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Invisible labor, invisible bodies: how the global political economy affects reproductive freedom in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Feminist scholars have critically demonstrated the links between the global political economy, social reproduction and gender-based violence. This article builds on this scholarship by investigating restrictions to reproductive freedom and their connection to the depletion of women's bodies in the global political economy. Specifically, I use the Depletion through Social Reproduction (DSR) framework to reveal how the work of social reproduction is harnessed to service economic activity at the cost of rights to bodily integrity with the aid of religious fundamentalist ideologies that (re)inscribe discourses of female altruism such as the "self-sacrificing mother" ideal. Drawing on the case of the Philippines, I argue that the control of women's bodies is integral to the Philippines' economic strategy of exporting care workers in a competitive global political economy. This strategy is abetted by local Catholic religious fundamentalists who challenge reproductive rights reform at various levels of policy-making and legitimize the lack of investment to sustain social reproduction in the household, community and country as a whole. This article suggests that the neoliberal global economy is increasingly reproduced through women's labor at the cost of their bodily integrity and reproductive freedoms.

KEYWORDS Depletion; reproductive freedom; social reproduction; religious fundamentalisms; feminist political economy

Introduction

The right of all individuals to attain complete physical, mental and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes is recognized in various human rights instruments.¹ Reproductive freedom as Petchesky (2005, 303) points out is essentially "rights of the body and bodily integrity." As a concept, it emphasizes a "human rights discourse around the body and its needs for security, health and pleasure" (Petchesky 2005, 303). Reproductive freedom, however, represents an unfulfilled development goal and contentious human rights issue. Despite the growing recognition of women and gender equality as crucial drivers in the global economy, whether in the context of post-crisis recovery or in attaining global sustainable development goals, financial and political support for reproductive rights from developed countries remain inadequate in the face of worsening conditions for women and girls in developing countries (UNFPA 2013). Moreover, the idea that sexual and reproductive

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health is fundamental to human dignity remains fiercely contested by religious groups and conservative governments at various levels of policy-making. Indeed, the staunch opposition, particularly to women's autonomy over decisions relating to the body and sexuality, is increasingly backed by a formidable, transnational network of political connections and financial resources (Chappell 2006; Girard 2014).

In this article, I examine restrictions to reproductive freedom as mutually shaped by the depletive nature of the neoliberal global economy and by religious fundamentalist ideologies that (re)inscribe discourses of female altruism such as the "self-sacrificing mother" ideal. Building on critical feminist scholarship, I argue that neoliberal economic restructuring processes are enabled by practices that undermine bodily integrity primarily through the intensified reliance on women's unpaid social reproductive labor. Moreover, these processes perpetuate various everyday insecurities that directly and indirectly create spaces for religious fundamentalisms to normalize the lack of contributions to sustaining women's reproductive health and well-being simultaneously across different spheres in the household, community and the state. I draw on the case of the Philippines to demonstrate how sustaining its distinctive care-work remittance-driven economy comes at the cost of gradually depleting women's bodies, as extremely manifested by the sustained high maternal mortality rates in the country.

In the Philippines, female altruism is deliberately harnessed by the state to strategically position as the source country for ideal care workers in a neoliberal global economy. Local Catholic religious fundamentalists utilize the very same gendered discourses, particularly maternal self-sacrifice, to enforce policy restrictions to reproductive freedom and perpetuate harmful norms that effectively deny women and girls the means to take better care of their own bodies. Hence, as this article underscores, advancing reproductive freedom across all spheres of social reproduction is dependent on transformative change that tackles how the neoliberal global economy devalues social reproductive labor, and how particular religious fundamentalist ideologies serve to complement this economic devaluing.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I begin by situating this research within the growing body of feminist political economy work that theorizes the material and ideological roots to gender-based violence. I draw on the Depletion through Social Reproduction (DSR) framework developed by Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas (2014). DSR is useful for conceptualizing the links between women's bodily integrity and the lack of material contributions to value care and domestic work in the context of crisis and global austerity. Second, I map out the growing relevance of religious fundamentalisms for legitimizing particular restrictions to social welfare provisions especially on sexual and reproductive health, as well as in supplying meaning to experiences of gendered inequalities in an increasingly precarious world. Religious fundamentalist forces are present in every religion and manifest in dynamic and non-uniform ways across households, communities and states, but they are nevertheless underpinned by the common intent to protect traditional notions on sexuality, human reproduction and "the family," which the global sexual and reproductive rights agenda seeks to dismantle. Finally, I turn to the national context of the Philippines to further unpack how the global political economy affects reproductive freedom.

