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# How neo-Marxism creates bias in gender and migration research: evidence from the Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

The paper analyses migration flows from the Philippines in two gendered occupations: domestic helpers and computer programmers. The international division of labour theory claims that foreign investment determines migration from developing countries, especially of women, towards low-skilled gendered occupations in developed countries. This paper shows that the division of labour is neither gendered nor international in the predicted sense. For instance, data from Philippines Overseas Employment Agency shows that the theory is Eurocentric as Northern America and Europe are destinations for only 3 per cent of domestic workers' flows. The paper argues that neo-Marxism creates bias in gender and migration research and hinders understanding of important gendered effects concerning migrants. Two examples of such gendered effects are highlighted here: the higher vulnerability to legislative change of migrant men employed as domestic workers in Italy and the higher penetration of women into computer programming in the migrant flows to the U.S.

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**KEYWORDS** International division of labour; feminization of migration; globalization; gender bias; domestic work; skilled migration

## Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of gendered international division of labour. The notion originates in the neo-Marxist theory of “global economic restructuring” which claims that the “global expansion of capital” leads to the feminization of labour in the developing countries which in turn causes the “feminization of migration” towards developed countries. While migration statistics invalidated the existence of a feminization of migration phenomenon (Zlotnik 1990; Donato and Gabaccia 2015), the notions of “feminization of migration” and

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“international gendered division of labour” have started to feature as entries in dictionaries and encyclopaedias (Bose 2007; Yoshimura 2007; Rothschild 2009). They shape scholars’ expectations who often assume without checking that women from developing countries increasingly migrate to work in low-skilled and gendered occupations in developed countries.

This paper shows that the neo-Marxist expectations bias gender and migration research. A first glimpse is given by Rhacel Parreñas’ work on Filipina migrants. Its premise is that “the international division of labor is a structural process that determines the migration of Filipina domestic workers” (Parreñas 2000, 560). Based on the assumption that “global capitalism” causes “the migration and entrance into domestic work of Filipino women”, Parreñas chose to carry out fieldwork research in two countries: the U.S. and Italy. Drawing on interviews with Filipina domestic workers conducted in the two countries, Parreñas confirmed the existence of the “international division of reproductive labour” and published a book with the generalizing title *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Parreñas 2001).

But have statistics on migration flows from the Philippines to the U.S. been confirming the existence of a “gendered international division of labour”? The Philippines Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) provides data on emigration flows disaggregated by sex and occupation for the period 1992–2010. We can select the data concerning two “gendered” occupations: domestic helpers and computer programmers. Domestic work is a low-skilled poorly waged occupation construed as “feminine”, while computer programming is a high-skilled high-waged occupation construed as “masculine”. Neo-Marxism predicts that the U.S. would drive migrants from the Philippines, especially women, into domestic work rather than computer programming.

The POEA data reveal that such expectations are misleading. Between 1992 and 2010, labour migration flows from the Philippines to the U.S. contain *more than twice as many computer programmers as domestic helpers*. Furthermore, the numbers of women migrating as computer programmers and as domestic helpers to the U.S. are almost *equal*. Nor is the division of labour “international” in the predicted sense. For instance, there are *24 times* as many Filipina domestic workers migrating to Malaysia, a less developed and less populated country, than to the U.S. All in all, this example illustrates that the division of labour can be neither gendered nor international in the sense predicted by the neo-Marxist theory.

The aim of this paper is to show how neo-Marxism draws attention away from important gendered effects about migrants. Firstly, the POEA data on labour migration flows suggest that the neo-Marxist expectations are biased in three ways: (1) they are *Eurocentric* and overstate the role of Western countries in driving migrants into domestic work (as only 3 per cent of the Filipino domestic workers migrated to Northern America and Western Europe); (2) they underestimate the number of Filipino men migrating as domestic

workers in the Western countries; and (3) they ignore the significant proportion of Filipina migrants who are skilled and/or hired in skilled occupations, including occupations construed as “masculine”. Such distortions are not surprising as the notion of gendered international division of labour does not stem from the empirical study of migration but from a comprehensive critique of capitalism.

