

**Bielefeld Anthropological
Papers on
Issues of the **G**lobal **W**orld
(**BAPGW**)**

Working Paper Nr. 2
October 2023

**Reimagining Social
Protection:
Financialized Futures
Among Ageing
Migrant Domestic
Workers in Asia**

Megha Amrith

Editors

Minh T.N. Nguyen

Antje Missbach

Editorial Board

Éva Rozália Hölzle

Jingyu Mao

Wayne Palmer

Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka

Tobias Reu

Julia Roth

Inka Stock

Phill Wilcox

Heidemarie Winkel

Editorial Assistant

Alexander Fetting

ISSN:

2939-9149

Webpage:

https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/fakultaeten/soziologie/fakultaet/arbeitsbereiche/ab6/ag_sozialanthropologie/

Reimagining Social Protection: Financialized Futures Among Ageing Migrant Domestic Workers in Asia

Megha Amrith

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
amrith@mmg.mpg.de

Abstract

A common narrative among Filipino migrant domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong is that their work abroad is to guarantee a better future for their families. Migrant women frequently extend their temporary contracts, sometimes over decades, as they seek to realize numerous life projects, such as remitting money for their children's education, building a family house, or responding to medical or climate-related crises. Yet their contracts can only be extended until retirement age, after which they must return to their countries of origin. This paper focuses on migrant women approaching this critical juncture as they begin to shift their focus inwards, towards themselves, in the face of precarious futures with limited state-based forms of social protection and uncertainties around kinship care in later life. As a consequence, domestic workers increasingly enroll in courses on 'financial literacy' to prepare for their retirement. Such courses are led by an array of actors from NGOs and co-operatives to state agencies, private multinationals, and motivational speakers. They generate new financialized aspirations among migrant women which revolve around self-responsibility for success and security in later life. This cultivation of a self-oriented and 'purpose-driven' ethos also generates new (inter)dependencies, risks, and exclusions in migrant women's lives. I further examine how such financialized modes of thinking exist alongside, and in tension with alternative imaginaries around social protection and how to live a good and meaningful present and future life.

Keywords

**Social Protection,
Transnational
Migration,
Ageing, Domestic
Work, Financiali-
zation, Southeast
Asia**

Introduction

On Sundays, the campus of an international school in Singapore turns into a learning space for domestic workers. Migrant domestic workers of different nationalities gather in the classrooms of this school to take courses on managing their money, building confidence, or setting up a business. These courses are run by a local NGO focused on financial literacy for low-income women, and particularly, migrant domestic workers. The classes are taught by volunteer teachers, many of whom work in the financial sector. One Sunday, when I went to sit in on the classes, the women were learning about 'how to say no' to family members who expect migrant

women to send money home at the drop of a hat for a range of household-related expenses. In a role play, the teacher in the class plays a relative whose roof is breaking because of the heavy rains and is asking his migrant cousin to pay for the roof repairs. He puts emotional pressure on his migrant relative with statements such as ‘the children need to be safe; the rains were so heavy this year’ or ‘you are single, help me now and I will take care of you when you are older’. The migrant struggles to say no in this fictional (yet realistic) situation and wishes she could just yell, ‘your roof is your responsibility!’ The women in the class point out that the role play reflects many a conversation they have had with relatives. One student pointed out that ‘there are many people we know who work abroad fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years but go home without any savings’, because they ‘give in’ too much to seemingly never-ending demands.

This interaction is just one of many that occur within an increasing array of financial education course offerings developed for migrant domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong. Such courses are run and sponsored by a range of actors, from local NGOs, multinational corporations, intergovernmental organizations, co-operatives, and small businesses and aim to teach migrant women how to be ‘financially smart’ through saving, budgeting, avoiding debt, investing in financial markets and products, starting and managing a business, or joining a co-operative. They also focus on changing mindsets when it comes to giving money to others (as seen in the opening example) and on building self-esteem, confidence, and a self- and future-oriented ethos. The increasing prevalence of financial education courses represent the next step in the widespread narrative among migrant-sending states and intergovernmental organizations that migrants are ‘agents of development’. Beyond sending remittances, migrant workers are encouraged by sending states and financial institutions to remain productive, to continue to earn an income upon their return to their countries of origin, and to ‘invest’ financially in their own futures.

While financial education courses target migrants of all ages, I noticed in my observations in courses that I attended in Singapore and Hong Kong, that a number of the women participating were middle-aged or older, approaching retirement and realizing that they had little in the way of savings for themselves. These women form part of a generation of contract migrant labourers who left their countries of origin between the 1970s – 1990s and is now ageing. My specific focus is on an older generation of migrant domestic workers from countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia primarily, but also India and Sri Lanka, who have worked abroad in Asian cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong over decades. They are on the most restrictive work visa: two-year contracts, renewable until the age of 60 (in Singapore) or until the migrant worker is ‘too old’ to work or to obtain insurance (in Hong Kong), after which migrant women must return to their countries of origin. In short, there are no pathways to permanent residence in the places they have spent most of their working lives and little is yet known about the forms of care and social protection that will support migrant women later in life upon their mandatory returns. While tropes of sacrifice and expectations of intergenerational reciprocity are often uttered by migrant women over the course of their migrant journeys, these ideas are also tenuous and challenged by the changing aspirations of migrant women who also state that they do not want to be a burden on their kin after having long experienced a sense of independence abroad as earners. And despite the largely-state orchestrated arrangements of their contract migration journeys, state-based social protection schemes are insufficient to support migrant livelihoods.

In this context, this paper focusses on middle-aged and ageing migrant women (mostly in their 50s and 60s). Though I did research with migrant women of different nationalities, this paper concentrates on the Philippine context given its systematized ‘labour export policy’ since the 1970s, which has actively promoted the out-migration of its citizens, a significant proportion of them women in domestic and care work sectors (Rodriguez 2010). Within this scheme, the Philippine state has discursively framed migrants as ‘new heroes’ of the nation, who are celebrated for their financial contributions to the country through remittances. They are also seen as entrepreneurial ‘development actors’ who are to continue generating revenue even after the ends of their working lives abroad (Department of Labor and Employment Philippines 2007).