Global political economy, depletion and gender-based violence

Social reproduction collectively refers to biological reproduction, which includes the provision of sexual and affective services that maintain family and intimate relationships;

domestic labor and related care work at home and in the community; and the reproduction of cultural and religious norms, values and practices (Hoskyns and Rai 2007; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014). As a key concept, feminist scholars in international relations have made significant theoretical contributions in drawing the links between the neoliberal global political economy, social reproduction and gender-based violence (Peterson 2005; Elson 2012; True 2012). Particularly, feminist political economy research has shown first how the economic devaluing of social reproductive labor vis-à-vis productive labor underpins the unrecognized contributions of social reproduction to national and global economies. In times of economic crisis, this invisibility of social reproductive contributions heightens the concurrent reliance on and erasing of women's bodies through neoliberal policies of austerity that involve cutting back of social welfare provisions and conditioning greater volunteer work to the disproportionate detriment of women and girls (Elson 2010; UN Women 2014). Furthermore, as True (2012) argues, vulnerability to gender-based violence is constituted within global political economic processes and the material inequalities they generate, which take root in the gendered division of labor in the household.

Second, research has drawn attention to how neglecting social reproductive contributions leads to harmful consequences to the sustainability of social reproduction itself (see Hoskyns and Rai 2007; Elson 2012; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014). The concept of DSR is relevant for exposing the ways by which social reproductive labor is harnessed to service economic activity at the expense of bodily integrity. According to Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas (2014, 86), DSR occurs when there is "a critical gap between the outflows – domestic, affective and reproductive – and the inflows that sustain the health and well-being of those engaged in social reproduction." Indeed, depletion highlights the "structural aspects of social reproduction that undermine the sustainability of the everyday lives of women and men in a given social context" (Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014, 89–90). Though the authors do not explicitly apply the concept of depletion to unpack the political economy roots to gender-based violence, they nevertheless lay bare the bodies that experience depletion particularly in the context of everyday life or beyond the boundaries of crises (see for a similar point Elias and Rai 2015).

Using the DSR framework, I identify restrictions to reproductive freedom as indicative of the continuum between the gradual loss of bodily integrity and the structural and symbolic forms of gender-based violence with which women and girls disproportionately contend on a daily basis. Consequently, these conditions are also likely to be exacerbated in times of crisis (see for example UNFPA 2015). Employing a feminist political economy analysis to reproductive freedom renders visible the multidimensional ways by which "power operates ... through the structured relations of production and reproduction that govern the distribution of resources, benefits, privileges and authority" (True 2012, 30). It shows violence is not only directly inflicted on an individual's body but also rooted in structures that relegate unequal status and levels of access to resources and decision-making that significantly impact life chances, as well as in the symbolic representations that justify and render these inequalities as "natural" (True 2012; Dominguez and Menjivar 2014; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014).

For instance, feminist scholars have noted the marked increase in recognition among international organizations of gender equality as a crucial driver for economic progress whether in the context of post-crisis recovery or in attaining global development (Roy 2010; Calkin 2015). First, we are seeing unprecedented levels of what Sassen (2000) observes as the "feminisation of survival" in the global economy such that households,

communities and states are increasingly dependent on women and social reproductive labor for economic survival. This dependence is further intensified in the context of crisis and global austerity wherein women's unpaid time and care work are more prevalently assumed and expected to be elastic. That is, they are contingent on women's willingness to make the necessary sacrifices for the family, community and the state (UN Women 2014, 11).² Second, through framing gender equality as "smart economics," broadening women's and girls' economic participation especially in developing countries has been increasingly represented as necessary for boosting economic growth as well as in rescuing economies in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (Roy 2010; Griffin 2015). The problem, however, is that given the prevalence of restrictions to reproductive freedom globally and across various countries, women and girls are being made responsible for everything else, and yet are denied the means to take better care of their own bodies.