Yet, seeing migration through the neo-Marxist lens can hide important gendered effects concerning migrants. Using data on migration stocks, I illustrate two such effects: (4) in Italy, the higher vulnerability to legislative changes of migrant men compared to women employed as domestic workers and (5) in the U.S., the higher penetration into computer programming of emigrant women from the Philippines compared to the women in the U.S. The neo-Marxist concern with the gendered international division of labour diverts gender and migration research from analysing such phenomena as they do not fit the theory.

The paper uses data on flows and stocks of migrants from the Philippines. Data on labour migration flows are provided by the POEA and are disaggregated by occupation, sex, and country of destination for the period 1992–2010. This statistical source is relevant not only because neo-Marxist claims about “feminization of migration” and “gendered international division of labour” concern labour migration flows, not stocks. But the POEA data use a unique occupational classification which allows for a proper comparison between migrants’ occupations in different countries. The disadvantage of using this statistical source is that it underestimates migration flows, as not all emigrants from the Philippines are registered in the country’s official agency. To remediate it, I corroborate the data with statistics on stocks in the countries of destination. Data on stocks are used from two sources: the Italian Social Security Institute and the US Bureau of Labor, where they are disaggregated by sex and occupation.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first section explores the theoretical foundations of the international division of labour and how they have led to predictions about women’s migration. The second section shows how data on migrant domestic workers and computer programmers from the Philippines challenge the notion of gendered international division of labour. The conclusion suggests that in the age of heavily restricted immigration, the occupational structure of migrant workers could *prima facie* be better explained by the states’ action and by other related factors than by the global capital expansion.<sup>1</sup> As data from Italy will show, migration policies can have a significant impact on men’s recruitment in domestic work. Yet, built as a critique of globalization and capitalism, neo-Marxist scholarship tends to neglect the states’ role in controlling migration.

## From capital expansion to women's migration

The notion of "international division of labour" started to be used in the 1970s by the neo-Marxist critiques of "globalization". In 1974, Wallerstein theorized the "world-economy" and elaborated on "the existence of a single division of labour" at the global level (Wallerstein 1974). But it was in 1977 that Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye published a book titled *The New International Division of Labor: Structural Unemployment in Industrialized Countries and Industrialization in Developing Countries* (1980).<sup>2</sup> The book is a critique of "globalization" and, in particular, of the tendency of western companies to partly outsource their production to developing countries. The phenomenon is situated in the 1970s and empirically grounded on a survey of German industries. The authors view outsourcing as a new form of expansion and accumulation of capital driven by the western companies' willingness to lower their labour costs, despite an unemployment rate estimated as high at 5 per cent. The book suggests that outsourcing leads to a "global economic restructuring" and the creation of a "single world economy". International trade is viewed as its "most striking manifestation". The economic restructuring organizes according to a "new international division of labour": basic manufacturing and industrial production are relocated to developing countries, whereas developed countries deindustrialize and specialize in the service sector. The division is "new" by contrast to the "old" or "classic" division which was obtained in colonial times between the European countries and their colonies with the extraction of raw materials from the latter and their industrial transformation in the former.

On this account, "international division of labour" seems to refer to a global occupational segregation understood in a *spatial* sense: some occupations or sectors of activity are executed mainly in some territories and some in others (Schaeffer and Mack 1997). However, a closer look suggests that the division of labour is considered not only between national territories but also between *workers* of different national origins wherever they live. This is how migration enters the picture. Global restructuring scholars criticize corporations not only for outsourcing production to other countries but also for "the appearance of *Gastarbeiter* in Western Europe and Mexican and Puerto Rican immigrant workers in the USA" (Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1980). They employ the Marxist phrase "reserve army of labour" to refer to workers in developing countries, but extend it to workers from developing countries. This warlike metaphor will further inspire migration scholarship (e.g. Castells 1975).

