children, friends, or relatives to find work overseas, since information about migration is readily available to them and they learn about what migration entails. But not all migrants have such personal contacts. How did the idea of migration occur to these people? How did they reach the decision to migrate? To understand women's decision-making processes, we need to examine factors other than networks and migration culture.

The household strategy approach offers some insights about migration decisions. Here, the household is seen as the "primary decision-making unit" for both male and female migration. It follows that migration decisions are made collectively rather than by individual migrants. According to the proponents of this approach, migration is part of a household strategy for its own survival; a household organizes and allocates its resources, taking into account the productive and reproductive roles of its members. As it was first conceived by economists based on the new household economics, this theoretical approach sees a household as an entity that is trying to maximize its collective utility. The basic assumption is that the household decides who should migrate overseas to which country, based on its consumption needs and productive capacity. The decisions arrived at in this manner are supposed to serve the collective interests of the "household" as a whole.

However, this approach obscures women's agency by assigning too much weight to households as decision-making "actors." Many scholars have been questioning the very idea of "households" and the existence of "household strategies." The main criticism to this approach concerns its two assumptions: one is that the "optimal reallocation" of a household's resources results from altruism and the voluntary contributions of its members; and the other is that the "group preference function" is identical with that of the altruistic household head.

Critics of this approach contend that households are laced with conflict, inequality, and exploitation—things that do not necessarily comprise a collective utility or maximize the sum of individual utilities. The interests of the household or those of the household's decision-maker are not necessarily those of its less powerful members such as the women and children. The decision-making process often reflects power relations among household members. All of this means that it can be very problematic to assign a single utility function and decision-making role to the household as a collective entity. Furthermore, the household strategy approach blindly assumes that
the household members are altruistic and unselfish. In this regard, many scholars in the past have portrayed Third World women as obedient daughters or caring mothers who work hard for their families. The recent literature suggests that such views are rooted in nostalgia or in the biases of Western researchers, and that many Third World women are autonomous and assert their own interests within the household. Of course, many women are family-oriented and migrate for the sake of the family, but even then, the decisions they make on such a basis are not necessarily collective ones.

In fact, during my fieldwork I found no empirical evidence to support the tenets of the household strategy approach. I did not find a single case where the household members discussed who should go overseas and made a collective decision. On the contrary, the migrant women I spoke to had made their own decisions about migration. These women displayed much greater autonomy and decision-making power than is often suggested. More than 90 percent of Filipinas and Sri Lankans and 60 percent of Bangladeshis in my sample took the initiative to find out about overseas employment and then decided by themselves whether to go. Some women did not even consult their husband or parents: 30 percent of Sri Lankan women and 16 percent of Filipinas never discussed their migration decision with other household members. Moreover, 27 percent of Filipinas and 16 percent of Sri Lankan women left the country over the objections of their husbands or parents. Yapa surveyed one hundred Sri Lankan migrant women and found that these women have a lot of power to make their own decisions on migration. Her study found that 85 percent of migrant women had decided by themselves whether to migrate and that 40 percent of these did not even consult other household members. More studies are needed for the Philippines and Bangladesh, but so far the available data suggest that women have much more autonomy than migration theorists have long assumed. Women are indeed the major decision-makers for migration.

Of course, from the finding that many women do not consult their parents or husband, and even migrate over their objections, we must not conclude that the household matters less to these women. In fact, most migrant women decided to work abroad for the sake of their family members—both immediate and distant ones sharing the same household. The point here is that in the Philippines and Sri Lanka, women do not simply follow the “household strategy” or the suggestions of other household members. Most of them decide very much on their own whether to migrate. This leads to another question: Do a woman’s overall role and her degree of autonomy within the household help determine whether she will migrate? The decision to migrate is one among many that women make in their lives. It follows that the processes whereby they make the decision should be placed in
the context of their overall role and decision-making power within the household prior to migration.

There are many types of household decisions. Naina Kabeer listed twelve different decision-making dimensions ranging from daily household budgeting to children’s education, family planning, and household financial planning.34 Oppong and Abu found in their own study (conducted in Ghana) that women have seven roles in the household, in the workplace, and in the community.35 To measure women’s decision-making power in each of their roles would be a tremendously complex task.