At the close of the 2000–2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDG) agenda, the final United Nations report noted that despite improvements, progress has been slow and uneven in the last 25 years with many developing countries, including the Philippines, falling significantly short of the global goals and actual targets for improving maternal health (Goal 5) (UN 2015). As the report points out, only half of all pregnant women are able to receive the minimum antenatal care. The need for reliable and effective contraception continues to be unmet with access largely defined by one's age, marital status, education, disability, ethnicity and/or geographic location. Moreover, the growing rate of adolescent pregnancies remains poorly addressed. Early pregnancy strongly undermines a girl's ability to pursue education, fully participate in economic and political decision-making and her likelihood of attaining the highest possible health and well-being. Global data, however, indicate that the birth rate among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 only declined from fifty-nine births per 1,000 girls in 1990 to fifty-one births in 2015 (UN 2015, 42). Maternal deaths refer to the death of a woman during pregnancy or as a result of childbirth related complications. Global data suggest that in 2013 around 800 women per day died of preventable maternal deaths. Adolescent girls whose bodies may be too young to cope with the physical strain of childbirth are at an even greater risk of maternal mortality (UN 2015, 39).

The DSR framework informs us that the depletion experienced by women and girls through their sexual and reproductive well-being is enabled by how the global economy is increasingly reliant on the domestic and care-work contributions while this work remains unpaid, underpaid or uncounted. But as V. Spike Peterson observes, "this economic devalorisation is either hardly noticed or deemed 'acceptable' because it is consistent with cultural devalorisation of that which is feminised" (2005, 508). We know for example that the gendered division of labor has been rendered "natural" across various historical and geographical contexts through cultural and/or religious tradition (see Yuval-Davis 1997). In the next section, I expound on how religious fundamentalist ideologies symbolically justify depletion and the broader gendered inequalities it embodies.

Religious fundamentalisms, female altruism and reproductive freedom

I use religious fundamentalism to refer to the ideology espoused by different religious groups and conservative governments whose common feature, as Kandiyoti (2015) observes, is:

to establish the principle that matters relating to sexuality, to the control of female bodies, and to reproductive choice do not belong to the sphere of civic deliberation, public choice, or human rights but to a domain of non-negotiable morality defined by doctrinal imperatives.

Studies show that religious fundamentalist forces are increasingly present in every religion – Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Judaism (Sen 2005; Estrada Claudio 2010; AWID 2016). Yet, they reflect a shared “conservative and patriarchal point of view on gender issues which come together under a rhetorical ‘pro-family’ rubric” (Chappell 2006, 493–94). They “can work formally through the state and informally through institutions and individuals” (Estrada Claudio 2010, 15). However, “the violence that they are wreaking on women’s rights may differ and manifest in specific ways depending on the context” (AWID 2016, 10).

The distinction between *fundamentalist* religious ideologies and religion per se is crucial because progressive interpretations and practices of each religion equally abound (Moghadam 2005; AWID 2016). Moreover, as other scholars also note, religions can provide “empowering” spaces that enable women to negotiate and even transform other patriarchal structures that define their everyday lives (see for examples Chong 2006; Htun and Weldon 2015). A feminist political economy perspective, therefore, is crucial for interrogating how different religious fundamentalist groups and conservative governments normalize restrictions to sustaining social reproductive labor through undermining sexual and reproductive rights reform in distinct ways. The rise of religious fundamentalisms in tandem with neoliberal global economic processes is not merely incidental, but in many contexts it may play a central role in legitimizing gendered inequalities and by offering a lens to process personal and household experiences of depletion (see also Sen 2005; Estrada Claudio 2010; AWID 2016).

Household and community levels

Evangelicalism, for example, serves as a “neoliberal technology of the self” that gains importance in relation to deepening and permanent precariousness in the global economy (Fraser 2005). According to Fraser (2005, 303), “evangelicalism does not give people security. Rather it gives them a discourse and set of practices through which they can manage insecurity.” Similarly in Catholicism, Pope Francis, the leader of the global Catholic community, has strongly spoken against social injustices including global income inequalities. Still, he relies on the “martyrdom of mothers” as an antidote to the contemporary “self-centredness of societies.” In his words, “motherhood is more than childbearing; it is a life choice entailing sacrifice, respect for life, and commitment to passing on those human and religious values which are essential for a healthy society” (quoted in Harris 2015). Indeed, in the Philippine context, cultural definitions of acceptable femininity largely stem from religious symbols such as the Madonna – virginal and a martyr – indicating the ingrained influence of Catholicism in society (Roces 2009, 272). So as Caron Gentry observes, “Christianity, like other faiths, is a spiritual and relational way of being that requires a follower to be concerned with injustice and to care for the marginalized” (2015, 2). However, at its core is the self-sacrificing individual which is essentially feminized such that obligation weighs more heavily on women than men (Gentry 2015, 12).