The link between capital expansion, migration, and gender has been more explicitly articulated by Saskia Sassen (1984, 1988). In her book, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (1988), she argues that foreign direct investment (FDI) determines the size and direction of migration flows. For Sassen, the division of labour occurs between "Export

Processing Zones" (EPZs) in developing countries, dedicated to export manufacturing and export agriculture, and "global cities", such as New York and Los Angeles, reserved to "the control and management of the global economic system". Both kinds of place are assumed to draw the migration of women to low-skilled work. On the one hand, the EPZs drive women's internal and regional migration, a process Sassen describes as "uprooting", and which "contributes to the disruption of traditional, often unwaged, employment structures". Sassen insists that "the massive recruitment of young women [...] who under other conditions would not have entered waged employment [...] has been found to contribute to male unemployment and, in several cases, to male emigration" (Sassen 1988, 19, see also 107, 116). On the other hand, the global cities drive migration from the developing countries: the EPZs prepared it by bringing countries closer, especially with the U.S., and making emigration emerge as an option actually felt by the individuals concerned (Sassen 1988, 20). The final push is given by the "widespread practice of firing the new, mostly female, workers" and thus "these women, left unemployed and westernized, may have few options but emigration" (Sassen 1988, 19). In the global cities, oriented towards the services sector, the occupational structure is assumed to be polarized between very high-income professional jobs and low-wage jobs. Immigrants come to provide labour for low-wage service jobs: they "service" the high-income lifestyles of the top level professionals and the expanding downgraded manufacturing sector (Sassen 1988, 22). For Sassen, as for other neo-Marxist theorists, migration is a byproduct of capital expansion: "migrations do not just happen: they are one outcome or one systemic tendency in a more general dynamic of change" (1984, 1148). Its consequences are negative: "immigration and off-shore production are ways of securing a low-wage labor force and of fighting the demands of organized workers in developed countries" (Sassen 1984, 1144).

The above summary captures three causal relations: (a) capital expansion leads to the massive recruitment of women; (b) which, in turn, favours women's emigration (c) to fill the low-skilled and gendered occupations in capitalist countries. Under the headings of "feminization of labour", "feminization of migration", and "international gender division of labour", this framework has become influential and shapes scholars' expectations about women's migration. Let us briefly describe each of these notions.

### ***"Feminization of labour"***

In the neo-Marxist literature, the phrase "feminization of labour" has been used in both a descriptive and a metaphorical sense. In the descriptive sense, it refers to the increasing participation of women in the workforce associated with outsourcing (Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1980) or with foreign investment (Sassen 1984, 1988). The "massive recruitment of young

female workers" in developing countries is explained as a consequence of capitalism: because the capital accumulation process privileges a low-cost, flexible, and "docile" workforce, women from developing countries become the optimal labour force (Mies 1986), and they are preferred for their "nimble fingers" which – somewhat surprisingly – are assumed to make them "cheap workers" (Elson and Pearson 1981). As the theory is above all a critique of capitalism, women's participation in the workforce is analysed exclusively through its negative consequences as a process of uprooting, of disruption of traditionally unwaged employment structures, of engendering male unemployment, and so on.

The phrase "feminization of labour" was also employed in a more metaphorical sense to pejoratively describe a degradation of labour conditions. For instance, Standing (1989) observes that:

the types of work, labor relations, income, and insecurity associated with 'women's work' have been spreading, resulting not only in a notable rise in female labor force participation, but in a fall in men's employment, as well as a transformation – or feminization – of many jobs traditionally held by men. (1077)

Likewise, Mies (1981) coined the term "housewifization" to criticize the capitalist transformation of work towards more flexibility. Later on, she elaborated the concept and argued that seeing work as "income-generating *activity*" is what allowed women's labour to become invisible and be bought at a much lower price than male labour (Mies 1986, 116).

### ***"Feminization of migration"***

Feminization of labour was thought to lead to "feminization of migration", a phrase used by a growing body of literature beyond the neo-Marxist framework to describe an increase in the number and/or the proportion of women among international migrants. Yet, the phrase is inappropriate in both senses: while the number of migrant women has increased since 1960, the number of migrant men has increased even more and should have been theorized as "masculinization of migration". By contrast, the proportion of women in international migration has been stable since 1960. Paradoxically, the phrase "feminization of migration" emerged in migration studies in the 1990s at precisely the time when evidence about the unchanged proportion of women in international migration became available (Zlotnik 1990, 1999). However, the phrase has been so successful that "feminization of migration" continued to be cited as one of the main trends of international migration (Castles and Miller 2003) by scholars who attended the presentation of UN data in 1998 showing that the proportion of women's migration had increased only slightly from 47 per cent to 48 per cent, and that the phenomenon of feminization "could not be justified in purely quantitative terms" (Castles 1999). In the 2000s, the phrase "feminization of migration" was