This paper adopts a focus on an emergent space promoting the financialized futures of migrant women, and the ways in which they are bound up with the existential questions relating to home, belonging, and emotional connections to kin that migrant women navigate at this juncture of retirement and return. Drawing on ethnographic research with migrant women in these spaces in Singapore and Hong Kong, I examine how they engage with this proliferation of financial offerings: migrants’ motivations for joining such courses, their experiences of being a part of them, as well as counter-narratives that do not follow the logic of financialized futures.

I argue that in a context of insufficient old-age state-based social protection for migrants, a shift away from the trope of intergenerational reciprocity, and the prospect of insecure futures, the idea of social protection in retirement for migrant domestic workers takes on an increasingly financialized character. While neoliberal financial education programs capitalize on migrants’ financial and emotional vulnerability, they also tell a story about the emergence of new and ambivalent financialized aspirations among migrant women. These aspirations revolve around a turn inwards to oneself, focusing on self-responsibility for their success and security in later life. This cultivation of a self-oriented and ‘purpose-driven’ ethos exists alongside new risks, the exclusion of those who do not share or participate in such schemes, and reconfigured (inter)dependencies between migrants, kin, employers and the state. These courses, moreover, are not all-encompassing: there are resistances and alternatives, with some migrant women choosing to focus their efforts on collective political advocacy for state accountability towards migrant workers’ social protection; and others who fashion themselves ethically in different ways, for example, choosing everyday practices of giving and of service, which they see as more virtuous and ultimately more rewarding than being involved with money matters.

New Private Actors in Transnational Social Protection

I refer to social protection as the combination of formal and informal resources, networks and mechanisms to secure one’s wellbeing in the present and future. This includes support systems to protect against social exclusion in contexts of acute crisis or ongoing precarity, as well as in life course transitions, from work to retirement, for example. Formal social protection might come in the form of state-based schemes of health insurance and retirement pensions (as experienced in the framework of European welfare states, for instance), while informally it might come in the form of kinship or paid care. For migrant workers, social protection exceeds the boundaries of national containers as the extensive scholarship on transnational social protection has demonstrated (Bilecen et al. 2019; Bilcen and Barglowski 2015; Faist 2013; Faist et al. 2015; Levitt et al. 2023). Given the scale of global and transnational mobility in the world today,

migrants necessarily navigate a hybrid mix of formal and informal social protection across borders rather than relying on a single source (Levitt et al. 2023).

Future social protection for ageing Filipino migrant domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong is typically imagined as a transnational hybrid of state and kinship-based support. The Philippine state's social security system ('SSS') is a contributory pension system which offers some degree of coverage for migrants' illness, disability, loans for housing (partnering with PAG-IBIG, another big state entity), healthcare (partnering with PhilHealth) and pensions and death claims for contributors' kin. According to the SSS-attaché to the Philippine Embassy in Singapore¹, only 5% of overseas Filipinos in Singapore are paying into it (despite it having been made mandatory since 2018). Moreover, the pensions eventually paid out are not enough to sustain the lifestyles that migrant women are used to after years of earning significantly more abroad. In the case of migrant care workers, inequalities over the life course along the lines of gender, citizenship and migration status directly shape their access to formal forms of social protection. The gendered inequalities stem from the fact that care work is often not recognized as formal labour that is protected by labour laws or employment contracts offering social security, particularly so for migrant workers who are abroad on temporary contracts that deny them labour protections (including pensions), long-term residence or citizenship rights. This limited formal social protection through employment contracts or state-based social security reflects the multiple and intersecting forms of precarity that characterize migrant women's livelihoods over long periods of time, including their futures (Silvey and Parreñas 2020).

In the temporary migration schemes within which migrant domestic workers are employed, everyday care and support, including financial, is implicitly expected to come from kin as the dominant form of social protection. Yet, as I found in my research with ageing migrant women, returning migrants are not necessarily willing or confident on relying on kin once they stop working abroad. In the discourses espoused by migrant women taking such courses, the old idea of labouring to give one's family a better future and then returning home to rest and be cared for seen as outdated, pitiful, even shameful. This is not only a story of a neoliberal emphasis on self-care and self-responsibility eroding the intergenerational contract. It goes hand in hand with the independence that migrant women have developed over decades of earning money as breadwinners abroad and a stated lack of desire to depend on others. It is further related to the fears of being neglected by kin once they lose the status of being a migrant. In the absence of sufficient formal social protection by the state and the complex relation to kinship-based social protection among migrant women, there is a shift towards securing one's own future through individual, financialized means. The entanglements of social protection with the market is part of a broader shift towards the 'privatization of responsibility' and of care, as Minh Nguyen (2021) puts it. In the context of rural central Vietnam, Nguyen examines the tendency for people to put together 'portfolios of social protection' (316) to confront and manage a range of risks – where state welfare is limited – through individualized strategies such as the purchase of insurance.

It is in this landscape – of a shift from the state and kin, to the private actor and individualizing narratives – that financial education courses have become ever-more present and popular in recent years among Filipino migrant workers in Singapore and Hong Kong. Migrant organizations now focus not only on questions relating to their rights and working conditions;

¹ Based on an interview I conducted with the attaché in 2018.

they also orient around ‘self-empowerment’ ‘skills upgrading’ ‘business’ and ‘financial literacy’, in line with the migrant-turned-successful-entrepreneur’ narrative promoted by the Philippine state. In practice, however, as Denise Spitzer (2016) and Rhacel Parreñas (2021) have demonstrated, migrant workers are encouraged to be entrepreneurial at the same time as they bear the responsibility for any failures, the latter not being uncommon and often spurring migrants to go abroad once again. Beyond promoting entrepreneurship, however, there has been a shift towards promoting financial products for migrants – savings options, investments into mutual funds and stocks, insurances, real-estate as investment, and shares in co-operatives. Some of these financial products are fully private and sponsored by large multinationals like KPMG and Deloitte, others have state-backing. Welfare and social security attachés from the Philippine embassy sit alongside housing loan officers at real-estate fairs that sell property in the Philippines to migrants. These financial offerings distinguish themselves from risky, debt-inducing loans that migrant workers might take from money-lenders, and are promoted instead as investments in oneself and one’s future. The involvement of states in these financial schemes echoes Sohini Kar’s (2017, 12) point (in the Indian context) that ‘social security is no longer a simple transfer from the state to its citizens; rather, it generates new financial products’, into which lower-income people invest directly. These products rely on moral tropes relating to protection and familial protection, Kar (2017, 15) argues, but ‘rather than seeing social security as something that comes out of the collective or as a form of redistribution’, investing in financial products ‘emphasizes self-help and active forms of investment’.

