Multinational Maids offers an in-depth investigation into the international migrations of Filipino and Indonesian migrant domestic workers. The author taps on her rigorous study of more than 1,200 subjects’ migration trajectories to reveal how these migrants work in a series of overseas countries to improve their lives and, in some cases, seek permanent residence in another country. Challenging the portrayal of Asian migrant domestic workers as victims of globalization, Multinational Maids reveals migrants’ agency and strategic thinking under conditions of constraint. At the market level, the establishment of guestworker programs for migrant domestic workers in multiple countries has created a global labor market. A transnational diaspora shapes migrants’ evolving destination imaginaries, while manpower recruitment and placement agencies create transnational mobility structures. In addition, differing destination hierarchies and degrees of access to resources lead to the adoption of divergent stepwise trajectories. Written in an accessible manner, Multinational Maids appeals to migration scholars, policymakers, activists, and students.

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Multinational Maids
Stepwise Migration in a Global Labor Market

ANJU MARY PAUL
Yale-NUS College, Singapore
To Eduardo, my rock in stormy waters
Contents

List of Figures page ix
List of Tables xi
Preface xiii
Acknowledgments xix
List of Abbreviations xxv
Map of Southeast Asia xxix

1 Introduction 1

Part I The Context

2 Key Concepts in Stepwise International Labor Migration 33
3 Origin Stories 53
4 Global but Uneven: The Market for Migrant Domestic Workers 85

Part II The Actors

5 Stepwise Journeys, Compared and Contrasted 129
6 The World According to Migrant Domestic Workers 153
7 Inside the Stepwise Migrant’s Suitcase 185
8 The Agents of Stepwise Migration 221

Part III The Aftermath

9 The End of the Road 247
10 Conclusion 275
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>viii</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I: Data Table</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix II: A Methodological Note</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix III: Index of Interviewees</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

3.1 Job vacancies advertised outside a recruitment agency on Mabini Street, Metro Manila  
page 69

3.2 A bulletin board outside a recruitment agency on Mabini Street, Metro Manila  
70

4.1 Indonesian domestic workers praying in the open area of Victoria Park in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong  
one rainy Sunday afternoon  
98

4.2 Filipino domestic workers picnic on the sidewalk outside Lucky Plaza shopping mall in Singapore  
on a Sunday morning  
105

8.1 Agency advertisement in *The Migrants* newspaper in Taiwan (November 2013 issue)  
235

8.2 The side display of a Singapore placement agency in Lucky Plaza shopping mall  
236
Tables

3.1 Countries with largest stock of overseas Filipinos (as of 2013) page 60
3.2 Top ten countries by Indonesian migrant stock (as of 2015) 65
5.1 Percentage of onward migrants, by survey location and nationality 131
5.2 Top three prior destinations among onward migrants, by survey location and nationality (% of total) 133
5.3 Future plans, by survey location and nationality 134
5.4 Intended next destination, by survey location and nationality 135
10.1 Domestic worker profiles on netmaid.com.sg with prior overseas work experience (not including Singapore), by nationality 278
A1.1 Descriptive statistics from 2014 and 2015 surveys, by survey location and nationality 295
Preface

I wish I could write that I came up with the idea of stepwise international labor migration on my own and then launched myself into the field to systematically test my hypotheses about this emergent migration pattern. In reality, it was more of an accident. A happy accident, but an accident nonetheless. In the summer of 2008, I traveled from the United States to Asia intent on studying the destination decision-making processes of Filipino migrant domestic workers for my doctoral dissertation. I had chosen this particular topic and this population for a variety of reasons. Though I was born in India and hold Indian citizenship, I had previously lived more than 10 years in Singapore, first as a student, then as an employed adult. During this time, I became familiar with the ubiquitous presence of foreign domestic workers in Singapore homes. On weekdays, I would see them going about their daily chores: washing their employer’s car, walking their employer’s children to and from school, purchasing groceries, and the like. On Sundays, I would see them going to church or picnicking in local parks and other public areas around the island.