We see themes of female altruism replicated in global development agendas based on how motherhood is fashioned as key to a country’s development success (Molyneux 2007; Roy 2010). Roy (2010, 548) argues that the “Third World Woman” in the MDG

agenda is no longer represented as a victim; rather she is a heroic entrepreneur and selfless altruist. Notions of female altruism frame social reproductive labor largely performed by women and girls as duty or service. Female altruism also partly informs why social reproductive labor is treated as a “special” form of labor – one that cannot readily be given a monetary value. As a result, women and girls do not necessarily share in the rewards or benefits brought about by their social reproductive contributions, and that is expected of them. Due to a “feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation,” which has its basis in religion and/or culture, “women are working harder in and outside the home ... however, in most cases, [they] appear to see no justification to expect or demand more as a result of giving more” (Chant 2010, 114).

State level

Religion and culture are primary vehicles through which female altruism becomes ossified within institutions such as national policies and family laws. As Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon point out, particular configurations of “church-state relations help to shape key political outcomes such as party systems, the development of the welfare state, and the extent and nature of social provision” (2015, 453). At the state level, the political institutionalization of religious authority is an impediment to promoting sex equality in family law (Htun and Weldon 2015). When particular religious interpretations become “frozen” in institutions, these inform gendered hierarchies around distributions of resources, authority and obligations in society that are deemed natural. Consequently, the normative prescriptions and stereotypes contained within them serve as “instruments of inequality” affecting individuals differently depending on how they are positioned within overlapping structures of power based on class, sexuality, nation or ethnicity (MacKinnon 2013, 1023). For instance, discourses relating to the family including motherhood are invoked to advance different, sometimes even competing, political agendas because laws governing the family also regulate access to resources including social welfare (Carreon and Moghadam 2015; Htun and Weldon 2015). These also define citizenship demarcating boundaries among diverse ethnic, national and/or religious groupings (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Culturally and religiously-informed female altruism in this regard enables and exacerbates gender-based violence. When women and girls depart from or transgress religious doctrine and its interpretations, they are subjected to shame, guilt or stigma as well as physical violence for not conforming to acceptable behaviors and appearances (True 2012; AWID 2016). The emphasis on female bodies as *the* biological and cultural reproducers in society has also been used to define various forms of social reproduction in exclusively heteronormative terms. More specifically in the case of restrictions to reproductive freedom in the Philippines, family and “pro-life” issues are strategically deployed to obscure growing socio-economic inequalities (Estrada Claudio 2010; Tanyag 2015; see also Razavi and Jenichen 2010). Thus, alongside the religious fundamentalist value placed upon female altruism is the devalorization and indeed violence against women and girls justified in its name. At the end of the day, depletion through social reproduction is about control of women’s bodies, which has been at the heart of authoritative struggles over claims on how society and the roles and relationships within it ought to be (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Global level

Globally, religious fundamentalist actors such as conservative governments from the Middle East and the US right wing which identify with two of the world's major religions (Christianity and Islam), have mobilized transnationally to oppose sexual and reproductive rights. These "unholy" alliances have solidified at UN conferences, Commission on the Status of Women meetings and key international conferences on HIV/AIDS, population and development and children (Petchesky 2003; Sen 2005; Chappell 2006). International gatherings have been increasingly pivotal in creating spaces for this conservative lobby to organize and adapt to global and regional governance structures in the same way that women's human rights groups all over the world have mobilized transnationally (Moghadam 2005; Chappell 2006; Molyneux 2013; Girard 2014). In a bid to broaden political alliances, the Vatican, along with other religious fundamentalist groups, increasingly represents itself as a champion for the Global South against economic injustices. Specifically, Catholicism identifies as a "Church for the poor," given its historical Marxist links through the Theology of Liberation, thus professing "a special concern for the poor and the victims of oppression, which in turn begets a commitment to justice" (Ratzinger 1984). However, such strategies are used to effectively advance an anti-feminist agenda globally (Sen 2005; Petchesky 2000). Economic inequalities, from a feminist perspective, cannot be divorced from the gendered inequalities that emanate from the control of women's bodies.