In the context of transnational Philippine migration, the selling of financial products to migrant and diasporic populations is only something that has recently been raised in the scholarship, with a particular focus on the financial power of middle- and upper-middle class overseas Filipinos. Eric Pido’s (2017) ethnography ‘Migrant Returns’, for instance, evocatively captures how *balikbayans* (a particular category of the Philippine diaspora, typically holding long-term residence or citizenship in the United States or elsewhere) return to the Philippines for shorter touristic stays, since they can hold ties to multiple countries. Pido writes of the unveiling of three huge new retirement villages, multi-million-dollar properties, in Batangas province, which are marketed to diasporic Filipinos as second retirement homes combining local and foreign elements and where *balikbayans* are seen as key investors in the Philippine financial landscape. Geraldine Pratt and Vanessa Banta (2021), meanwhile, examine an entrepreneurship training and financial literacy programme for middle-class, professional Filipinos in Dubai, one that echoes state initiatives to ensure that migrant workers return to the Philippines with an ‘entrepreneurial mindset’. Such initiatives uphold discursive constructions of overseas workers as ‘heroes’ who will uplift the nation, and are predicated on ‘neoliberal values of educational uplift and self-responsibilization’, as Banta and Pratt (2021, 471) argue. Impermanence, economic and legal precarity in Dubai, and the selling of future security to migrants fundamentally drive these schemes, just as they do in Singapore and Hong Kong, which are also contexts of temporary migration.

However, unlike the groups that feature in Pido and Banta and Pratt’s studies – who are middle or upper-middle class professionals – this paper focusses on financial education among migrant domestic workers, who are less wealthy than their higher-earning counterparts but whose financial contributions are still much sought after. In the case of Dubai, such courses struggled to reach domestic workers due to constraints they face in leaving their employers’ homes. A number of courses in Singapore and Hong Kong, however, specifically aim to reach

this population with classes held on Sundays, domestic workers' typical days off and also online (and some courses, as I discuss later, are also run by domestic workers themselves). We know relatively little to date about the financial strategies of temporary migrant domestic workers, particularly for the later stages of their lives.² One exception is a study by Deirdre McKay (2020) and her observations that Filipino migrant women in Hong Kong were 'putting little aside, if anything, for investments that would generate ongoing income on their return to the Philippines' and therefore enrolled in financial education programmes which enabled them to give 'themselves permission to save and to invest in themselves and for themselves'.

Financial offerings for migrant women, on the one hand, emerge out of and benefit from the precarity characterizing domestic workers' lives. On the other, migrant women remain subjected to the uncertainties and risks of financial investments (Weiss 2015; Nguyen 2021; 336). Yet, as Deborah James (2021, 36) argues, 'we need to explore the complicity of participants' engagement with these processes rather than seeing them as imposed on unwilling victims'. There appears to be a shift from the 'social' to the 'self' in terms of organizing future security in a way that is valorized in the narratives of migrant women participating in these courses. Still, migrant women who participate in such programmes evaluate and discuss their options with peers and combine strategies that, even if articulating a shift away from a narrative of kinship-based dependency and care in later life, produce new kinds of social interdependencies – rather than any absolute ruptures – between migrants, kin, employers, and the state, given that many of these actors become intertwined and invested in such programmes. Financial education further creates new communities of belonging and meaning among domestic workers. However, their presence is not absolute and there remain a range of ways about thinking of the future amidst this turn towards financialization.

Methodological Note

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted with an older generation of migrant domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong since 2018. It forms part of a broader project on the anticipation of retirement and return among middle to late-middle-aged migrant domestic workers between the ages of 45 and 65 and who have been living and working abroad for between 15-35 years, including over 50 in-depth interviews with migrant domestic workers of different nationalities, primarily from the Philippines, but also Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka, as well as with policy officers, co-operative and NGO representatives.³ The interviews were complemented by regular encounters, follow-up conversations and ethnographic observations

² In a different socio-legal national context are the ageing Filipino domestic workers in Los Angeles that Rhacel Parreñas (2015) writes about, who age in the United States but are unable to fully retire and continue to work in eldercare to earn a living.

³ Fieldwork was carried out over six months between late 2018 and early 2020 until the coronavirus pandemic set in. I continued online contact with some interlocutors during the pandemic as well as observations within online communities of domestic workers. In 2022, I was able to return to the field for two months to follow-up with those I had previously met. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms, and all identifying information has been removed. The domestic workers that form part of this study were fully informed about the research project and gave their verbal consent to participate. Some interviews were recorded, others were not, according to the wishes of the domestic workers and in recognition of their more vulnerable positionalities in Singapore. Topics covered in the interviews and follow-up conversations included reflections on migrants' long-years of work in Singapore, Sunday activities with peers, relationships with kin and friends, self-improvement narratives and uncertainties about the future. Those I met within financial education courses spoke more about financial concerns and outcomes than others.

in spaces where domestic workers meet and socialize, such as shopping malls, religious spaces, a domestic workers' clubhouse, at the decks of public housing blocks, parks, Sunday classes and online spaces such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger.