While acknowledging such difficulty and complexity, I chose to focus on the dimension of household finance, which is generally considered one of the important indicators of women’s autonomy.36 By “the dimension of household finances,” I mean not only women’s decision-making power over daily expenditures but also their ability to make long-term decisions about allocating financial resources within the household. Other dimensions such as children’s education and family planning are important indicators of women’s decision-making power as well. However, I hypothesized from the literature that the financial dimension would be the best indicator of a woman’s overall autonomy and decision-making power within the household. The migrant women I spoke to often referred to themselves as the “finance minister of the house.” As Rae Blumberg suggested in her research, women’s control of income and other resources is a major determinant of other variables such as family planning and overall power within the marriage.37

My survey found that most married migrant women were already playing a major role in financial decision-making before they emigrated. Among the migrant women in my sample, Filipinas had the highest level of decision-making power: 58 percent of married respondents actively participated in decisions about household finances. Of these, 93 percent were the sole decision-maker, the other 7 percent shared this power equally with the husband. As for married Sri Lankan migrant women, 46 percent had been making important decisions on household finances before migrating. Of these, 55 percent made such decisions basically on their own. As for Bangladeshi respondents—most of whom were very poor—the percentage was relatively high, partly because the husband was not a stable breadwinner and had less economic power. Thus, 42 percent of married Bangladeshi migrant women had at least some decision-making power over household finances prior to migration, and among these, 80 percent were the sole decision-maker. As I will discuss in a later section, these rates are extremely high compared with the national average in Bangladesh.

To my surprise, unattached women (single, separated, divorced, or widowed) in the Philippines and Sri Lanka enjoyed relatively less decision-
making power. Only 39 percent of unattached Filipinas and 8 percent of unattached Sri Lankans had decision-making power in household finances. The main reason was that most of them lived with their parents or siblings and were often financially supported by them; this placed them into a weaker position within the household. The vast majority of them said their father or mother or a sibling made most of the financial decisions within the household. In cases where a woman was the household head, that woman held all the decision-making power. This was true for all three countries.

In Bangladesh, unattached women enjoyed more decision-making power than attached ones: 55 percent made decisions entirely on their own. This was because they received relatively less financial support from their family (which was also poor and had a hard time ensuring its own daily survival). Widows and divorcées, who comprised about a half of the sample, admitted that their own parents and siblings did not welcome their return because it made a bad financial situation worse. Many of them were thus living alone with their children and struggling terribly hard to make ends meet. Ironically, then, their poverty allowed them more freedom and control over their lives and made them more self-reliant.

As many scholars have pointed out, women’s decision-making power is related to their contribution to household income. Many of the women in my sample had already assumed a breadwinner role prior to migration: 47.8 percent of Filipinas, 23.3 percent of Sri Lankans, and 49 percent of Bangladeshis had been engaged in wage employment as either sole or co-breadwinner. They had already been playing a major economic role within the household.

The economic role of women and their power to make decisions about household finances have important implications for emigration. Women with more decision-making power over household finances develop a strong sense of responsibility for making ends meet on a daily basis as well as for sustaining family life in the long term. They are the ones who are most aware of the general financial state of the household. In her study of Filipino families, Heimonen also found that women generally feel the effects of poverty and hardship in the household more directly than men because they are the ones who actually purchase what household members need. Furthermore, many of them are educated enough to make long-term financial plans based on current expenditure patterns. In doing so, they grasp soon enough the benefits of earning extra income and thus are more likely to consider overseas employment as a means to fulfill the desires and dreams of their loved ones.

This observation helps us understand the cross-national differences in levels of female migration. In the Philippines, where the largest number of migrant women leave home every year, wives tend to have an equitable share
of decision-making responsibility in most spheres. Yu and Liu studied 1,521 urban families in Cebu City and found that the wife exercised “almost absolute control” over spending money, family health care, and food preparation. With regard to financial planning, schooling, child care, and choice of leisure time activities, the wife and husband made decisions jointly. Deano studied a national sample of 1,041 married women; 53 percent reported that decisions about budgeting and purchasing major household items were generally their domain. In fact, this is not a recent phenomenon. Even during the pre-Hispanic era, Filipino women had “their own purse and were also custodians of the conjugal purse” and “could acquire property, often own and administer it, and dispose of its produce without her husband’s consent.” (author’s italics)

Financial responsibility tends to push many married women in the Philippines toward wage employment. This is because they feel monetary needs more acutely as they make long-term plans for their family, especially their children. Eder studied Filipino women and reported the following comments: “I was supposed to be in charge of the money, but there was no money”; “If you just count on the earnings of your husband, it is not enough.” Filipinos tend to have large families and extended family systems, and this makes it easy for women to get help with child care when they work outside the home.