In the context of developing countries, the already weak infrastructures for reproductive health care are further weakened by globally-promoted neoliberal economic policies that roll back the state's responsibility vis-à-vis welfare provisioning. Religious fundamentalists have been able to leverage greater influence over the reproductive choices of many women precisely as a result of these gaps. Crucially, neoliberal governance, which emphasizes public-private partnerships in delivering social welfare services and aid, directly enables faith-based non-government organizations (see Prügl and True 2014). For example, international and national donor bodies such as the World Bank and UN have begun treating faith-based service providers as "privileged interlocutors" especially in contexts of humanitarian crises (Cooper 2015, 56). However, the "faith-based turn," especially in humanitarian and emergency relief, serves to embed religious morality in addressing public health crises (Cooper 2015). Given the stance of fundamentalist groups on sex and reproduction, broadening the role of faith-based welfare delivery before, during and after crisis can only suggest that sexual and reproductive health and well-being will be disproportionately and adversely impacted.

Finally, as Petchesky (2005, 303) points out:

in the reality of a world governed by neo-liberal capitalist regimes, sexual and reproductive health and rights and the right to the highest attainable standard of health care are entirely subject to resource availability and held hostage to inequitable patterns of resource distribution that belie the myths of scarcity.

According to a 2014 World Health Organization report, maternal mortality ratio, or the number of maternal deaths during a given time period per 100,000 live births, is still fourteen times higher in developing regions than in developed regions (WHO 2014, 1). These deaths reflect not just global material inequalities between developed and developing countries but also ultimately whose bodies and social reproduction matter. This is why reproductive freedom is both transformative and elementary. It

goes against the depletive nature of the global political economy by recognizing that the bodily integrity of women and girls comes first and foremost.

Mothers at the service of the Philippine state

I now turn to further analyzing the case of the Philippines to reveal the context-specific ways by which depletion at the household and community levels is enabled by the neoliberal global economy and exacerbated by efforts of local Catholic religious fundamentalists to undermine reproductive freedom. According to Enloe ([1989] 2000, 197), “to operate in the international arena, governments depend on ideas of masculinized dignity and feminized sacrifice to sustain their sovereignty.” The Philippines, with its remittance-driven economy, is sustained by the state’s strategic harnessing of female altruism. Consequently, discourses of female altruism also define the structural and symbolic basis for the conditions that undermine reproductive freedom in the country. This gendered allocation of sacrifice increasingly informs whose contributions are rewarded and how in the neoliberal global economy.

Labor migration has been a key economic strategy in the Philippines by households and governments since the 1970s (Chin 1998; Safri and Graham 2010). Like many developing countries, labor migration in the Philippines was triggered largely by the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and was initially framed as a temporary solution to reducing high unemployment levels (see Chin 1998). The labor export of the Philippines is highly gendered with female overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) heavily concentrated in “unskilled” and service occupations such as laborers and domestic workers (NSO 2015). This pattern adds evidence to how the Philippines is positioned within a global division of labor that is increasingly gendered and racialized (Gibson, Law, and McKay 2001). The continued global demand for care work, particularly to support the ageing populations of developed countries, suggests that labor migration will remain a key feature of the Philippine economy despite recent economic developments such as the growth of business process outsourcing (BPO) industry including call centers in the country (see David 2015).

The total number of OFWs was estimated at 2.3 million in 2014 (NSO 2015). Remittance inflows to the country have steadily increased in the past four decades. On average, remittances constitute 10–11 percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) (Bayangos 2012). In 2014 alone, OFWs sent back 173.2 billion pesos (or approximately US\$4 billion) (NSO 2015). Indeed, Philippine remittances have been observed as more stable than other financial flows in the country since 1996, and have outranked foreign direct investments (FDI) and official development assistance (ODA) (Bayangos 2012, 364; Nicolas 2012, 2). Despite the noted impacts of the recent global economic crisis on migrant workers, including retrenchments, OFWs’ intensified vulnerability to precarious employment is just part of “the ongoing series of economic crises that Philippine workers and their families have faced at home and abroad for decades” (Spitzer and Piper 2014, 1008). Thus, precarity for many OFWs is normalized with the Philippine state playing a pivotal role in conditioning migrants and their families to merely cope or mitigate the consequences of economic crises.