When I began my doctoral studies in sociology at the University of Michigan, I already knew that I wanted to focus on international migration for my dissertation but I had no idea that I would end up studying Filipino migrant domestic workers. My focus returned to this migrant population in my second year at Michigan when I took a course on migration policy. For my final class assignment for that course, I decided to write about Singapore’s guestworker program that allows migrant domestic workers into the country on temporary work visas. Throughout my years in Singapore, I had felt outside the mainstream of Singaporean society and, perhaps because of that internalized sense of otherness, I felt an affinity with the low-wage migrant workers who were also in but not of Singapore. Given that the Philippines had been the primary source of migrant domestic workers for Singapore in the
1990s when I lived in the city-state, I started to delve into the literature on Philippine labor migration. I was stunned by the wide variety of countries, in addition to Singapore, where Filipino domestic workers can be found, and became fascinated by the question of how Filipino migrant domestic workers (and labor migrants more generally) choose between their various destination options. But I could not find any study that addressed their destination decision-making processes. There are a steadily increasing number of ethnographies written about Asian migrant domestic workers of various nationalities, but most of these projects focus on domestic workers in a single destination. And while there are plentiful theories attempting to explain the migration decision, less attention has been paid to the single (or multiple) destination decisions of international labor migrants. I saw an opportunity to build new theory by attempting to explain the destination decisions of Filipino migrant domestic workers.

In April 2008, I left the United States for Asia with a plan to conduct interviews in Singapore, the Philippines, and Hong Kong, in order to gain a better understanding of how migrants chose between Hong Kong and Singapore. (At the time, I did not imagine that there was any flow of labor migrants between these two markets.) My first interview was conducted in the waiting area of a “maid agency” in the Lucky Plaza shopping mall in Singapore’s downtown shopping district. Inside the placement agency’s waiting area were two Filipinas – an older woman in her late forties and a twenty-something woman – chatting on a sofa. After receiving permission from the agency manager, I approached the

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1 Rhacel Parreñas’s (2015 [2001]) book, Servants of Globalization, which compares Filipino domestic workers in Italy and the United States, was a rare exception when it was first published in 2001.
2 In Singapore and many other parts of the world, domestic workers are called “maids” or “helpers,” which obfuscates their status as workers. Wherever possible, I use the term “domestic worker” to describe people engaged in paid domestic service. Meanwhile, in describing the overseas, for-profit organizations that place these workers with employers, a common term that is used is “maid agency.” I instead use the term “placement agency.” I use the term “recruitment agency” to describe the companies in origin countries that source and send suitable domestic workers and assist with processing any paperwork on the sending government end. In this book, I show how overseas placement agencies are increasingly doubling up as recruitment agencies, sourcing migrant domestic workers who are already employed in one overseas market and finding work for them in another overseas market, thereby encouraging the adoption of stepwise international labor migration.
two women and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed by me for my research. The middle-aged woman, who had a confident, upbeat air about her, quickly agreed. With little prompting, Winola started to talk about the years she had spent in Saudi Arabia working as a private, live-in tutor for a well-to-do Saudi family, her return to the Philippines, and her subsequent failed attempt to find a job as a live-in caregiver in Canada. Winola’s search for a job in Canada had been unsuccessful because her Philippines-based agent had absconded with the deposit she had paid for her placement fee. After that setback, Winola contacted a Singapore placement agency – where we were now sitting – and this agency had offered her a job as a live-in domestic worker in Cambodia. Winola had accepted the offer, traveling to Singapore on a tourist visa to complete her paperwork for Cambodia. But then the same agency proposed an alternative: a job as a live-in domestic worker for a Saudi family in Italy. (The agency manager thought Winola’s prior work experience in Saudi Arabia made her a good fit for the Saudi family in Italy.) Winola accepted the job in Italy, which she saw as more attractive than the one in Cambodia and, by the time I met her, she was waiting for her Italian visa application – submitted through the Italian embassy in Singapore – to be approved before flying to Rome to start work.

As I listened to Winola chart out the countries where she had worked in the past, the countries she had attempted to gain access to, and the country she was planning to work in, I experienced a eureka moment. Until then, it had never occurred to me that migrant domestic workers might be employed in more than one overseas destination over the course of their migratory lifetimes, or that their work experience in one destination could assist in the process of getting a job in a second, preferred destination. It seems obvious in retrospect but I had never before considered the implications of having multiple overseas markets mounting guestworker programs for migrant domestic workers. After that first interview with Winola, however, I made sure to ask all my subsequent interviewees if they had worked or would like to work in more than one country, the process by which they had made each of their destination decisions, and the mechanics of each of their migrations. What I learned upturned my preconceived notions about

3 All names of migrant domestic workers mentioned in this book are pseudonyms, used to protect the identity of the men and women I interviewed.
migrant domestic workers’ destination aspirations and their ability to fulfill them.