“gaining currency” (Donato et al. 2006) and began to refer exclusively to “gendered” activities. One encyclopaedia article summarizes the sense of “gendered”:

feminization of migration has produced gender-typed forms of migration, particularly in terms of domestic workers and caregivers, performed either in private homes or institutionalized settings such as hospitals or nursing homes; trafficking of women for the sex industry; and the organized migration of women for marriage. (Rothschild 2009)

### ***“Gendered international division of labour”***

The idea of a division of labour which is both international and gendered is used with different meanings. At times, it refers to the study of gender relations within foreign or multinational companies, and at other times to the overrepresentation of migrant women in specific occupations. In both cases, the occupational segregation is considered at the country level (the international dimension being given by the foreign origin of either the employing company or the women employed) and analysed as a vertical occupational segregation (women tend to be overrepresented in low-wage jobs).

In recent years, the sectors of activity regarded as gendered have changed. In the 1980s, scholars insisted that occupations mostly associated to women were in low-wage professions of various sectors such as electronics, information technology, garments, textiles, footwear, or toys (Elson and Pearson 1981; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Mies 1986; Sassen 1988; Samper 1997). However, in the 2000s, the “gender” is most often associated with occupations in the care sector (Hochschild 2000; Parreñas 2000; Gündüz 2013). When the idea of a gendered international division of labour is used to refer to migrant women, studies often focus on women from specific developing countries hired as domestic workers in specific developed countries.

One powerful illustration of this meaning of the word “gendered” is the association of Filipina migrants with domestic workers hired in western countries. As mentioned in the introduction, Rhacel Parreñas claimed that “global capitalism” determines “the migration and entrance into domestic work of Filipino women” (2000). However, Parreñas’ work is not isolated: an important body of literature associates Filipina migrants with domestic work. A search in ProQuestia, a large academic journal data base, reveals that 74 per cent of the peer-reviewed articles containing the words “Filipina migrant” also contain the words “domestic worker”.<sup>3</sup> This is a high frequency compared to the share of Filipina migrants employed as domestic workers, to the share of the skilled migrant among women from the Philippines, and to how migrant women of other origins are treated in the literature. While not the whole corpus is inspired by neo-Marxism, some of the most influential articles are. Many studies explicitly ground their analyses on the economic

restructuring theory and use Filipina migrants to elaborate new concepts criticizing globalization. Thus, concepts such as “global care chains” (Hochschild 2000), “care drain” (Hochschild 2002), and “global care crisis” (Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild 2008) have emphasized the negative consequences of global capitalism on the children left behind and are popular in the literature. The concept of a new “emotional imperialism” (Gündüz 2013) is built on the model of the *old*, colonial, international division of labour, and implies that Western countries extract and transform care and “emotional resources” (i.e. women) from formerly colonized countries.

### **Do data on Filipino migrants fit the theory?**

This section addresses the issue of empirical support for the neo-Marxist theory. As shown in the previous section, the theory claims a complex causal chain: (a) from “capital expansion” (mainly FDI) to “feminization of labour” in developing countries; (b) from “feminization of labour” to “feminization of migration” towards developed countries, and (c) from “feminization of migration” to a “gendered international division of labour”.

Complex causal chains are less probable than simpler ones. But in the complex neo-Marxist chain, each causal link is controversial. The link between FDI and emigration (regardless of sex) is contested in the literature: economists are still debating whether FDI increases emigration (Xu and Sylwester 2016), decreases it (Aroca and Maloney 2005), or whether it has no impact at all (Kim and Park 2012). Likewise, the link from internal (rural to urban) to international migration of women is contested: based on an extended analysis of Asian migrant women and a review of the relevant literature, Oishi (2005) concluded that the empirical data belie Sassen’s idea that migrant women are former factory workers in the EPZ. The phenomenon of “feminization of migration” has been contested for decades (Zlotnik 1990, 1999; Donato and Gabaccia 2015; Gabaccia 2016). The focus of migrant domestic workers is questionable: data from ILO (2015) show that migrant women employed as domestic workers in Northern America and Europe represent 2 per cent of migrant women worldwide and cannot be seen as characterizing the “feminization of migration” (Dumitru 2016).