Laborers and unskilled workers, who are predominantly women engaged in vulnerable occupations and are often underpaid and exploited, also typically send home the biggest amount of remittances. In 2014, these women sent back 24.3 billion pesos or 19.2 percent of the total remittances to the country (NSO 2015). As “cheap” laborers,

what this evidence indicates is that they are remitting the greater share of their earnings with little to spare for their personal consumption to the detriment of their well-being (see also Spitzer and Piper 2014, 1011). This is intensified in times of economic crises, which typically push their wages further down. Themes of selflessness or self-sacrifice particularly for mothers pervade various studies on Filipino domestic workers, underscoring the important role played on one hand by cultural–religious expectations for women and OFWs in general, and on the other by the financial dependence of left-behind families (see for examples Gibson, Law, and McKay 2001; Parreñas 2003). The point is that though not all OFWs are self-sacrificing or altruistic, this is the ideal against which they rebel, to which they conform or with which they bargain.

State-level depletion and the global economy

The Philippine state fuels depletion as it actively promotes labor migration without adequately addressing the socio-economic conditions that push Filipinos, especially women, to work overseas and undermine their health and well-being. For instance, improvements in socio-economic well-being through remittances remain localized to the immediate family and communities where migrants come from (Gibson, Law, and McKay 2001). In the long run, labor migration contributes to income inequality within the country as governments reap tremendous profit particularly on the backs of women migrants through their remittances without having to make substantial investments in domestic social welfare infrastructures (Parreñas 2003; Safri and Graham 2010). Yet, it is also women and girls, as caregivers and biological reproducers, who are disproportionately dependent on state welfare support, particularly for accessing reproductive health services (Chant 2010; True 2012; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014). Moreover, despite the reliance on remittances that support the Philippine economy significantly, the state continues to inadequately protect migrant workers' rights especially those in already vulnerable occupations such as domestic workers. For instance, through "pre-departure orientation seminars," OFWs receive more training on remitting money, learning the various bank and non-bank remittance agencies through which to route their money, than on the protection mechanisms available to them.³

The Philippine state has acknowledged the valuable contributions by migrant workers in sustaining the economy. Beginning in the late 1980s, OFWs have been branded as the new heroes of the nation (Gibson, Law, and McKay 2001). The discourse continues to be relevant as it is reproduced by the state through national awards such as the Model OFW Family and Bagong Bayani (New Hero) award. The state's initial deployment of the "heroes of the nation" discourse coincided with the successive, high profile cases of abuse and exploitation of overseas workers including the execution of a domestic helper in Singapore in 1995. The nationalist discourse of OFWs as heroes underscores how migrant workers serve the country at great personal cost to themselves and their families. These forms of recognition evoke imageries of martyrdom emphasizing the virtues of self-sacrifice by both migrants and their families in favor of the country's economy. They form part of the various "technologies of servitude" that inculcate female migrant workers with values of selflessness, service and sacrifice for the family and country (Rudnykyj 2004; Spitzer and Piper 2014, 1013). More importantly, they offer a lens through which experiences of hardship and suffering by migrants and their families are given meaning.

The depletive conditions in the Philippines, however, are rooted in the strategic gendering of the Philippine state as it positions itself within the global political economy. As

a labor exporting country, it relies on the gendered association of national identity with representations of Filipinos as innately apt for social reproductive labor, specifically in terms of service or care-related occupations. As Barber (2000, 400) notes, “to speak of Filipina now, particularly when speaking from outside of the Philippines, is to conjure up the idea of domestic service.” Indeed, the word “Filipina” translates to “maid” in Italy, Greece and Spain. It is precisely this gendering that allows the Philippine state to capitalize on “nurturing qualities associated with ideologies of Philippine femininity” to secure a comparative advantage in a global economy increasingly reliant on social reproductive labor subsidy (Barber 2010, 146; see also Chin 1998, 105–106).

