

Sustaining daily life: How the members of Mali's household reinvent their roles



Migrant's son with nanny
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Mali migrated to Italy from the Philippines when she was 46 years old, three years after her husband had moved there for work as a domestic helper. Both of them now work in Italy and send money home to their sons, who are concluding their studies in the Philippines.

Mali was born in 1958 in Pampanga, a poor province in the Central Luzon region. After leaving her country, she became the main provider for her household and a determined worker.

"When I was in Pampanga I used to own a goods store. I also had a grocery store; I was also a rice dealer and money lender. I was a busy business woman," she recounted in an interview with UN-INSTRAW.

However, the money Mali and her husband made working in the Philippines was not enough to ensure that her sons, aged 22 and 19, and her daughter, aged 18 could go to university. In fact, the family was not even able to cover their basic living expenses.

In 2002, Mali's husband left to find work in Italy in order to try and add to the family's income. Three years later, Mali decided to join him. Upon arrival, Mali was welcomed by her husband and shortly afterwards, she started working as a live-in nanny for a family in Parioli, Rome.

"We have three kids; our oldest is here with us in Rome. But unfortunately our second son and our daughter are in the Philippines. My relation with my husband has improved since I joined him in Italy. But my relationship with my kids is not as close as it used to be when I was with them and their father was there as well."

As a nanny, Mali is satisfied with her working conditions and has a good relationship with her employer that includes mutual respect and understanding. She looks after a five-month old baby and is able to go back to her home on the weekends. Mali works regular hours and her main responsibilities are to take care of the child, clean and cook.

Mali's 19 year-old son is now the head of their household in the Philippines. Since he is older than the daughter, he is considered the head of the family and was therefore given the responsibility of managing the remittances sent by his parents.

"I trust our kids and it is all up to them how to use the money we send since they use it especially to be able to finish school. Our remittances go straight to my son, so our son has to take care of finances."

The two children in the Philippines are still studying and are not employed. The eldest finished a Bachelor's degree in hotel and restaurant management, while the daughter is studying at a college in Baguio. They have a maid at home who is responsible for the cleaning and cooking, and their grandmother helps in running the household.

As a result of the €2,317 a month that Mali and her husband send their children, they can pay their school fees, food, clothes, allowance and other expenses – they lead a better life and have more hope for the future.

Philippine migration to Italy since the 1970's has always been dominated by women, the vast majority of whom work in the domestic service sector. The case of Mali is an example of the creation of "Global Care Chains," through which household work is transferred from one person to another based on an axis of power. In Italy, women increasingly participate in the labour market, though their own domestic work has not created a strong demand for paid domestic and care services that has been filled in many cases by migrant Filipino women. At the same time, Filipino transnational families have to shift the tasks of daily care that were previously performed by migrant women, within the nuclear family (to father, son or daughter), to the extended family (most often a grandmother), or to a paid domestic worker/caregiver (most often a woman). In that sense, migration changes the social, economic and gender relationships at three levels: inside the household, in the community and globally in both the countries of origin and destination.

This interview was conducted as a part of the UN-INSTRAW/IFAD/FWC research study: "Gender, Remittances and Local Rural Development: The case of Filipino migration to Italy" (UN-INSTRAW, 2008).