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Born in the Philippines, Ramona moved to Hong Kong when she was 20 years old and worked there for more than 6 years, before moving again to Canada, where she is currently residing. She speaks English and Tagalog fluently, is conversant in Cantonese, and she can hold her own in a conversation about the political situation in the Philippines and the long-term consequences of the most recent elections in Canada. If Ramona had been an investment banker or a business consultant, her history of “multinational” mobility would not raise any eyebrows. But Ramona is neither a banker nor a consultant; she is a migrant domestic worker. Her highest educational qualification is a 2-year associate’s degree in computer science from a Philippine university, and her job in the Philippines (before she took up paid domestic work overseas) was as a cashier at a fast food restaurant chain in the capital city of Manila.

When most people think about migrant domestic workers like Ramona, they tend not to view these low-status workers as globetrotting women travelers. Rather, the prevailing discourse around migrant domestic workers more often highlights the vulnerability of their lives and the marginality of their social position overseas. At worst, these women are portrayed as victims of trafficking or pawns at the mercy of forces of globalization beyond their control. Many migration scholars who study migrant domestic work try to balance out such perspectives by highlighting how these migrants use international labor migration as a way to escape poverty and gendered social expectations back at home.¹ I situate myself within this feminist scholarship tradition, but focus on a less-studied way in which these migrants display their capacity to influence their own life-outcomes. I show how many migrant domestic workers leverage the information, resources, and

¹ Most migrant domestic workers are women and so, for the remainder of this book, I use female pronouns when I refer to these migrant workers.

connections that they acquire, and the migration opportunities they encounter, in one overseas destination to secure a better job in a new overseas destination. This “multinational” mobility of migrant domestic workers occurs more often than we might think and is not simply the result of churn in the global marketplace. Instead, many times, these incremental journeys follow a distinct *upward* pattern based on migrant domestic workers’ personally and socially constructed destination hierarchies. Other times, their onward trajectories seem to follow the rules of a snakes-and-ladders² board game, with migrants working to climb shifting ladders of opportunity despite encountering setbacks along the way in the form of recruitment agencies that cheat them out of their savings, or receiving country governments that unexpectedly tighten the rules of admission. I term these migrants “stepwise international labor migrants,” and the stepwise migration stories of Ramona and other Asian migrant domestic workers like her are at the heart of this book.

So how did Ramona manage to move from the Philippines to Hong Kong to Canada? And why did her migration trajectory follow that particular order? A range of factors at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels combined to enable Ramona’s adoption of this stepwise migration pattern. As mentioned earlier, the only job Ramona had been able to secure in the Philippines was that of a cashier at a Jollibee, the Philippines’ most successful fast food chain. After 2 years of this low-paid work and no success securing a job in the Philippines that utilized her qualifications, Ramona was desperate to leave her country for greener pastures overseas. She was advised by friends that a job as a live-in caregiver in Canada was her ticket to a better life. Until very recently, the Canadian government had a migrant labor program that offered temporary work permits to qualifying foreigners willing to work as full-time, live-in domestic workers in Canadian homes.³ Once a foreign live-in caregiver completed 3,900 hours (or 24 months) of full-time employment within a 4-year period, s/he was eligible to

² In the United States, this board game is more commonly known as “chutes-and-ladders.”

³ This has since been changed to a live-out program with stricter rules for entry though the live-in caregiver program (LCP) continues for migrants who entered Canada on an LCP visa and whose LCP visas have yet to expire. I discuss the details about this new program and the one that preceded it in Chapter 4, *Global but Uneven*.

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apply for permanent resident status in Canada. A job as a caregiver in Canada is still considered the holy grail by many aspiring domestic workers from the Philippines.