However, the case of Filipina migrants is a source of hope for the neo-Marxist theory. Not only are labour migration flows from the Philippines highly feminized, as the theory predicts, with a proportion of women sometimes exceeding 70 per cent of the emigrants, but a significant proportion of women (lying within a range between 27 and 54 per cent) migrate each year to work as domestic helpers. However, do the available data confirm the neo-Marxist theory?

The POEA provides data on labour migration flows disaggregated by occupation, sex, and country of destination for the period 1992–2010. When data

about domestic helpers are selected, they reveal that the division of labour is neither international nor gendered in the sense predicted by the “global economic restructuring” theory. The data show (1) that only 3 per cent of the Filipino domestic workers migrated to Northern America and Western Europe during the period under consideration; (2) that European countries such as Italy and Spain are privileged destinations for men domestic workers; and (3) that the number of women who migrate to the U.S. as domestic workers is small and equals that of women who migrate as computer programmers, an occupation construed as “masculine”.

### ***The Eurocentric bias***

Northern America and Western Europe are at the centre of the neo-Marxist theory. In truth, the geographical units between which the gendered division of labour is assumed to hold are loosely defined. In recent years, the use of the Cold War language “First/Third World” (Hochschild 2000, 2002; Parreñas 2000) has been replaced by the “Global North vs. Global South” language (Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild 2008; Gündüz 2013). But however called, the privileged fieldwork for scholars who use Filipina migrant domestic workers to illustrate the gendered international division of labour is provided by the U.S. and European countries.

Yet, the POEA data show that Northern America and Western Europe are destinations for only a tiny proportion of migrant domestic workers leaving the Philippines. Table 1 ranks the first 20 countries of destination by the volume of flows of domestic workers who left the Philippines during the period 1992–2010. The table shows that the “Global North” is represented by only four countries – Italy, Spain, Canada, and the U.S. – which drove small flows of domestic workers. Combined, they represent only 3 per cent of the migrant domestic flows. The U.S. rank 20th among the countries driving migrant domestic workers from the Philippines. The main destinations of migrant domestic workers are the Arabic States and the Middle East (54 per cent) and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (43 per cent). This geography suggests that if Filipino domestic workers were to serve any theory about the “economic restructuring”, its scope would be regional, not global. It would leave no room for Eurocentric speculations. How can one explain the neo-Marxist focus on Northern America and the European countries?

In the literature, the international division of labour between the Western countries and the Philippines is explained as (a) a racial divide (Parreñas 2001, 2015); (b) a form of neocolonialism and a new “emotional imperialism” (Hochschild 2002; Gündüz 2013); (c) a consequence of the “feminization of labour” in the Western countries where women’s participation in the labour force increases the demand for carework (Hochschild 2002; Yoshimura 2007); and (d) a “care crisis” of the Western welfare systems under the pressure

**Table 1.** Top 20 destination countries for domestic workers' flows from the Philippines, by sex (POEA, 1992–2010) with selected demographic characteristics.

	Destination country	Domestic workers' total flows 1992–2010 <sup>a</sup>	Proportion of men	Women's participation in labour force (%) in 2000 <sup>b</sup>	Population aged 65+ (%) in 2000 <sup>b</sup>
1	Hong Kong	401,231	6,672	49	11
2	Saudi Arabia	190,927	3,461	16	3
3	Kuwait	160,717	1,034	44	2
4	Arab Emirates	123,832	1,077	34	1
5	Qatar	65,694	395	39	2
6	Malaysia	39,179	108	44,5	4
7	Taiwan	39,169	760	-	-
8	Lebanon	37,686	326	20	7
9	Singapore	34,166	112	53	7
10	Italy	20,202	5,630	35	18
11	Bahrain	16,800	293	35	2
12	Oman	16,221	122	23	2
13	Cyprus	15,561	253	50	10
14	Brunei	11,874	242	56	4
15	Spain	11,300	3,422	40	17
16	Jordan	10,353	123	12	3
17	Canada	8,544	303	58	12,5
18	Israel	7,960	700	53,5	10
19	Saipan	2,031	97	-	-
20	U.S.	1,593	149	59	12

<sup>a</sup>Source: The POEA (1992–2010)<sup>b</sup>Source: World Bank (2015).

of an increasingly ageing population (Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild 2008; Beneria 2009).