For example, in the case of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong and Singapore, the antagonism towards them by female employers has long been documented and made known to the state. Fixated on the sexuality of domestic workers and their perceived ambivalent relationship status, Filipino women have been subjected to the suspicions and severe policing of female employers who fear that domestic workers will form illicit relationships with their husbands (see Constable 1997). In April 2015, a prominent female public official in Hong Kong insinuated that their government should be held responsible for marriages wrecked by Filipino domestic workers (*The Manila Times*, 19 April 2015). In response, the Philippine government stresses that, “Filipinos are culturally family-centered. We are known to highly value family ties. This trait has defined Filipinos for generations, wherever they are and whatever circumstances they may be in. *Filipino women are homemakers, not home-wreckers*” (DOLE 2015, emphasis mine).⁴

Reinforcing the ideal of Filipino women as “innate mothers” protects the moral identity of domestic workers, and represents them as non-threatening to married female employers. It also has a direct and immediate benefit for reinforcing the Philippines’ stake in global care economies. Female altruism in the context of Philippine labor migration, however, aligns with the interest of local Catholic religious fundamentalists in entrenching the cultural ideal of the “non-complaining and silenced Filipina” (Roces 2009, 272). Through the same discourses of female altruism, local Catholic religious fundamentalists justify restrictions to reproductive freedom in the country. Being compliant and subservient makes Filipino women not only ideal care workers overseas but also valued mothers, wives and daughters in Philippine society. Women are thus at the service of the Philippine state and the neoliberal global economy, but this servicing comes at the cost of their reproductive freedom.

Maternal mortality: a cost to social reproduction

An extreme indicator of depletion is the case of maternal mortality. In the case of the Philippines, the clear economic reliance on women’s social reproductive labor especially in terms of the gendered sacrifices expected of them is compounded by worsening conditions for reproductive health. These include severe restrictions on accessing contraceptives and the criminalization of abortion in the country (Likhaan, Reprocen and Center for Reproductive Rights [2007] 2010). Maternal mortality in the Philippines has not registered any significant decline for more than two decades at an average of 128 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (WHO et al. 2015, 1). Crucially, the total unmet need for family planning registered an increase from 15.7 percent in 2006 to 19.7 percent in 2011 (NSO 2012). This unmet need intensifies for poor, rural and less educated Filipino women (NSO 2012). In addition, adolescent and unplanned pregnancies, the majority of which occur in poor households, affect one in ten young Filipino women

(NSO 2014). The prevalence of adolescent pregnancies in the Philippines is increasing and among the highest in the ASEAN region (see *IRIN News* 2012; YAFS 2014).

Historically, the Philippines has been among the developing countries most heavily dependent on foreign donations of family planning supplies. Since 1970, contraceptives in the country have almost exclusively come from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and other international organizations, thus lessening the need for government procurement. In particular, USAID contraceptive donations accounted for 80 percent of the country's total supply requirement (Tanyag 2015, 65). However, beginning in the late 1990s, the US government decided to systematically stop being the main provider of supplies, and left developing countries to be "self-reliant" with their family planning programs (Brune 2005). The withdrawal of USAID contraceptive supplies in the Philippines significantly undermined reproductive freedom in the country by opening a juncture for Catholic religious fundamentalists to exert greater influence in the everyday reproductive decisions of many Filipino women including religious minorities. Catholicism's historical privilege or dominance in Philippine politics and society is reflected in the extent by which Catholic doctrinal teaching is embedded within state institutions. Catholicism is deeply ingrained and it is taken for granted that Philippine courts explicitly apply Catholic morality as legal standards (Ruiz Austria 2004).

It was not until 2007 when the phase-out of USAID supplies in the Philippines became effective that Catholic Church leaders, "pro-life" groups and local government officials including conservative elite women were able to restrict access to contraceptives through the state. The national government under President Gloria Arroyo (2001–10) made no effort to publicly provide contraceptives to the detriment of poor women who were reliant on state welfare support (Tanyag 2015, 64). Throughout her presidency, Arroyo maintained a firm stance against contraceptives on the basis that her policy is responsive to the needs of most Filipino mothers who are conservative Catholics and do not use contraceptives (Abinales and Amoroso 2005, 296). She was also instrumental in enforcing a ban that remains in place today on Postinor, a widely used and WHO-endorsed emergency contraceptive pill (Ruiz Austria 2004, 99; see also WHO 2016). In the highly-populated city of Manila, a de facto ban on all types of contraceptives has been in place due to a policy promulgated by a "pro-life" mayor since 2000 (Likhaan, Reprocen and Center for Reproductive Rights [2007] 2010). And yet, national surveys have consistently shown that the use of contraceptive pills is the most preferred method for family planning regardless of class and religious background (see for examples NSO 2012, 2014). Muslim religious leaders representing an estimated 5 percent of the Filipino population had even issued a religious edict or *fatwa* in support of all family planning methods as early as 2003 (Solamo-Antonio 2015, 94). This underscores the use of Catholic fundamentalist beliefs, rather than religion per se, that has been pivotal in perpetuating restrictions to reproductive freedom.