In Sri Lanka as well, married women have a fairly large share of decision-making power. According to a small-scale study by local researchers, 93 percent of married women in that country who were not living with in-laws made decisions about household finances by themselves. Other studies have reported that Sri Lankan women enjoy a status almost equal to that of their male counterparts in various spheres of life. According to Takakuwa, although traditional Sri Lankan society assumes that men are breadwinners and that women are housewives, social norms still call on women to manage the “home,” and this often includes household budgeting.

In Bangladesh, which sends far fewer migrant women overseas, the situation is rather different. Those who actually migrated abroad tend to have strong decision-making power, but generally speaking, Bangladeshi men control the household finances. Many of them even do the grocery shopping because they do not want their wives and daughters to mingle with men in the market. As a consequence, women often do not know how
much money the household has. Financial decision-making is definitely not their sphere. One study found that only 28 percent of married women in Bangladesh participated in decisions about household finances.47 White has reported that in many Bangladeshi households, the men have more scope to determine how money is used, and women are expected to rely entirely on the money the men give them.48 There is little social pressure on wives to supplement the household income, perhaps because of the purdah system and because religious values encourage women’s seclusion from society. Of course, low-income women do work, because their husbands do not earn enough to feed the family. Women have to assume the breadwinner role if their husbands are unemployed or if they become divorced, separated, or widowed. However, even these women work in “culturally acceptable ways.”49 International migration is definitely not “culturally acceptable,” even at the lowest rung of Bangladeshi society.

The Trapping Mechanism and Circular Migration

Most migrant women plan to work abroad for a few years, but once they set foot on foreign soil, their plans and feelings tend to change. Some return home sooner than they planned and never try to emigrate again, but the large majority of migrant women either stay longer or migrate to a different country. This tendency is stronger among Filipinas: in my sample, 64 percent of those working in Hong Kong had been away from home for more than five years, and 28.6 percent for more than ten years. One of them had been working abroad for nineteen years, another for seventeen years, and three others for eleven years. The average length of stay was eight years. Those whom I interviewed in the United Arab Emirates had been there for a shorter time—sixteen months on average. However, this was mainly a result of sample bias: the respondents in the UAE were “runaway migrants” who had taken refuge in the Philippine Embassy. Since Arab employers normally do not allow days off to domestic workers and most of them work sixteen to eighteen hours a day, it was impossible for me to interview these women unless they had taken refuge in shelters. When problems arose for these women (non-payment of wages, sexual harassment, and so on), it was usually during the first three to twelve months of the contract. Therefore, the average of sixteen months is not a representative figure for Filipina domestic workers in the UAE. In fact, if I include the previous migration experience of these runaway migrants, their total time overseas averaged over three years. The average time spent working abroad by all returned migrants in the Philippines was 4.8 years.

Sri Lankan women also stay abroad for quite long periods of time. In my
sample, their average length of stay overseas was 6.2 years for those interviewed in Hong Kong and 3.8 years for returned migrants in Sri Lanka. One-third of the Sri Lankan women in Hong Kong had been away from home for more than ten years—a higher proportion than for Filipina long-stayers. Bangladeshi migrant women tended to stay overseas the shortest time: 2.7 years on average, and none of them stayed longer than five years.

Circular migration—the phenomenon in which migrants return home and go overseas again—was also commonly observed in my study. Some migrant women return to the same employer in the same country. Others reapply for a different employer in the same country, and still others try an entirely new country. Whatever the case, many women emigrate more than once. In my sample, the proportion of migrant women who have worked in multiple countries was the highest among Sri Lankans: 36 percent of them had worked in more than one country, and of these and 39.3 percent had worked in three or more countries. Yapa found that 61 percent of migrant women had previously worked in a different country—most often in the Middle East. Filipinas also repeated migration but were more likely to return to the same country: 61.8 percent had worked in only one country and 38.2 percent in more than one country. The national data for the Philippines suggest that the percentage of Filipino “repeaters” could be as high as that of Sri Lankans. In 1993, the number of Filipino workers who emigrated for at least the second time exceeded the number of new migrants, and this trend has continued since. In 2000, 62.6 percent of all legal migrant workers were “repeaters.” As for Bangladeshi women, only one respondent had worked in more than one country; one other respondent had worked twice in the same country.

**TRAPPING MECHANISM**

Why do so many women repeatedly emigrate to a foreign country or stay for unexpectedly long periods of time? It is because labor migration entails a “trapping mechanism” that drives migrant women to prolong their stay, to repeat migration, or both. This mechanism operates at three levels: recruitment process, household, and individual migrants.