It was through Filipina friends working as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong that Canada first came to figure in Ramona's migration aspirations. Ramona's friends also advised her that attempting to travel directly to Canada from the Philippines was not realistic. "Because when you go directly from the Philippines to [Canada], and you don't have any relatives that will help you, it takes years. And it takes a lot of money too," Ramona explained to me when I asked her why she did not try to find a job in Canada from the Philippines. Ramona's friends suggested an alternative migration strategy: apply for a job in Hong Kong first, and then "cross country" to Canada from Hong Kong. (To "cross country" is how most migrants I interviewed describe the process of stepwise international labor migration. They call the intermediary destination markets in which they first work their "stepping stones.") Hong Kong offers one of the highest wage rates for migrant domestic workers in Asia,⁴ and greater labor protections such as a minimum wage, weekly rest-days, paid leave on all statutory public holidays, and paid maternity leave (though these are not always enforced).

Following her friends' advice, Ramona applied to a recruitment agency in the Philippines for a job in Hong Kong, paying the equivalent of USD1,700 in agency fees. She borrowed the money from her parents who sold some of their land to raise the necessary funds. Within 3 months, the agency had matched her with an elderly Chinese couple in Hong Kong and she had received her Hong Kong work visa. After her arrival in Hong Kong, Ramona built such a trusting relationship with her employers that she stayed with them for 6 years, renewing her contract twice. Happy with her work and her close bond with her employers, she almost shelved her plans to move to Canada, but her friends – many of whom had already made the leap from Hong Kong to Canada – convinced her to follow in their footsteps.

In 2009, Ramona submitted a job application to a Canadian caregiver agency along with a USD2,500 placement fee, paid for with the savings she had accumulated during her time in Hong Kong. The

⁴ By Asia, I am referring to countries in East, Southeast, and South Asia. I am treating the Middle East as a region distinct from Asia.

agency matched her with a Canadian employer in a matter of weeks and, because she had applied for her visa through the Consulate General of Canada in Hong Kong, she was issued a Canadian work visa within 2 months.

All in all, it took Ramona USD4,200 – her USD1,700 Hong Kong agency fee and her USD2,500 Canadian agency fee – in order to gain access to the Canadian labor market for live-in caregivers. Ramona’s story was typical of many of the “multinational maids” I interviewed in Canada. Like Ramona, these women tended to have worked in at least one Asian market – most often Hong Kong but sometimes also Singapore and Taiwan – before saving up enough funds to apply for a job in Canada. A few others had worked in European countries like Cyprus and Germany, and some in Israel, before their move to Canada. Only a handful of Filipina caregivers I interviewed had managed to secure a visa to Canada *directly* from the Philippines. Sherry was one such “direct migrant.”

In 2009, Sherry flew from Manila to Toronto to start a new job as a live-in domestic worker in Canada, without having worked in any stepping-stone markets beforehand. The critical factor that enabled Sherry to do so was her close connection to several overseas Filipinos who were permanent residents or naturalized citizens in various Western countries.⁵ Sherry’s brother had been sponsored by his wife, an American citizen, for permanent residency in the United States, and Sherry’s sister, a nurse, had worked in the United Kingdom for 7 years and now lived in Australia. On her mother’s side, Sherry had several aunts and uncles who were professionals working in Canada. With so many family members in various countries in the Global North, Sherry aspired to immigrate to the West as well.⁶ But Sherry knew that she lacked the qualifications needed to secure a white-collar job and accompanying visa to enter a Western country. Though she held a bachelor’s degree in computer science from a university in the Philippines, she had only worked as a “medical secretary” in an exclusive health clinic in Makati City, the financial heart of the Philippines. This was not a job that had much international mobility embedded within it.

⁵ The “West” refers to countries in Western Europe, and Canada and the United States.

⁶ Sherry was certain that she wanted to settle down overseas, preferably in North America.

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However, in a happy coincidence, the owner of the clinic where Sherry worked had a separate business: a for-profit training center that provided certification in caregiving for aspiring migrant domestic workers from the Philippines. This was useful for Sherry because the Canadian government requires applicants who lack on-the-job caregiving experience to hold a caregiving training certificate. As a clinic employee, Sherry was eligible for a discount in the tuition fee rate at her employer's caregiver training center, and so she enrolled in a 6-month caregiving certification course.