The material in this paper draws on a sub-set of that research on financial education courses among older migrant domestic workers. Financial literacy courses were more widespread than I had imagined when I first entered the field and it thus unexpectedly became a prominent theme in this study. I draw on observations conducted within three organizations offering financial education courses: a financial education NGO run by local and 'expatriate' migrant professionals in Singapore, a similar organization in Hong Kong, and an active financial literacy group led by Filipino migrant domestic workers in Singapore (backed by an NGO and co-operative in the Philippines which receives funding for some of its programmes through partnerships with intergovernmental organizations such as the ILO and the EU). I observed courses (of up to 30 women per class) related to financial education held by these organizations at different points in my fieldwork on Sundays between 2018 to early 2020, and in 2022, while also following the online social media pages of these organizations. The online observations were particularly notable during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) which interrupted the 'physical' fieldwork in this project. Financial organizations livestreamed their classes (something that also occurred with the Hong Kong-based NGO prior to the pandemic to enable domestic workers without a weekly day off to follow courses on Facebook), and there were also online webinars, recorded Zoom conversations on 'success stories' and guest speakers. Domestic workers involved in financial education also became active on YouTube, producing vlogs and blogs to keep their peers motivated. In addition, I draw on individual life-story interviews and focus group discussions with 20 women participating in these courses; but also include the voices of those who did not participate to provide a broader perspective on how the topic of money and finance sit in relation to other imaginaries of the future. Interestingly, it was mostly Filipino domestic workers who participated in these courses, followed by Indonesian domestic workers and just a handful from other nationalities, which is perhaps reflective of the involvement of the Philippine state in promoting financialized futures for migrant returnees through partnerships with a range of organizations and companies.

From Breadwinner to Investor

Lisa, 51-years-old, has been working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong for the past 22 years. Reflecting on her younger self and likening her past attitude to many of her domestic worker compatriots in Hong Kong, she says:

[Y]ou always think you are far away and it's your responsibility to give. Most of us think we are responsible for everything. The kind of mindset is that when you left Philippines you become breadwinner. When you sit in that airplane, already it's in your mind that you're a breadwinner and you have to give everything that you earn.

Lisa continued to reflect that because everyone else is sending money to the family, 'you feel you have to do the same thing and that it becomes a habit'. Like Lisa, many of the Filipino domestic workers I spoke to shared this sentiment: that they went abroad to support their families (among other reasons) and that there are certain life projects that they have to 'tick off'

before thinking about returning home, the primary ones being the education of their children who stay in the Philippines, building a house, and medical expenses of their parents and siblings. In addition to sending money home as remittances, long-term debt is a common theme, with many beginning their journeys in debt to cover agency fees (Platt et al. 2017) and then needing to take loans to meet the demands of kin which sometimes exceed monthly salaries. Among the women I worked with, there was a sudden realization later in their journeys, once they reached their 40s and 50s and once they had met their initial list of things to fulfil, that they had little left for themselves.

Carol, for instance, who has worked in Singapore for the past 29 years, explained:

The only regret I have is that I gave everything to the family, until there was nothing left. I am still here because I need to save for my own age and future. Before we go back, we must have savings. I am now thinking about myself. So at least if nobody wants to take care of us, we don't need to depend on anybody.

Like Carol, Jana, a domestic worker who has been working in Hong Kong for twenty-six years, reflected on how she feels an emotional distance from her children, observing that they are closer to their grandmother and aunts than herself as their 'absent mother' abroad. Jana reflects, 'I tell my friends, I don't feel close to my children, what will I do if I go back? You must prepare for yourself now, not later, not when you are too old, not like me'.⁴

It is not necessarily the case that migrants' children do not offer care. Some women narrated the promises of their children to look after them when they return and reassurances that they are not 'like others'. Taking financial education courses is thus not a response to an explicit refusal of care from kin but a lack of confidence in kinship relationships, as Jana's reflection indicates. This is accentuated by gossip about friends who returned to children (the 'others' referred to above) who did not suitably care for them. Being accustomed to their own independence as migrants abroad further contributes to the turn to self-help discourses and programmes. Experiences like this pave the way for financial education to resonate with long-term domestic workers. I had not expected such a variety of such courses and was struck when I began my fieldwork to find courses offered to migrants with titles like 'grow your money', 'investing in stocks', 'financial literacy', 'manage your business'. These courses are aimed at women of all ages – those, like Lisa, Carol and Jana, who only realized 'too late' that they had nothing left for themselves, but also younger age groups who want to avoid long-term stays abroad in vulnerable positions.

Migrant women find out about these courses through a variety of channels: sometimes through employers, through the direct outreach of financial organizations in migrants' social spaces, and largely through word-of-mouth recommendations from friends. It is important to point out that there is a wide diversity of approaches within this broad space of financial education offerings from those which situate finance in the social worlds of migrant women to corporate-oriented investment seminars. Some courses, for instance, start with basic modules on saving and budgeting one's weekly expenses, asking migrants in a paternalistic way to

⁴ For a longer discussion on kinship and its ambivalences in the lives of ageing domestic workers, please see Amrith and Coe 2022, which details the fluid registers of kinship in domestic workers' lives and the entanglements between migrants' kin relations, including its more conflictual dimensions (Carsten 2013; Hölzle & Pfaff-Czernacka 2023).

reflect on questions like: ‘why go out and buy that dress, isn’t it better if you put that in your bank account?’ They provide lessons on how to open a savings account, how to avoid debt and be wary of money-lenders and loan sharks, and offer additional support to women in finding a sense of what matters to them, to talk about their rights, to build confidence, and self-esteem. There is recognition of their future precarity and one apparent goal is to provide opportunities for women to build a more secure future through learning how to set up and manage a business. In the more advanced modules, domestic workers present their business plans to each other, discussing whether a beauty salon or catering business would make more sense in their small-business-saturated home villages.

The more corporate-oriented sessions seek to tap into the ‘financial potential’ of domestic workers as consumers and investors. One such session that I attended was run by young professionals from KMPG in their offices in downtown Hong Kong (and in partnership with an NGO) using their Sundays for this ‘corporate social responsibility’ activity. Domestic workers spent four hours of their day off sitting in the comfortable air-conditioned offices of this transnational corporation and listening to PowerPoint presentations on ‘what is insurance?’, and how to choose the right insurance products based on one’s stage in life, complete with graphs and pie-charts. The participants were then sent into break-out sessions to brainstorm different risks and future scenarios with the ultimate lesson that insurance is something important to consider investing in. Similarly, there are seminars on real-estate and investing in stocks and mutual funds, with lessons on how to distinguish scams from ‘legitimate’ financial products and the importance of earning a ‘passive income’.