Recently, a national legislation called the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012, more popularly known as the RH Law, was enacted after more than fourteen years since it was first proposed as a bill. With the support of President Benigno Aquino III, a progressive coalition led by women's groups successfully campaigned for a law that guarantees state funding for reproductive information, services and supplies in the country. However, three years after the RH Law was enacted, it still remains ineffective as the state recognition of reproductive freedom has not been matched by actual allocation of state resources. Local Catholic Church leaders and "pro-life" groups, more

importantly, continue to challenge reproductive rights reform in the country on the basis that reproductive freedom goes against the “Filipino culture of life” – one that valorizes motherhood in society.

International human rights bodies have long expressed serious concern over restrictions to sexual and reproductive rights in the Philippines. For instance the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2008) and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) have urged the state to stem the rise of maternal deaths and adolescent pregnancies in the country by ensuring universal access to contraceptives and abrogating other existing institutional restrictions to reproductive freedom. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2015), as a result of the optional protocol inquiry, concluded that the Philippine state is accountable for various grave and systematic reproductive rights violations in the country. Specifically, the committee stressed the role of the Philippine state in perpetuating cultural and religious stereotypes of women’s primary role as child bearers and child-rearers in undermining and constraining reproductive freedom (CEDAW 2015, 13; see also Cook and Cusack 2010). It is precisely these stereotypes, such as the discourse of selfless and nurturing mothers, that the Philippine state strategically deploys to sustain its remittance-driven economy, which then also serves to justify restrictions on women’s bodily integrity. As a prominent Filipino senator argued during the intense public debates over the RH Law in 2012, “our [Filipinos’] biggest export is OFWs. That is export. That’s why I’m against RH. What will improve our economy is the excess population that is used to accepting jobs that others don’t want to handle” (quoted in Macaraig 2012). Recognizing women’s reproductive freedom threatens the country’s ability to keep its advantage in the global economy and maintain a stable flow of remittances.

Conclusion

Restrictions to reproductive freedom are a clear revelation of prevailing global material inequalities and how crisis and global austerity come at the cost of bodily depletion for women and girls. Feminist political economy research has shown how social reproductive labor is harnessed to service various economic activities, but the costs and benefits of this servicing remain profoundly unequal. In this article, I contribute to this growing scholarship by highlighting how women and girls are often excluded from material redistribution and subjected to violence despite their immense contributions to sustain the needs of the family, community and the state. This occurs precisely because their labors are considered acts of sacrifice through the legitimating lens of religious fundamentalist ideologies, particularly female altruism. Importantly, it is through such ideologies that the subordination of bodily autonomy and integrity to economic survival, as well as barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health, are normalized. For care work exporting countries such as the Philippines, the linkages between care work export, female altruism and the deterioration of bodily autonomy and integrity are apparent. As a crucial site of depletion, the Philippines illustrates how economic dependence is directly maintained by discourses of female altruism wherein self-sacrificing women are fashioned as ideal care workers in Filipino households and the global economy. However, these very same discourses are rearticulated by local Catholic religious fundamentalists to justify restrictions to reproductive freedom. Yet, without sustaining the very bodies that render gendered service and sacrifice, the well-being of households, communities and states is also severely undermined. Locating reproductive

freedom within this contemporary nexus allows us to see that social reproductive labor is not merely devalued relative to productive labor, but that it is in fact increasingly being valued in religious fundamentalist terms.

Notes

1. See for examples the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW); International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Program of Action; Beijing Platform for Action (BfPA); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).
2. First, the global economic crisis brought differing consequences for developed and developing countries, particularly as the latter group was affected indirectly depending on the extent of their integration into the global economy (UN Women 2014, 15). Second, for many developing countries such as the Philippines, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) is a continuation of the various economic and political crises sustained by the state and households whose very economic survival is predicated on precarious work conditions available to migrant workers, especially female domestic workers (Spitzer and Piper 2014, 1010).
3. See Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) websites for examples: <http://www.poea.gov.ph/>, <http://www.owwa.gov.ph/>.
4. The Secretary for the Department of Labor and Employment issued an official statement indicating how the Philippine government took the issue seriously (DOLE 2015). I also note that the secretary at the time was a Christian woman.

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