The most crucial factor is the recruitment process—in particular, the placement fees that women must pay in order to emigrate. As discussed earlier, many migrant women must pay exorbitant fees to the recruitment agency to obtain a job overseas. Less cash is required up front these days, but many women still pay some cash deposit and commit themselves to pay the total amount from their future salaries. Even those who find jobs through their own personal connections are not necessarily exempted from high fees because of the limited supply of jobs and the relatively high overseas salaries,
even friends and relatives feel entitled to charge some money—albeit often below market rates. Only 13 percent of the women in my sample paid no fees. Besides placement fees, migrant women must also pay numerous other fees—medical exam, visa, passport, government registration, insurance, departure tax, and so on—which quickly add up.

Women from low-income households find these fees extremely high. For instance, the average household income for Sri Lankan migrant women in my sample was US$50 a month, and one-third of these women lived on less than US$15 a month. Even the relatively low fees for the Middle East were equivalent to eight to ten months of a Sri Lankan factory worker’s salary. Because of the low savings rates among poor households, many women had to borrow money to cover migration costs: 69 percent of Sri Lankan women received loans from friends, relatives, or moneylenders. To my surprise, almost all these friends and relatives charged 10 percent interest, which admittedly was lower than the market rate of 20 percent.

These high fees affect migrant women in several ways. First, women normally have to work for at least the first few months without a salary simply to pay off their fees and interest; only then can they start saving money. Savings are further delayed in some countries, such as Taiwan where a six-month salary deduction is common. In addition, most salary deduction schemes are combined with an initial cash payment up front, and many women borrow money at high interest in order to cover these fees as well as other costs, such as domestic transportation and board and lodging for a few days in the capital before departure. Since most contracts are for two years, the period in which these women can actually save money is limited, and the total amount they can save is not significant because of their low wages.

**Employment Malpractice**

Even after paying off the fees and other migration-related debts, migrant women often find that their plans to save money do not work out as they hoped. Employers can fire them abruptly and whenever they feel like it. Some Chinese employers in Hong Kong are especially fussy about *feng shui*, which involves superstitious beliefs about women’s physical features; these employers have been known to fire migrant women at the airport as soon as they see a mole in the “wrong” spot or any other physical features that might bring bad luck to the family. An NGO worker in Manila refers to this as “A-to-A,” meaning “from the airport to the airport”; that is, the migrant worker flies from the Manila airport to the destination airport, where she is fired and immediately returns to Manila. Crying is also seen as inviting bad luck; thus, predeparture orientations in the Philippines often instruct prospective migrants to Hong Kong and Singapore not to cry in front of their employers.
Even when a migrant woman is not fired, saving money can be difficult when the employer does not pay her salary regularly or decides not to pay her at all. In fact, non-payment and underpayment are common problems. In 1994, there were 14,714 reported problem cases involving Filipino migrant workers, and 25 percent of these were related to contract and payment problems. In my sample of “runaway” Filipina migrants in the United Arab Emirates, 23 percent had not received any salary since arriving in the country, even after the salary deduction period was over. The situation was similar for Sri Lankans: 28.4 percent of complaints lodged by migrant Sri Lankan women in 2002 were related to non-payment of wages. Although only 6 percent of the interviewees received no wages, 46 percent were paid less than had been promised. Somawathi, a fifty-year-old Sri Lankan woman, worked in Kuwait for two years without receiving any salary until just before she returned to Sri Lanka. The employer gave her only 20,000 rupees (US$280) as a lump sum salary for two years’ work. With this money, she paid off the recruitment fees she owed and bought a bicycle for herself. That was all she got for two years’ work in Kuwait.

In cases of non-payment and underpayment, migrant women have very limited choices: they can stay until the end of the contract, hoping they will be paid in full when they leave, or they can simply flee the employer. However, leaving the present employer does not necessarily lead to a new employer. Most destination countries in Asia do not allow unskilled migrants to change employers while in the country, and require them to return home before applying for a new job. This means that migrants will have to start the emigration process all over again, which necessarily involves paying another set of fees and taking on more debt.