After receiving her caregiver certification, Sherry sent her résumé to her aunt in Canada. Her aunt knew someone working at a Toronto-based caregiver agency who agreed to find a Canadian employer for Sherry. It took 3 months before Sherry was able to secure an employer and then another year-and-a-half before her Canadian work visa was approved. (From my interviews with agencies and migrant domestic workers, I learned that such long processing times appear to be standard for Philippines-based migrant domestic worker applicants seeking work in Canada.) For its services, the Toronto agency charged Sherry USD8,000. To put this fee into perspective, this was equivalent to double the average *annual* household income for a Filipino family in 2009,⁷ and would be an impossible amount for most Filipinos to amass. But an uncle of Sherry's in Canada agreed to loan her the money to cover the USD8,000 agency fee as well as the cost of her plane ticket from Manila to Toronto. And so, through the benevolence of her overseas relatives and her well-placed connections in the Philippines, Sherry was able to travel directly from her home country to her new job in Canada without having to undertake any working stints in a stepping-stone market.

⁷ www.census.gov.ph/, retrieved on September 30, 2012. Data came from the Family Income and Expenditures Survey conducted by the Philippine government's National Statistics Office. However, it is generally recognized that there is widespread underestimation, ranging from 30 to 70 percent, of income across both high- and low-income families in the Philippines. In the case of low-income families, this underestimation of household income is due to a significant portion of their income streams being non-cash-based (Rodriguez 1998) but also due to the non-reporting of income from the informal sector of the economy and from remittances (Rodriguez 1996). But even with a higher income estimate for these low-income families, they would still most likely be cash-strapped when it came time to cobble together sufficient funds to pay the necessary recruitment agency fees.

Unlike Sherry, few aspiring migrants from developing countries in Asia and elsewhere can secure visas to a Western country on their first try at international migration. Ramona, for instance, knew that she could not realistically expect to travel directly to Canada from the Philippines. She lacked Sherry's family connections to sponsor her for a visa or to loan her sufficient money to cover the exorbitant agency fees charged to Philippines-based labor migrants seeking jobs in the Global North. Even if she could have scrounged together the money, Ramona also felt that she did not have the luxury of time to wait in the Philippines for a year or more while her Canadian work visa was processed. Better to be overseas – even if it was not Canada – where she could immediately start earning more money and acquiring relevant work experience, rather than earning a pittance at Jollibee while she waited. To Ramona, a stepwise international labor migration trajectory was the most efficient and effective means for her to gain access to her preferred end-destination – Canada.

In Hong Kong, Ramona was able to acquire new migration-relevant capital – valuable work experience looking after the elderly, substantial savings, and a stellar job reference. This new capital enabled her to undertake a second migration journey – this time to Canada – the country where she had wanted to work all along. Ramona's incremental migration to Canada was cheaper than Sherry's direct journey. In addition, her waiting time was shorter because Ramona applied for her Canadian caregiver visa from the Consulate General of Canada in Hong Kong rather than the Canadian embassy in the Philippines where the visa processing times were much longer. Ramona's incremental and hierarchical labor migrations from one overseas market to the next, leveraging resources and opportunities she acquired along the way, is a textbook example of stepwise international labor migration.

Ramona's limited access to pre-migration capital was what set her on her stepwise migration journey. This dearth of capital is a problem facing most migrants from the Global South, which is apparent when looking at worldwide migration statistics.⁸ World Bank economists

⁸ There are an equal number (82 million) of international migrants from the Global South living in another Global South country as there are in the Global North (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2013:1).