Still others seek to integrate financial education with broader discussions on ‘return and reintegration’, as with one session that I observed led by domestic workers from a financial education collective who were receiving support and course materials from an NGO in the Philippines that received financing from the European Union and International Labour Organization. While the training materials are developed by these organizations, the domestic worker-leaders take attendance, report on their activities, and run these seminars, motivating their peers through a system of mentorship, throwing in dance breaks to break up the long sessions, and listening to their peers’ struggles with empathy: ‘we know what it is like’, welcoming participants to share their burdens and to bring out the tissues. These seminars deal with the emotional questions around transnational family life after years of separation, communication with kin on the realities of life-abroad, as well as self-care and wellbeing (a meditation session was newly introduced after the pandemic). As many of the participants are Filipino, the Filipino domestic worker-mentors also appeal to a more nationally-relevant message (‘as Filipinos, we know it is hard to put our own needs before our families’ needs’). This collective relies on grassroots word-of-mouth messages to promote their programmes and bring in Filipino professionals as guest speakers. They also talk about investing in co-operatives in the Philippines and getting involved in social entrepreneurship.

Some courses are free. Others, such as those in the local Singaporean or Hong Kong NGOs, require a fee of, for example, 100 US Dollars per module. In these cases, the organizations often expect that domestic workers’ employers will contribute to the course fees, convincing them that it is a productive use of their employee’s time on Sundays and an investment in their futures. In this vain, there is a narrative among domestic workers that ‘good employers’ who take an interest in their futures and want to help are those worth seeking out and staying

with, creating new kinds of (inter)dependencies that oscillate between care and control (Johnson and Lindquist 2020) in their pursuit of financial education.

Lisa, who joined a financial education course in Hong Kong a few years ago, upon the recommendation of her employer, believes that she has transformed her way of thinking and moved away from that ‘breadwinner’ mentality that she talked about earlier. Speaking frankly, Lisa said: ‘every one of us will think... that people in the Philippines will die if we don’t send money. Actually, it’s not true... let’s see if they die. I know, I’m being rude sometimes, just see if they die. You can hate me today, it’s fine. Just don’t send’.

This transformation narrative from ‘breadwinner’ to ‘financially-smart’ is one that many of the course participants aspire towards and in the next section, I examine some of the reasons why this transformation gives them a new sense of purpose in their migration journeys.

Living with Purpose

- ‘The fastest way to get rich is to do it slowly. Getting rich is like dieting. Crash diets never work but a lifestyle modification or change will’

- Vince Rapisura

Financial education is framed by some migrant women as an ethically transformative journey that is bound up with shifting ideas on how to best live one’s (migrant) life through the cultivation of goals and purpose. One motivational book that circulates is Vince Rapisura’s 2016 handbook ‘(L)earning Wealth Successful Strategies in Money Management’⁵. ‘Sir Vince’ as he is known presents ‘a personal finance guidebook’, which delineates the different stages to financial freedom, peppered with motivational quotes specific to the Filipino migrant experience. He argues that the emotions that migrants hold – fear and guilt, for example – in relation to their families holds them back from achieving this financial freedom. He concludes saying that financial freedom is ultimately about ‘self-mastery’: ‘at the end of the day, you will define your happiness. You will have all the wealth in the world. Once you are able to align your happiness with your needs, wants, motivations and priorities’.

Lisa, before she joined the financial education programme in Hong Kong went back to the Philippines with the intention to return ‘for good’. She recounts, however, that she was completely lost, feeling like a stranger in her original home. When a yoga teacher that she knew in Hong Kong contacted her to come back to work in her home, Lisa took the first opportunity. She told herself that this time, she needs a goal:

Let’s say the last 5 years, I am more focussed... for me it’s like...really knowing yourself and at the same time, really planning. You really need planning because if you don’t plan, you plan to fail...this is what they say. It’s true. I always say I’m a late bloomer. I realized I don’t have vision, I didn’t plan for when I’m going to stop working here. I attended a lot of classes about self-improvement and then I realized what is missing is really the vision of when I’m going to finish, when I’m going to prepare for the next thing.

Lisa is now an ambassador for the organization where she did her courses, convincing her domestic worker compatriots that they need to enrol in these courses too. But she protests that

⁵ <https://vincerapisura.com/book/>

many do not want to listen. ‘I think about it later’ – that’s what they always say, I still have a lot of expenses. But when are you going to think about it? Because you really have to. If you are young, you know what? You are lucky’.

Similar sentiments were shared during a group discussion I held in a park outside the KPMG offices with a group of Filipina domestic workers who had attended the training on insurances. As Elle, one of the women in the group said: ‘We try to make our time productive. Now there are livelihood programmes, financial education classes. All this is new, we did not have this before’ and ‘we have to study and do research about all the financial products, but there are a lot of scams. That’s why we have to know which ones are good, or suitable for our needs, that’s why we come to these classes’. Another in the group chipped in to say ‘everything I learn I share with my daughter [in the Philippines] and now she invested in a condo unit in Makati [Manila’s central business district]’.

This group was making similar moral distinctions and hierarchies as Lisa between themselves, seeking to use their time wisely and productively, and those who ‘just sit around’, referring to the women in downtown Hong Kong who sit on cardboard boxes, chatting, spending their Sundays with friends: ‘not everyone is thinking about their future, some are just wasting their time sitting there [in Central], gambling, eating, they have no plan’. They shared that if they could offer advice to new arrivals of domestic workers to Hong Kong it would be: ‘if you have a goal before leaving, you can plan, share with family, save and invest early. Here we are just getting older and older without a goal. Don’t wait until you are old to save, or until you need the money’.