In Hong Kong, where migrant workers are allowed to sue an employer for non-payment or underpayment, some migrant women do run away and file suit for their back wages. However, the rate of success is marginal since court cases take a very long time and many employers do not even appear in court. Furthermore, the “two-week rule” in immigration regulations stipulates that migrant women must return to their home country within two weeks from the date of contract termination. Migrants are allowed to stay longer if they have filed suit in a court but are not allowed to work while the case is being heard. Since most migrants cannot afford to wait for the entire legal process to unwind without earning any income, they either give up on suing the employer and go home, or illegally engage in temporary work. If they follow the latter course, they earn even lower wages and also risk deportation. Most migrants in this position give up and go home, planning to apply for an overseas job again to recuperate the loss.

Some migrant women return home early because of abuse and sexual ha-
rassment by the employer. According to the Philippine Department of Labor, 31 percent of problem cases have been related to abuse, rape, sexual harassment, and other maltreatment.54 The Sri Lankan government reports that 21.6 percent of complaints by migrant women in 2002 involved harassment.55 Just as with cases of non-payment and underpayment, migrant women who cannot tolerate abuse and harassment return home only to find that the debts they owe have grown considerably because of the high interest rates. It is difficult for them to pay back these huge debts while remaining in their own country, because employment opportunities are limited for unskilled women and the wages paid by the jobs they can find are very low. In this situation, they must borrow money again, pay more fees, and give working overseas another try, hoping that this will be the last time they have to migrate.

FINANCIAL MISMANAGEMENT AND INCREASING CONSUMERISM

Migrant women tend to make substantial financial contributions to their families back home. Most of the migrant women I interviewed were sending 80 to 100 percent of their earnings back home. Another study has reported that single female migrants send their families an average of 6.7 months' salary per year, whereas single male migrants send only 2.8 months' salary.56

However, the filial piety and altruism shown by migrant women is not always rewarded. Other family members are sometimes the source of the financial problems that lead to circular migration. Migrant women's parents, husbands, or other relatives often mismanage the remittances so that by the time the women return home, the situation that compelled them to migrate has not improved. Indeed, sometimes it is worse. One of the problems is that low-income people, especially agricultural workers and day laborers in rural areas, have never seen such large sums of cash before and find it difficult to manage these windfalls. During my fieldwork, I heard many stories about husbands who spent all the remittances on “monkey business,” by which was meant alcohol, gambling, and women.

Fiona, a thirty-four-year-old Filipina migrant now in Hong Kong, had worked in Qatar for seven years and kept sending money to her husband. Then she came home and found that nothing had changed for the better in all that time. “All the money disappeared because of my husband,” she said, “and I had to start all over again.” A year after returning from Qatar, she migrated to Hong Kong as a domestic worker. She no longer sends her husband money; instead, she saves most of her salary in her bank account in Hong Kong and only sends some money to her parents to take care of her children. “I will stay here until I save enough money for my kids' college
and my own reintegration,” she said. Upula, a forty-nine-year-old Sri Lankan, worked in Lebanon for four-and-a-half years, only to find that her husband had spent all her money on alcohol. “He was a drinker before but started drinking more after I left,” she said. Upula had to emigrate again, this time to Saudi Arabia. She decided to send her husband only 50 percent of her salary; she saved the rest in her own bank account. In the end, she had to emigrate three more times for a total of twelve years before she could save a sufficient amount of money.

Single migrant women are not exempt from similar risks. Myra, a twenty-eight-year-old Filipina migrant in the United Arab Emirates, had been sending her money to her older sister for many years. Her parents were old and the sister was making the financial decisions for the entire family. Myra had a joint bank account with her sister in the Philippines, and that was where she had been sending the money. However, the sister took Myra’s money and electronic appliances with her when she got married and moved elsewhere. Myra has lost everything and must keep working in the UAE to support herself and her parents. Lalani, a forty-two-year-old Sri Lankan divorcée who worked in Kuwait for seven years, had a similar experience. She had sent her entire salary to her sister; on her return, she found that her sister had spent all the money on her husband and children without saving any for Lalani. She had to leave again for Kuwait at the end of 1999 in order to save money for herself.

Remittances certainly change the consumption patterns of migrants’ families. Family members and relatives often spend the money without any long-term goals. In particular, almost all of them purchase electrical appliances immediately, such as a television, a VCR, and a stereo; these are the status symbols of the middle-class, to which most low-income people aspire. Migrant women usually tolerate this behavior. In fact, they believe these appliances are good for their children and their family. A television is especially valued because it unites the family and encourages the children to stay home and away from drugs. Rosa, a returned migrant in the Philippines, said: “In a village like ours, we don’t have much entertainment. No movie or concert. So young kids often hang around and do drugs. But if you have a TV, you sit together with your family and watch it after dinner. You talk together while watching it. Kids don’t have to go outside to do drugs at night.”