These explanations do not stem from empirical investigation. For instance, Parreñas evoked the “colonial ties” with the U.S. and Italy to explain the migration of domestic workers from the Philippines and to justify her choice of carrying out fieldwork in Los Angeles and Rome (Parreñas 2000). However, Italy has never colonized the Philippines. To maintain the neocolonial thesis, Parreñas argued that Italian domination was merely “cultural”, through the Catholic Church. By contrast, Spain did colonize the Philippines for three centuries until the Spanish-American War in 1898 but Parreñas did not carry out fieldwork in this country. As Table 1 shows, the U.S. drives 1 per cent of the total flows of domestic workers from the Philippines during two decades. Even by adding Spain, the “colonial ties” cannot become the main determinant of domestic workers' migration.

“Feminization of labor” and the “care crisis” in the Western countries are also used to explain reliance on migrant domestic workers from the Philippines. Yet, as the right side of the Table 1 shows, the higher participation of women in the labor force does not drive higher flows of domestic workers from the Philippines. Except for Singapore and Hong Kong, where the women's share in the labor force is around 50 per cent, the first twelve destinations for Filipino domestic workers have relatively low proportions of women in the labor force. Likewise, Italy and Spain have smaller proportions

of women in the labor force than Canada and the US yet higher flows of domestic workers. The situation is similar for the proportion of population aged 65 and above. Asian and the Middle East countries have small proportions of seniors and high proportions of domestic workers.

To sum up, women's participation in the labour force and ageing societies are facts characterizing the Western countries, but not the migration of domestic workers from the Philippines. The assumption of a division of labour illustrates more a concern for the Western countries than for the migrant domestic workers from the Philippines.

### ***Migrant men's vulnerability in a female-dominated low-skilled occupation***

One way of avoiding Eurocentric bias while studying migrant domestic workers in the Western countries is to pay attention to men. As [Table 1](#) shows, migration from the Philippines into domestic work is highly feminized, but the Western countries are destinations for only a small minority of domestic workers. However, two Western countries – Italy and Spain – are singled out as privileged destinations for important flows not of women, but of men domestic workers. Apart from Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia, no other country of destination had drained comparable flows of men domestic workers from the Philippines.

Yet, the neo-Marxists focus on women only; not only in theory, when they argue that “global expansion of capital” leads to “feminization of labour” and “feminization of migration”, but also in practice, when they chose to conduct interviews only with women domestic workers as Parreñas initially did (Parreñas 2001). This choice has been criticized for running the risk of “falling into the trap of accepting the long-dismissed sex role theory” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999), of reifying “stereotypical gendered conceptions of domesticity” (Manalansan 2006), or of endorsing “methodological sexism” (Dumitru 2014). Indeed, other scholars working on migrant domestic workers in Italy included men in their samples (Kilkey 2010; Näre 2010, 2012; Scrinzi 2010). In the second edition of her book, Parreñas added interviews with twelve men domestic workers in Italy and explored the extent to which domestic work threatened their “masculinity” (Parreñas 2015).

The focus on women is pernicious to gender studies. It not only reinforces stereotypes but also hinders understanding of mechanisms through which social phenomena are gendered. Such mechanisms concern men and women, occupations construed as “feminine” and “masculine”, and their combinations. To focus on women in occupations construed as “feminine” is to leave the rest of gender effects understudied.