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Dilip Ratha and William Shaw (2007) point out that the cost of international migration is still prohibitive for a large segment of aspiring migrants from the Global South, and even more so if they aspire to gain access to a country in the Global North. With the exception of migrants in Mexico, few developing countries share an extensive land border with a high-income country. As a result, direct, permanent, and documented immigration from the Global South to the Global North is limited to those aspiring migrants (like Sherry) with sufficiently high levels of pre-migration capital in the form of family connections, educational qualifications, money and other financial assets, or a particular ethnic or geopolitical profile. However, an alternative set of opportunities exists that increases the odds of capital-constrained migrants from the Global South being able to gain at least short-term legal entry into hard-to-access destinations in the Global North. This opportunity structure is tied to the establishment of guestworker regimes in many high- and middle-income countries. These guestworker programs bring in temporary foreign workers to fill shortfalls in native-born labor supplies for various occupations, particularly the so-called 3-D (“dirty, dangerous, and demeaning”) jobs.

But these overseas labor markets are not equal in the average wage levels, labor protections, and ease of entry they offer aspiring migrant workers. Some markets are objectively better than others in terms of average wage levels and working conditions, though these markets also tend to be harder (and more expensive) to access. At the same time, many migrants do not start their overseas journeys already aware of the relative merits of different overseas markets or having charted out a plan to gain access to their preferred destination in the long run.

Saira, an Indonesian domestic worker I met in Hong Kong, was one such migrant, organically adopting a stepwise migration journey as her knowledge of the world steadily increased with each additional year she spent overseas. I met Saira in Victoria Park, a popular gathering spot for Indonesian domestic workers on Hong Kong Island. A petite, vivacious woman with an easy smile, she told me how she had been ignorant of the world at large when she left Indonesia at the age of twenty-one to start her first overseas job in Malaysia as a domestic worker. “Last time, I don’t know any other country,” she told me. “I just want to make my mother and father happy, so I just go to Malaysia.” Saira had run a small provision shop in Ngawi, the district in the Indonesian province of East Java where she had been born,

but she earned very little from this shop. Meanwhile, she had an aunt who was working as a migrant domestic worker in Saudi Arabia who seemed to like her job. This overseas connection inspired Saira to seek work overseas as well. Saira first worked in Malaysia from 1999 to 2001 but, upon completing her 2-year contract, she decided to move to neighboring Singapore, rather than renew her Malaysian contract for another 2 years. This was because, during her time in Malaysia, she had learned from other Indonesian domestic workers she met that she could earn much more money in Singapore, and so she applied for a job in that neighboring country while she was still employed in Malaysia.

Saira enjoyed her time in Singapore more than she had in Malaysia, but she found that she was not earning as much as she had hoped. (In Malaysia, she had earned 700 Malaysian ringgit (MYR) a month, roughly USD180 a month. She earned 350 Singapore dollars (SGD) a month in Singapore which, using 2001 exchange rates, was roughly USD200 a month, only a little higher than her previous Malaysian salary.) So Saira finished her 2-year contract in Singapore and then applied for and secured a job in Hong Kong through a placement agency in Singapore. She did so having learned from friends in Singapore that she could earn even higher wages in Hong Kong.

For her first Hong Kong contract, Saira earned 2,000 Hong Kong dollars (HKD) a month, which at the time was the equivalent of USD260 a month, a significant increase over her Singapore salary. (Saira now earns more than double her original Hong Kong salary thanks to subsequent increases in the minimum allowable wage for migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong.) Having experienced working life in three overseas destinations in Asia, Saira is convinced that Hong Kong is the best overseas market in which to work as a domestic worker. She told me she likes its cleanliness, the weekly off-days she is given by her employer, and the higher salary. When I asked her if she wanted to move elsewhere in the future, she expressed no interest at all in moving again, whether to a Western country or some other Asian market. As far as Saira is concerned, her stepwise migration has ended successfully in Hong Kong. She plans to work there for one more contract before retiring to her hometown in Indonesia and opening her provision shop again.