Over the course of the next 3 years, I conducted 160 interviews with Filipino domestic workers in Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and later in Canada and the United States for my doctoral dissertation. Altogether, 82 percent of my interviewees in Canada, 50 percent in Hong Kong, and 42 percent in Singapore had worked as domestic workers in at least two overseas markets by the time of their interview with me. For the vast majority of these women, there was a clear logic to the sequence of markets they had worked in, ordered according to a subjective and evolving destination hierarchy they carried around in their heads. I labeled this hierarchical migration pattern “stepwise international labor migration,” and made it the focus of my research.

After finishing my doctorate, I moved back to Singapore and, over the next 3 years, with the help of my students, conducted two large-scale surveys of migrant domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong, collecting data from more than 1,200 Filipino and Indonesian migrant domestic workers, just over 30 Sri Lankan domestic workers, as well as a handful of Indian and Myanmar domestic workers. Alongside these surveys, I conducted scores of additional interviews. My goal was not only to collect a larger dataset to test my earlier findings, but also to expand my nationality pool beyond Filipino migrants. This was critical in order to determine if other nationalities of Asian migrant domestic worker were also engaging in stepwise international labor migration.

For this book, I focus on the data I collected from Filipino and Indonesian migrant domestic workers because these two nationalities serve as important counterpoints to each other. The Philippines and Indonesia are now two of the largest source countries of migrant workers (of all types) in Asia and the Middle East. Filipinos have received the most academic attention, but there is increasing interest in studying Indonesian domestic workers, as they have been encroaching into the Filipino share of the paid domestic work market in Southeast and East Asia, as well as in the Middle East. There are distinct differences

4 These percentages are based on the number of interviewees who were no longer on their first overseas contract. This is necessary since, by definition, those migrant domestic workers who were still on their first overseas contract would have not yet had the opportunity to work in more than one overseas location.
Preface xvii

between the two groups in terms of their average educational attainment levels, wage levels, and the size and diversity of their overseas networks before and after migration. It is worth asking if stepwise international labor migration is exclusively observed among Filipino migrant domestic workers or if it is adopted by various nationalities of migrant domestic worker in Asia.

Among my survey respondents in Hong Kong and Singapore, I found that a significant number of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers had worked in at least one other overseas market, showing that stepwise international labor migration was not unique to better-educated and better-connected Filipino migrants. The prevalence rate of stepwise international labor migration among Indonesian migrant domestic workers was lower than that for Filipino domestic workers, but it was still significant, especially in Hong Kong. There were clear overlaps in the stepwise trajectories adopted by these two sets of migrant domestic workers, but also clear points of divergence. The differences between Indonesian and Filipino stepwise trajectories were, in some ways, more exciting as they highlighted the differing motivations and destination dreams that can drive the adoption of stepwise international labor migration. Just over 30 percent of the Sri Lankan domestic workers my students and I surveyed in Singapore had also worked in at least one other overseas market (most often in the Middle East) before their arrival in Singapore. In other words, Filipinos are by no means unique in their adoption of stepwise international labor migration.

The title of this book – *Multinational Maids* – seemed like the perfect choice as I met more and more globetrotting women migrants responding to the growing transnational demand for carework and using the mobility structures embedded within this globalizing industry to better their work situations and improve their long-term life outcomes. This is globalization happening simultaneously from above and below, and on a geographical scale that previous scholars of migrant domestic work have rarely examined in a single manuscript. My hope is that, through this book, readers begin to appreciate the individual-level destination imaginaries and aspirations, the multinodeal migrant networks, the transnational industry actors, and the broader social forces behind the adoption of stepwise international labor migration by Asian migrant domestic workers. At the same time, by highlighting the nuances within each stepwise migration trajectory,
Preface

I want readers to come away with a sense of the complexities embedded within these journeys and the ongoing constraints on the socioeconomic mobility options of even these “cosmopolitan working-class” (Werbner 1999) migrants.