One understudied effect is the *higher vulnerability* of migrant men employed as domestic workers in Italy to migration policies. This effect can

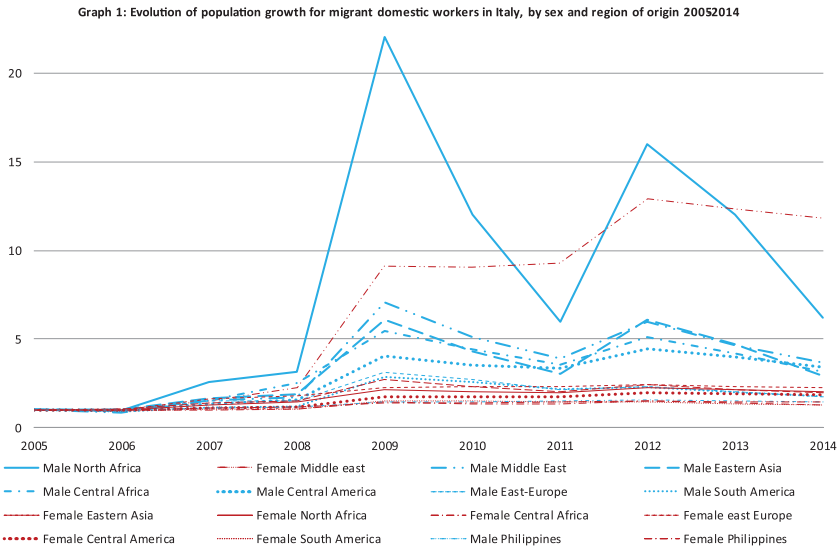
be shown by examining how the proportion of migrant men employed as domestic workers varies over a decade. In Italy, the National Social Security Institute (INPS) provides data about domestic workers, disaggregated by sex and geographical origin for the period 2005–2015.

The INPS data occasion three remarks. The first is that nearly 1 million domestic workers are registered annually. This is considerable, relative to the population size. With five times the population of Italy, the U.S. has only 1.5 million “maids and housekeeping cleaners” (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014), compared to almost 900,000 “*lavoratori domestici*” registered the same year in Italy (INPS 2014). Admittedly, the two countries do not use the same definitions for this occupation. The US Bureau of Labor counts workers in “general cleaning tasks”, performed in both private homes and establishments such as hotels and hospitals. The Italian INPS’s definition is centred on *personal* service and excludes work for commercial establishments (but includes “religious communities, military barracks, and other non-profit organizations”). The INPS includes tasks other than cleaning (e.g. babysitting, caregivers, cooks) performed “for the needs of the family life of the employer”. Despite these differences, the number of domestic workers per capita in Italy remains higher than in the U.S.

Secondly, the INPS data considered by origin reveal that the employment of *native* domestic workers varies between 17 and 28 per cent over the decade, following an increasing trend. The only group numerically more important than the Italians is the Eastern Europeans who account for 39 to 48 per cent of the total domestic workers. Contrary to popular thinking, domestic workers from the Philippines account for only 8–10 per cent, a proportion that discredits the idea that they are the “servants of globalization” in Italy.

Thirdly, the INPS data considered by sex show that men represent a non-negligible proportion of domestic workers, varying between 10 and 23 per cent during the decade. Filipino men represent a large group within the masculine population of domestic workers, except for some years, when the number of Eastern Asians, Northern Africans, and Eastern Europeans becomes much larger. How can one explain this variation?

Two important effects of migration policies can be observed. Figure 1 compares the growth rate of migrant domestic workers by sex and origin. A first effect is observable in the curves for men (in blue): they vary more than the curves for women (in red). That means that the stock of men domestic workers is less stable than that of women. As Figure 1 shows, men’s employment in domestic work grew significantly in 2009 and 2012 but why? In 2009, the law made it easier for employers to hire domestic workers,<sup>4</sup> whereas in 2009 and 2012, two amnesty measures legalized the status of non-EU domestic workers employed by Italian and UE families.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1.** Evolution of population growth for migrant domestic workers in Italy, by sex and region of origin 2005–14.

A second effect is ethnic: for instance, in 2009, male employment in domestic work hugely increased for men from Northern Africa (+ 22 per cent), when 52 thousand men entered domestic work. They represented 70 per cent of all Northern Africans employed in this occupation which indicates a huge “masculinization” of domestic work. However, the increase is significant for men of all origins who are clearly more affected than women by the two legislative changes in 2009 and 2012.