These women articulate an age-related life course shift from reckless spending and endless giving and cycles of debt to an inward orientation to being money-wise, forward-thinking – these are new financialized aspirations among older migrants that emerge from the neoliberal ideas put forward in the training sessions that one is responsible for one’s own success in the future and that one has to continuously work on oneself (reminiscent in many ways of Foucault’s (1988) ‘technologies of the self’ (1988)). The women in the course believe that if you do nothing about it and suffer in your old-age without money or care, that you only have yourself to blame. This further echoes the financialized notion of development that relies on the continued productivity of migrant returnees and retirees, even those who have long-worked in low-waged and precarious sectors, the commodification of the migrant body continuing as they age. In many ways, financialization depoliticizes (Weiss 2015) by individualizing responsibility instead of making it a political issue and collective responsibility. But this is not only a story of the neoliberal intrusion of financial institutions into the lives of the vulnerable, for such a reading would flatten the agency of women in engaging with such projects. The migrant women I met taking such courses find a new sense of freedom from the constraints of kinship expectations, as they push back against the idea that they are just ATMs to their families, building friendships and communities of support, forging connections with the locals who run these courses. They also value spending their days off doing activities that nourish their own aspirations that they have long put aside and to find a sense of purpose that goes beyond the racialized and victimized ‘domestic worker’ label that is ascribed to them in the context of Singapore where migrant women are widely seen as non-citizen ‘others’.

Nanette’s narrative encapsulates this sense of purpose and espouses the idea of self-responsibility. Nanette, a domestic worker in Singapore since 2005, joined a financial education collective of Filipino domestic workers at the point where she realized her son was not going

to complete college and she would need to start saving for her own future before returning home to the Philippines. A single mother, she left her son with her mother when he was 6-years-old to work abroad, the goal being that she would be able to support his education. Nanette reflects on how her own mother (herself a former migrant domestic worker) and her peers returned to the Philippines without any plans, with no ideas on how to continue earning an income and holding the ‘common attitude that the parents just depend on the kids’. She continues, ‘but for me... we start from our ourselves...we save more, make a retirement plan, otherwise you go home with nothing’. Since joining this group, Nanette has invested in a plot of land which overlooks the sea in her home province in the Visayas region of the central Philippines, which she envisions turning into a campsite weekend getaway for city-dwellers to earn some income. She has also invested in various co-operatives, including managing a cacao farm with her peers in which she has shares that provide her with good interest earnings. Nanette now volunteers in her financial education collective as a mentor and teacher. She wears her collective’s uniform t-shirt on Sundays, and with a lot of presence and confidence, goes in with her peers to lead a course that receives funding from the EU and ILO, with the conviction that she can make a difference in the lives of her domestic worker compatriots. All the while, she continues her decades-long labour to find a sense of present and future security.

Alternative Narratives I: State Accountability

Despite the growing presence of financial education courses, it is important to note that not all domestic workers participate in them and cultivate these financialized aspirations. Instead, they articulate different goals. The ‘women in Central’ that some of my research participants referred to, for instance, find other ways to spend their time. One subset of those who spend Sundays in Central are domestic worker activists, who are present and visible in Hong Kong and who articulate different goals.

Che, now 50 years of age and working in Hong Kong for 25 years, is the leader of a large migrant activist organization in Hong Kong which campaigns for migrant domestic workers’ rights both in Hong Kong and in the Philippines. Her Sundays are spent in Central publicly protesting particular issues and calling for state accountability, leading campaigns and petitions, and rallying domestic worker compatriots. She does not participate in financial education courses. When I asked Che about her view on financial education, she responded:

It’s good. Good in the sense if you have money. The organizations who are doing this are practically teaching how to save money. But the point is, what we are receiving is not enough for us to save. Our salary is only enough for the basic needs of the family and if there are other unforeseen emergencies, we don’t have enough money to do it. And actually it goes back to the Philippine state.

Che argues that if the government would step in to support workers and their families with social services in times of crisis, and if workers had a living wage, such initiatives would make more sense. At the moment, they simply put pressure on workers to ‘do something’ with their low wages. She makes the plea that such things such as social protection should not be left up to the individual and that the governments are escaping their responsibility. Che, a university graduate and activist during her student days in Manila, takes a step back to examine the political-economic structural conditions which put domestic workers in these precarious positions

and believes that it is crucial to hold states accountable for their policies which ‘squeeze’ as much as possible from the workers and absolve themselves of their share of the deal in a migration regime that is highly state-controlled.

Che and her organization are actively campaigning against the Philippine state for making social security payments mandatory. Their argument is that such payments enable the state to extract money from overseas workers with ‘excessive fees’ in ways that take away from migrants’ immediate financial needs. As she explains:

Then they say, if you work for 30 years, we can receive 1500 pesos – for 30 years! Nevermind. We are living in the province, we go to office of OWWA, the money you get is very low for what you need to travel, the time you spent to get this money, provide a lot of proof that you are this person and then what you get it’s useless – it’s really a show.

From the government, Che and her peers are calling for social pensions for retiring overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) over 60. She explains:

They should have a monthly pension for the OFWs, even if we don’t pay, it should be a government responsibility because we are sending and contributing a lot to our country and to our government through our remittances, through the taxes that our family pays, all the goods we pay and food in the Philippines, these are all contributions so why not giving back to the OFWs? But it’s not addressed by the government. Give us the social pension without these excessive fees.

In addition to the social pensions, they also advocate for bilateral agreements with host countries for social security reform, and subsidies for welfare programmes.

Che, having dedicated her life to advocating for domestic workers’ rights in Hong Kong and making claims on the Philippine state, is one of a group of domestic workers demanding new ways of imagining social protection that re-politicizes their migration journeys in the context of the state’s ‘labor export policy’. However, it is only a small proportion of domestic workers in Hong Kong who are involved in this form of political activism for rights and in Singapore, visible public protest and political activism hardly exists due to the state’s curtailment of political activity. One thus has to take this narrative as just one of many approaches to thinking about future social protection. In this case, claims are made on the state with less of a focus on the individualized financial responsibility that financial education courses promote.