The entertainment these gadgets provide is very much appreciated by migrant mothers. Furthermore, these appliances signify the success of the migrant women themselves. In most households I visited in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, a television and VCR were placed in the most visible corner of the house so that visitors would notice them as soon as they stepped inside. These shiny electrical appliances often seem out of place in
the shabby residence. They are sparkingly clean and are sometimes decorated with a nice cloth cover or some ornaments so that they almost resemble household shrines. Whenever I took a photograph inside a house, the woman always asked me to include her TV and VCR in it. Even after all the remittances have been spent and no money is left, these appliances are not sold; they are still the centerpieces of the home.

Many migrant women, when they come home and find that the family has saved little, emigrate again. However, many of them have a clearer strategy for this second time. Some tell their family members outright how to spend the remittances and how much to save in a bank account. Lucila, a thirty-five-year-old Filipina migrant in Hong Kong, now sends her husband only half her monthly salary, with detailed instructions how to budget it. Yet things do not necessarily go smoothly. “He still lends money to his friends and drinks more,” she said. Other women send less money home and save a large part of their wages in a personal bank account. Often this is not easy, because they receive letters asking for more money. Some yield to the pressure, but most of them who learned from the past are determined to set aside some money for themselves.

Some migrant women encounter their own problems managing money. Having grown up in low-income households in developing countries, they find themselves intoxicated with city life with its shopping malls and entertainment centers. The experience of migration permanently changes their expectations as consumers. Some young Filipinas admitted to me that they were excited at the beginning and spent too much money on clothes, cosmetics, perfume, jewelry, and so on. Paz, a Filipina secretary in the UAE, remembers that she could not save very much money for the first few years after her arrival. “When I was single, I was worldly,” she recalls, “I went to discos and parties with my friends. I liked to spend money.”

Other migrant women—especially those who were domestic workers in the Middle East and who had no holidays and had little chance to spend money while abroad—spend more after they return home. In Sri Lanka, returned migrant women find it hard to readjust to rural life, having grown used to the lifestyle in wealthy countries. There is even a derogatory term for this—“Dubai Syndrome,” referring to the tendency of women to wear excessive make-up, flashy clothes, and accessories after they return from overseas. A local woman was critical of returned migrants: “They prefer to take three-wheelers [a taxi-like motorcycle] to travel short distances instead of walking. They want more and more.” Comments like these are tinged with jealousy, but even so, it is clear that migration alters many women’s expectations as consumers. The longer they work abroad and the more money
they make, the wealthier the lifestyle they desire for themselves. Some of them feel driven to achieve it and thus emigrate repeatedly.

Migrant women's overspending also has a complex social dimension. In part, it reflects the difficulties migrant women have with reintegration. Some migrant women in Sri Lanka engage in conspicuous consumption in response to the envy, stigmatization, and other negative reactions they sense from their neighbors and other community members. They try to compensate for their reduced social status by displaying their heightened economic status. Even in the Philippines, where there is little bias against female migration, some women still overspend, treating their family, friends, and relatives and sometimes lending money to them. Migrants feel social pressure to help the people around them. The community perceives them as "nouveaux riches" regardless of their actual financial situation, and expects them to act like benevolent providers.

The lack of savings, overspending, and rising expectations all drive many women toward circular migration. Yet working overseas for many years does not guarantee a better life. Rosita, a forty-three-year-old Filipina, said she had saved very little money even after working in Hong Kong for ten years. All the money she sent home had been spent by family members—for their daily needs at first, and later for medical treatment for her husband and parents, and after that for their funerals. Generally, most migrant women find that it takes at least five years to save sufficient money. Among those who worked abroad for five or more years, 54 percent of Filipinas and 67 percent of Sri Lankans said they had saved enough money. Among the short-timers who worked four years or less, only 23 percent of Filipinas and 18 percent of Sri Lankans had been able to save money. Given that the potential to save increases with the length of overseas stay, many migrant women tend to stay abroad longer or engage in circular migration.