To an outsider, the three Asian markets that Saira worked in may appear identical given that she was employed as a temporary migrant

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domestic worker in all three. Saira’s stepwise migrations from Malaysia to Singapore to Hong Kong may therefore seem more like lateral moves in a kind of serial migration. But, as Saira’s story reveals, there are stark distinctions in the average wage rates, protections, and other benefits in each of these markets, making Hong Kong more attractive than Malaysia and Singapore for the average aspiring Asian migrant domestic worker.

Like Ramona, whose story started this chapter, Saira is a stepwise international labor migrant. But Saira’s story demonstrates how stepwise international labor migrants may not always be motivated by a desire to settle down overseas and instead may be about looking for the “best” destination to work in for a certain number of years before returning home. Saira’s story also reveals how stepwise international labor migration journeys need not be planned out in advance. Differences between destinations may not be known to a migrant when she first leaves her home country and, even if these differences are known beforehand, the migrant may not initially be aware of how to access her preferred overseas market. Among the many stepwise migrants I met, an organic and piecemeal adoption of stepwise international labor migration (as with Saira) was just as likely as a more strategic, pre-planned decision to engage in stepwise migration (as with Ramona).

Defining Stepwise International Labor Migration

Ernest Ravenstein (1885), the father of migration studies, was the first to coin the term “stepwise migration,” though he used it to describe the internal migrations of English laborers from village to village. Following Ravenstein’s lead, much of the initial literature on stepwise migration focused on internal migrations from a rural interior to an urban center. There is now a growing application of this term to include hybrid internal-then-international migrations and also full-fledged “multinational” migrations.⁹ I define “stepwise international

⁹ Ravenstein (1885) was the first scholar to identify this pattern though he limited his focus on internal migrations within the British Isles. Conway (1980) and Riddell and Harvey (1972) apply the concept to other forms of internal, rural-urban migration. Subsequently, other scholars such as Tsujimoto (2014), Carlos (2013), and Konadu-Agyemang (1999) extended it to cover hybrid internal-then-international migrations.

labor migration” as the process by which capital- and information-constrained labor migrants accumulate migration-related capital of various kinds while working overseas, enabling them to eventually gain access to destinations that had been out of their reach and/or outside their awareness set when they originally left their home country. While a country in the West may be the dream destination for some migrants like Ramona who engage in stepwise international labor migration, it may not be the dream for others like Saira. For this reason, my working definition has no mention of permanent residence in the West as the end-goal or driver behind all stepwise international labor migrations. Rather, it is a broader and more diverse set of ambitions, hopes, and aspirations that can drive stepwise migration.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss how migration and destination aspirations differ among different groups of labor migrants but, for now, I will simply mention that a stepwise labor migrant chooses her subsequent destinations according to socially and personally constructed destination preferences that vary depending upon the migrant’s origin country, occupation, and ethnic, class, and religious background, among various other factors. What *is* shared across all stepwise journeys is their hierarchical, incremental, path-dependent, contingent, complex, dynamic, and fundamentally, agentic nature. The first five of these characteristics relate to the order and patterning of the individual steps that make up a stepwise journey, while the remaining two characteristics are more closely tied to the decision-making that lies behind the stepwise journeys themselves.

The first characteristic shared by all stepwise international labor migrations is the fact that they are all attempts to climb a migrant’s “destination hierarchy,” the personal, subjective ranking of different destinations in terms of each location’s attractiveness as a place in which to live and/or work.¹⁰ For Asian migrant domestic workers, the places that sit at the top of their *destination hierarchies* vary by nationality (and other factors). Western countries like Canada and the United States sit at the top of most Filipino migrant domestic workers’ hierarchies, while markets like Hong Kong and Taiwan sit atop most Indonesian migrant domestic workers’ destination hierarchies. However, because of an initial lack of resources and/or information,

¹⁰ Hofmann (2014); Paul (2011a); Foner (2009); Gallo (2006).