Alternative Narratives II: Giving and Serving Others

In addition to the activist narrative, I also encountered more philosophical takes on how to live well in later life as counter-narratives to the financialized script. In this approach, domestic workers found the focus on money to be misplaced, even greedy, believing instead that more virtuous ways of living such as being a good person, giving and serving others, are more meaningful. Comments such as ‘I don’t want people to remember me for my money, I want them to remember me as a good person’; ‘I don’t give because I have to, I give because I want to’; ‘what’s the point in keeping it all to myself?’ were also things that my research participants who were not actively participating in financial education courses expressed. These sentiments

signal a wide spectrum of perspectives on money, purpose, and future and demonstrate a wide-range of strategies to prepare for later life.

One set of these strategies, for instance, relates to more ‘classical’ economic decisions and practices, such as buying land or participating in village-based savings groups. Rose, a domestic worker who has been in Singapore for over 30 years, estranged from her husband and soon to return to her extended family of siblings, nieces and nephews said: ‘I chose to buy land for rice. As long as I have the documents, papers – they cannot take my land away from me. People may take my money, if they want a loan, or borrow for bad habits – but then I will never see that money again. So then what? If I put money in land, I have more control’. Despite the precarity of land itself, Rose makes a distinction between owning land and the new financialized schemes of savings and investments, which entail more risk in her perception than owning a small plot of land. In her absence, her siblings use the land to grow and cultivate rice for additional familial income. In our conversations, Rose would say repeatedly, ‘I am not business-minded’, contrasting herself from her peers who are all thinking about and planning business-related activities. Other domestic workers may participate in informal lending groups within village-based associations known as *paluwagan* in Filipino. Migrant women might participate and borrow from these lending circles to achieve more immediate goals (finishing the construction of one’s house) or for emergencies, rather than future-oriented or long-term plans. Josie, for instance, sits on the same spot of pavement with her friends every Sunday and participates in these grassroots lending circles. In addition, she is an informal moneylender and earns commission from her compatriots who borrow money from her. Josie recognizes the need for ready cash and tries to supplement her income in this way, saying ‘what’s the point if I get nothing in return for lending this money?’ But she often runs into trust issues and has seen conflicts in her friendship circle over this, including cases of friends disappearing because they cannot repay the loans with interest. Still, she has cemented her role as a community figure and moneylender, which serves her interests and others’ interests in the present.

The second set of strategies that diverge from the financialized logic are strategies related to altruism and faith. Here social protection is imagined as something that will eventually come back if one serves others, or a trust that one’s faith will take care of things for them in the future. Lory said candidly, ‘For me, it’s okay, I will just wait and see what happens. At least I know God will take care of me’. Those like Lory focus on spiritual and moral transformations that have little to do with money, and more to do with more existential and ethical questions of life, participating regularly in religious communities and volunteer work⁶. Amanda, for example, spends her Sundays at Church, volunteering as an usher, making tea and preparing snacks for the congregation, cleaning up afterwards, and participating in the Filipino group of her international Church. Amanda mentioned that her group organizes financial education seminars once in a while at Church, with guest speakers occasionally coming in to speak to the Filipino migrant group on a Sunday afternoon after the morning service. She finds it interesting and admits she had not thought much about those matters. More than pursuing financial projects, however, it is Amanda’s Church community in Singapore that is central to her sense of being

⁶ Sri Lankan domestic workers are not the focus of this paper, but I found they were hardly present in the financial education courses I attended. Instead, they participate in volunteering activities – cooking and cleaning at the temple, for example – and similarly make judgements between those who help and those who do not, and where the marker of living purposefully was not defined in financialized terms.

and purpose. She has been talking with the Singaporean pastor about joining a mission when she returns to the Philippines, which will provide her with shelter and opportunities to dedicate herself to religious service in her retirement. In these interactions, it becomes clear that despite the popularity of financial education courses which attract many migrant women, not all cultivate a sustained interest in financializing their futures and find other ways of imagining the future through faith, service, and giving.

Conclusion

The financialization of migrant domestic workers' retirement is an increasingly prominent phenomenon that has emerged in spaces created by the 'precarity of the future' (Silvey and Parreñas 2020). Limited state-based social protection for migrant workers when they return after decades of labour abroad and a hesitance to rely on kin in older-age (questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about intergenerational care) have opened up spaces for a whole range of opportunities to financialize migrant women's futures.

As this paper has demonstrated, the kinds of financial education offered to migrant domestic workers vary, with different actors – corporate, non-profit, state-affiliated, co-operative and grassroots networks – promoting a range of approaches to the role of finance in their lives. Some focus on the basics of saving, budgeting and avoiding scams, others integrate financial education with emotional return and reintegration questions, or are more business-oriented or focus on investments in financial markets and real-estate. This privatization of future security, on the one hand, plays on the structural inequalities that put migrant women in precarious positions and requires them to take responsibility for their own futures. This is in a context where migrant women have already contributed enormous financial sums through remittances, as well as caring for the lives and futures of others for much of their adult lives with little pay or recognition. In these ways, the shift towards the privatized self-responsibility for the future is a depoliticization of social protection, eroding the state's responsibility to care for the workers whose migratory journeys it has facilitated within temporary migration regimes.

On the other hand, the migrant women I met and interviewed at these courses narrate their transformations from being naïve breadwinners to being informed and equipped with financial wisdom. To argue that migrant women are thus dupes of the global financial system reduces the forms of agency and belonging they attempt to cultivate through their participation in financial courses. This transformation goes along with the moral cultivation of a mindset based on discipline and self-responsibility. The definition of 'success' for women on these courses goes beyond having provided for one's family to encompass broader notions of self-worth and preparedness for the future. The shift towards financialization enables a view on migrant women's lives beyond the typical tropes of care, kinship, and sacrifice used to understand migrant domestic worker's lives, acknowledging a more complex picture of their lives and aspirations, and their desires for future independence. There is thus a double-edge to understanding the financialized futures of domestic workers – as exploitative of their vulnerabilities at the same time as creating new self-understandings and forms of purpose.