**DISRUPTED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

Family problems also significantly affect migrant women's decisions to prolong their stay abroad or engage in circular migration. Once they leave home, their family situation will never be the same again. The problem is more serious for married than for single women, since the husband and children have a hard time adjusting to the absence of the wife and mother. The most common family problems that migrant women face are the husband's extramarital affairs and neglect of the children. Stella, a forty-five-year-old Filipina who worked in Hong Kong, found out from a friend's letter that her husband was having an affair with someone in the same village. "I came back home immediately," she said. When she did, she also found that fami-
ily unity no longer existed: “As for meals, everyone was eating whenever
and whatever he or she liked to eat. There was no sense of family. I was sad.”
She made strenuous efforts to bring the family back together, and her fam-
ily life has been restored. Not everyone is as lucky as Stella. Apsara, a forty-
one-year-old Sri Lankan woman working in Hong Kong, divorced her hus-
band, who had left her for another woman. In the aftermath, he took the
house and land she had purchased with her earnings from her long-time
work abroad. A similar thing happened to Malani, a thirty-seven-year-old
Sri Lankan woman. While she was working in Kuwait, her husband aban-
donied their children for his lover, who eventually killed him.

Many women emigrate in order to secure a happy future for their fam-
ily, only to encounter problems that endanger the family. The worst cases
end in separation and divorce, as Apsara and Malani experienced. Once
women become separated or divorced, they become “true” breadwinners
and their financial responsibilities increase—all the more reason for them
to stay abroad as long as they can keep their job, or to emigrate repeatedly for
higher-paying work overseas.

It often happens that problems arise which do not lead to separation or
divorce but which are serious enough to keep migrant women away from
home. In Fiona’s case (mentioned earlier), her husband placed their children
with relatives without telling her. Fiona was upset when she learned this, es-
pecially because her husband was unemployed and had plenty of time to
take care of the children. She also learned that her in-laws were maltreating
her youngest son and that her husband was spending all the money she was
sending from Hong Kong. After all this, she now feels very differently about
her husband: “I don’t see him as my husband any more. I feel that he is
just like a friend.” Having lost her desire to be reunited in a family, she has
placed her children in her own parents’ care and decided to stay longer in
Hong Kong.

Even when there is no serious conflict, long absence can weaken family
ties to the extent that migrant women are discouraged from returning home.
Imelda, a fifty-nine-year-old Filipina, came to Hong Kong in 1982 and has
been working there ever since. Her husband had left her long before, and
that was the original reason why she migrated. During her absence, her
mother took care of her three children. All three are now adults: the oldest
son is thirty-two, the youngest twenty-four. Imelda feels proud that she has
been able to support them all and pay for their education. Yet when I asked
her why she did not return home now that they have all become independ-
ent, she said she feels a distance from them that she is unable to bridge. She
and her children can no longer communicate as mother and children. “I
The Road From Home  141

don't want to go home any more,” Imelda said sadly. No matter how much money migrant women provide, it may not be enough to compensate for the lost emotional ties between mother and children, or to repair rifts within the family. Rosita, another Filipina, provided her thirteen-year-old boy with all she could afford: a television, a VCR, a CD player, games, toys, and many other things. However, one day her son said to her: “Mom, you don't need to come back to the Philippines as long as you send me money.” “I got really hurt and felt sad,” she sighed. Cecile, a thirty-five-year-old Filipina in Hong Kong, also regrets staying away from home too long: “I missed the chance to see my children growing up. I couldn’t take care of them. Working abroad is good. You get money. But it’s bad for children.” Many migrant women come to realize what they are losing in their life, but by the time they do, it is often too late to regain it.

It seems that almost all migrant women experience family problems while they are away. I asked Fiona whether she would encourage her friends to work overseas. “No,” she said. “I don’t want them to experience what I have experienced. Many migrant women here have broken homes. So many of them! They might not tell you, but they actually do.” These family problems, which vary in seriousness, can trap migrant women in extended stays or circular migration, further discouraging them from returning home.

LIFE CYCLES

Migrant women do not extend their overseas stays forever, nor do they engage in circular migration forever. Almost all of them return home eventually, since most receiving countries in Asia have very strict policies that forbid them to settle. It is impossible for unskilled migrant workers to obtain permanent resident status, let alone citizenship. Some countries even prohibit migrant women from marrying their citizens. This means that even if they wish to, many unskilled migrant women do not have the option of retiring in their country of destination.

Furthermore, the work that most migrant women do—domestic and entertainment work—is physically demanding and becomes even more so with age. These women’s working hours are also long: the domestic workers in my sample averaged sixteen hours a day, and those in the Middle East almost never received days off. Moreover, there is a demand-side factor: one recruitment agency in Hong Kong noted that employers prefer to hire young women as domestic workers because they have more energy and can work more efficiently. All of this explains why few migrant women are over forty.
Chapter 5

Figure 5.1. Trapping Mechanism for Migrant Women I: A Failure Model

Figure 5.2. Trapping Mechanism for Migrant Women II: A Success Model

Trapping Patterns

The possibility that migrant women will become trapped in circular migration always exists for the reasons outlined above. The patterns for trapping can be summarized as shown in Figures 5.1 and 5.2.