To that end, I have written this book in as accessible a manner as possible, cutting down on theoretical jargon and keeping my language direct and concise. I have also included the stories of more than 80 women whom I met during my fieldwork. My objective for including these stories is to give readers a sense of the connecting threads running through many of these women’s stepwise migration journeys. My hope is that, as a result, not only academics, policymakers, activists, and students will learn from what I have written, but that migrant domestic workers with some high school or tertiary education will also be able to read this book and determine for themselves if it accurately portrays their experiences with and aspirations behind stepwise international labor migration.
Acknowledgments

With a book project 8 years in the making, and one that involves research in so many countries, there is no easy way to catalog all of the people and organizations that helped me along the way, and the likelihood is that I will have forgotten to thank some of the people who helped make this book a reality. My apologies to whomever I accidentally leave off this list.

If I start at the beginning, Ann Lin at the University of Michigan’s Ford School of Public Policy is the reason I started researching Filipino migrant domestic workers as a second-year doctoral student. Karin Martin, Dean Yang, and my dissertation committee members – Mary Corcoran, Fatma Müge Göçek, Karyn Lacy, and Anthony Chen – were steadfast in their belief that I was on to a good idea with this project, and were always incisive, generous, and thoughtful with their feedback.

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5 The individuals listed only by a first name in the Acknowledgments are also in my interview sample. The names listed are pseudonyms.
Acknowledgments

xxi

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In the Philippines, the staff at the non-profit PGX Global Exchange in Quezon City, the Scalabrini Migration Center, the Kalungan Migration Center, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), the Center for Migrant Advocacy, and the Azizah International Manpower Services recruitment agency were also kind and generous with both their time and knowledge. My special thanks go out to Fabio Baggio from the Scalabrini Migration Center, Imelda Rebate at the Kanlungan Center for Migrant Workers, Bernice Roldan at Unlad Kabayan, and Madam Azizah from the Azizah International Manpower Services agency. My deepest gratitude is reserved for Marla Asis from the Scalabrini Migration Center who read earlier versions of my manuscript and gave generous feedback.

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Finally, my deepest and most sincere thanks go to the countless domestic workers from Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, and Myanmar, who shared their life stories and dreams with me. I hope this book does justice to your struggles and determination.
Abbreviations

AED United Arab Emirati dirhams
ATIS-HK Abra Tinggian Ilocano Society-Hong Kong, a Hong Kong-based migrant association for Filipino migrants from the Abra province in the north of the Philippines
BNP2TKI Badan Nasional Penempatan Dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia, the Indonesian government agency responsible for regulating all labor migration flows out of the country
CAD Canadian dollars
CGFNS Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools
DH Domestic Helper, a common term for migrant domestic workers in Singapore
EU European Union
EUR Euros
EVP Exchange Visitor Program
FDM Foreign Domestic Worker Movement Program, the precursor to the Live-in Caregiver Program in Canada
HKD Hong Kong dollars
HOME Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, a Singapore-based NGO
ILO International Labor Organization
IMF International Monetary Fund
IND Indonesian rupiah
ITE Institute of Technical Education
LCP Live-in Caregiver Program
LMIA Labor Market Impact Assessment, the application a prospective employer of a foreign worker needs to submit to
the Canadian government to demonstrate that they have first attempted to hire a Canadian citizen or permanent resident for the position

MYR  Malaysian ringgit
NCLEX  National Council Licensure Examination, the licensing examination that all registered and practical nurses must pass before being granted a license to work in the United States
NCR  National Capital Region
NELM  New Economics of Labor Migration
NGO  Non-Governmental Organization
NUS  National University of Singapore
OPEC  Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OWWA  Overseas Workers Welfare Administration
PAP  Pembekekan Akhir Pemberangkatan or Final Pre-Departure Briefing, which the Indonesian government requires all prospective migrant workers to complete before their departure from Indonesia
PDOS  Pre-Departure Orientation Session, the mandatory classes a newly hired migrant worker in the Philippines must complete before they are allowed to leave the country to work overseas
PHP  Philippine pesos
POEA  Philippine Overseas Employment Administration
PR  Permanent Residence/Residency
QAR  Qatari riyals
RN  Registered Nurse
RPN  Registered Practical Nurse
SAR  Saudi Arabian riyals
SGD  Singapore dollars
TWC2  Transient Workers Count Too, a Singapore-based NGO
UAE  United Arab Emirates
* I do not use fixed exchange rates as there were significant fluctuations in some currency values over the time period during which the migration stories featured here occurred. Instead, I use the annual exchange rate with US dollars in the particular year the payment occurred.

**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USD</td>
<td>United States dollars*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WES</td>
<td>World Education Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMCA</td>
<td>Young Men’s Christian Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>