The shift of responsibility from social protection (provided by the state and kin) to the 'self' is a core part of the narrative that domestic workers learn about and embody in and through financial education. Yet despite this articulated individualized aspiration to be financially-independent, the 'self' remains deeply social, embedded within migrants' networks. The

emergence of financialized ideas about future social protection do not replace the state or kin, nor do they make ideas about dependence irrelevant. The state remains entangled in these financial offerings, just as migrants' relationships with their kin continue and transform in and amidst these new spaces, in both supportive and obstructive ways. Social protection is reimagined but remains a hybrid 'portfolio' (Levitt et al. 2023; Nguyen 2021) of different relationships, institutions, and structures. The financialization of the future for migrant women therefore does not tell a linear story of towards freedom or independence (despite this transformational narrative being present in migrant women's accounts), but rather it is generative of uneven and ambivalent interdependencies between the self, employers, peers, friends, kin, and the state.

Furthermore, ideas of success defined financially sit alongside and in tension with other imaginaries of a good life and of future social justice, which might be altruistic, religious or activist. Such approaches to the future do not neatly map onto particular relations with kin back home. The differences can be accounted for by different peer networks, personal engagements and aspirations, and to some extent, state-based narratives. The Philippine state, for instance, is particularly prominent in driving this narrative of financialized futures and entrepreneurship, which could explain in part, the larger number of Filipino domestic workers thinking and talking about finance. Further research into the participation of different nationalities of migrant women in financial education would be valuable to understand not only the range of culturally-situated ideas about future and money, but also how state migration and social protection policies play a role in shaping the emergence and resonance of such spaces with different groups of migrants. While this paper has focussed on the process of preparing for the future in financial terms, a follow-up would importantly trace how things eventually turn out for women participating in financial education programmes who return to their countries of origin with their investments and the extent to which their moral transformations endure. Additionally, a comparative perspective on how non-migrants experience these developments would usefully contribute to more nuanced understandings of the role of financial literacy in alleviating, or more likely, accentuating inequalities in transnational spaces.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Editors for the opportunity to share my work in this forum, and the two reviewers who provided very helpful feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

References

- Amrith, Megha and Cati Coe. 2022. 'Disposable Kin: Shifting Registers of Belonging in Global Care Economies'. *American Anthropologist* 124 (2): 307-318.
- Banta, Vanessa, and Geraldine Pratt. 2021. 'Surplused in Dubai: Filipino Professionals as Surplus Entrepreneurs'. *Geoforum* 126 (November): 471-82.
- Bilecen, Başak, and Karolina Bargłowski. 2015. 'On the Assemblages of Informal and Formal Transnational Social Protection'. *Population, Space and Place* 21 (3): 203-14.

- Bilecen, Başak, Karolina Bargłowski, Thomas Faist, and Eleonore Kofman. 2019. 'Gendered Dynamics of Transnational Social Protection'. *Comparative Migration Studies* 7 (1): 47.
- Carsten, Janet. 2013. 'What Kinship Does – And How.' *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3:2, 245-251.
- Department of Labor and Employment Philippines. 2007. 'Labour Migration and Development Goals: The Philippine Experience'. 2007.
https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshops/global_labour_mobility_0809102007/presentations/paper_calzado.pdf.
- Faist, Thomas. 2013. 'Transnational Social Protection'. *COMCAD Working Papers*, 113. Bielefeld University.
- Faist, Thomas, Başak Bilecen, Karolina Bargłowski, and Joanna Jadwiga Sienkiewicz. 2015. 'Transnational Social Protection: Migrants' Strategies and Patterns of Inequalities'. *Population, Space and Place* 21 (3): 193–202.
- Foucault, Michel. 1988. Technologies of the Self. In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton. Amherst: Universities of Massachusetts Press.
- Hölzle, Éva Rozália, and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (Eds) (2023) *The Price of Belonging: Perspectives from Asia*. Leiden: Brill.
- James, Deborah. 2021. 'Life and Debt: A View from the South'. *Economy and Society* 50 (1): 36–56.
- Johnson, Mark, and Johan Lindquist. 2020. 'Care and Control in Asian Migrations'. *Ethnos* 85 (2): 195–207.
- Kar, Sohini. 2017. 'Austerity Welfare: Social Security in the Era of Finance'. *Anthropology Today* 33 (5): 12–15.
- Levitt, Peggy, Erica Dobbs, Ken Chih-Yan Sun, and Ruxandra Paul. 2023. *Transnational Social Protection: Social Welfare across National Borders*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- McKay, Deirdre. 2020. 'The Philippines–Hong Kong Migration Corridor'. In *Routledge Handbook of Migration and Development*, edited by Tanja Bastia and Ronald Skeldon. Abingdon. Routledge.
- Nguyen, Minh T. N. 2021. 'Portfolios of Social Protection, Labour Mobility and the Rise of Life Insurance in Rural Central Vietnam'. *Development and Change* 52 (2): 316–39.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. 2015. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. Second Edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. 2021. 'The Mobility Pathways of Migrant Domestic Workers'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47 (1): 3–24.

- Pido, Eric. 2017. *Migrant Returns: Manila, Development, and Transnational Connectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Platt, Maria, Grace Baey, Brenda S. A. Yeoh, Choon Yen Khoo, and Theodora Lam. 2017. 'Debt, Precarity and Gender: Male and Female Temporary Labour Migrants in Singapore'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43 (1): 119–36.
- Rodriguez, Robyn Magalit. 2010. *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Silvey, Rachel, and Rhacel Parreñas. 2020. 'Precarity Chains: Cycles of Domestic Worker Migration from Southeast Asia to the Middle East'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46 (16): 3457–71.
- Spitzer, Denise L. 2016. 'Return Migrant Entrepreneurship and the Migration and Development Agenda: A Focus on Filipino and Indonesian Migrant Workers'. *Migration, Mobility & Displacement* 2 (2): 24-39.
- Weiss, Hadas. 2015. 'Financialization and Its Discontents: Israelis Negotiating Pensions'. *American Anthropologist* 117 (3): 506–18.