I am not suggesting that circular migration and the prolonging of overseas stays occur in every single case. Some migrant women who have had traumatic experience such as rape, sexual harassment, or physical abuse do not migrate again or extend their stay. But others with similar experience still do. When such problems do not arise, the likelihood that they will prolong an overseas stay goes up even higher after the first migration, especially in cases where they have incurred greater debt because of high fees and non-payment of wages. Another factor that contributes indirectly to circular migration is an increase in women's self-confidence. Most of my respondents said they became more independent and confident about themselves after surviving a difficult experience of living abroad and dealing with foreign employers. This self-confidence empowered them to emigrate again despite their difficult experiences in the past.
STEP-UP MIGRATION

Some migrant women engage in circular migration not because of the “trapping mechanism” but because of their long-term goal—settling in North America. Most destination countries in Asia have very strict immigration policies that prevent unskilled workers from settling; by contrast, permanent residence and citizenship are more easily available in North America, especially Canada. American immigration policies allow Third World women to enter the country legally as nurses, but not as temporary domestic workers; Canada, on the other hand, accepts migrant women as caregivers. Caregivers in Canada can apply for landed immigrant status after several years. This makes the country a “dream destination” for many migrant women in Asia. Some of them hoped to meet a Canadian husband and get Canadian citizenship so that they could forever escape their poverty back home. The reality, however, is that most women find it extremely difficult to apply for a job in North America because of the high fees and because of the work experience required before they can apply.

Given such a circumstance, some women adopt a long-term strategy that I call “step-up migration.” They start out working in Asian countries; having accumulated money and experience, later on they apply for a job in Canada. Many of them start out in Middle Eastern countries, which require the lowest migration fees, then move to Hong Kong or Singapore and eventually to Canada. McKay’s data indicate that 41 percent of caregivers in Canada were migrant women with experience in Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore. In these cases, women end their circular migration once they obtain Canadian citizenship and settle there.

Conclusion

This chapter has cast light on the faces of migrant women and highlighted the similarities and differences among them. Various microlevel factors such as poverty and social networks push many women to emigrate from the Philippines and Sri Lanka (much less so from Bangladesh). The effects of “migration culture” are especially noteworthy in the Philippines and Sri Lanka where the socialization processes of migrant women’s daughters have fostered intergenerational female migration.

This chapter has also elucidated the importance of women’s autonomy in decisions to migrate. Contrary to the conventional assumption that views households as primary decision-making units, my study found that women’s decisions to migrate were mainly in their own hands. Women’s power to make decisions was a function of their role and degree of autonomy within
the household. Women’s financial responsibility within the household was crucial: the more responsible they were in this regard, the more keenly they were aware of the short- and long-term financial needs of all the family members, and the more motivated they were to work abroad to meet those needs. At the same time, migrant women were not entirely selfless. Many emigrated to meet their own goals and purposes, not just those of family members. Overall, in the Philippines and Sri Lanka, migrant women have much greater autonomy and decision-making power than they have been given credit for in much of the literature on migration.

Bangladeshi women were not quite motivated to migrate, perhaps due to their household positions. Compared with women in the Philippines and Sri Lanka, these women have much less decision-making power within households. This was reflected in women’s decision-making for migration: many Bangladeshi migrant women had been persuaded by their husband or family members to work overseas instead of taking the initiative themselves. Overall, low-income Bangladeshi women still do not assume a sufficient financial responsibility that compels them to emigrate. The lack of mentality for setting long-term financial plans, partly as a result of little education, is another reason. These examples clearly indicate that women’s individual autonomy and gender roles within households are just as important as state policies and other macrostructural factors.

This chapter has also examined the “trapping mechanism” faced by migrant women. Whether they fail or succeed in making money, the possibility of getting trapped in extended migration or circular migration always exists as a consequence of wage non-payment or underpayment, financial mismanagement by themselves or other family members, heightened consumerism, and family problems. Furthermore, some women perceive temporary migration in Asia as a stepping stone to permanent migration to North America.

Individual factors have a tremendous impact on the processes and patterns of female migration. However, they do not operate in isolation from the social environment that surrounds women. The next chapter will focus more on the meso-level factors in society, explaining how individual actions are affected by a particular social environment, and vice versa.