The higher vulnerability of men domestic workers can be contested. One can see their presence in domestic service as purely opportunistic, as a means of obtaining legal status. However, the huge drop in 2011, which coincides with the government’s decision to raise social contributions for employers of domestic workers,<sup>6</sup> indicates that men’s employment in domestic work is vulnerable to, rather opportunistic on, legislative changes.

Filipinos are the least vulnerable group among male domestic workers and the only one whose employment slightly *increased* in 2011. In the second edition of her book, Parreñas (2015) included interviews with twelve Filipino men in Italy she carried out in 2011. The men deplored the lack of opportunities in domestic work and the better treatment reserved to the Polish. Parreñas logged it without checking. However, the INPS data reveal that in 2011 the number of Eastern Europeans decreased by 21 per cent while the Filipinos increased by 3 per cent. As the least vulnerable group to legislative changes compared to men domestic workers of other origins, the Filipinos are a significant group that grew from 12 to 19 thousand during the decade.

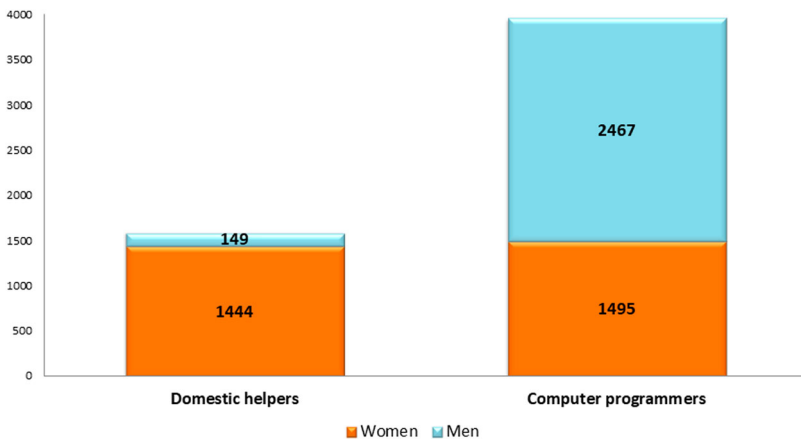
More research is needed to understand why men in “feminine” occupations are more vulnerable than women to legislative changes and why some ethnic groups, such as Filipinos, are less vulnerable than others. But the theory of a gendered international division of labour is not helpful. By understanding migration as a byproduct of capitalism, neo-Marxism simply ignores the role of the states in shaping the occupational structure of migration flows.

### ***Migrant women’s participation in a male-dominated high-skilled occupation***

A second understudied effect is the feminization of skilled migration. The neo-Marxist theory claims that the “global expansion of capital” drives migrant women into low-skilled, low-wage, and gendered occupations. However, the U.S. is a major foreign investor in the Philippines but ranks 20th among the countries driving Filipina migrants into domestic work. A comparison with a gendered, high-skilled, high-waged occupation – computer programming – has surprising results.

Indeed, the POEA data reveal that during 1992–2010, the U.S. drove *more than twice as many computer programmers as domestic helpers* (see [Figure 2](#)). Computer programming, unlike domestic work, is an occupation requiring a Bachelor’s degree and commanding high wages. The U.S. mean annual wage for computer programmers is three times higher than that for maids (\$85,000 vs. \$23,800 in 2016). The data show that the U.S. did not drive Filipina into low-skilled work as the number of women migrating for domestic service *equals* the number of women recruited in computer programming.

One intuitive way of explaining this fact is to point out the difference between the “gender ideologies” in the two countries: the U.S. is more



**Figure 2.** Labor migration flows from the Philippines to the US in two gendered occupations, by sex (POEA 1992–2010).



committed to gender equality and appeals less to domestic work while giving women the chance to work in skilled occupations. However, the computer programmers' flows from the Philippines are more gender-balanced than the occupation appears to be in the U.S. Women represent 38 per cent of the computer programmers' flows from the Philippines – a proportion never reached by the women employed in this occupation in the U.S. or in the Philippines. The proportion of women in computer programming in the U.S. was 22.6 per cent in 2016 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016), following a decreasing trend from 34.3 per cent in 1985 (Wootton 1997).

A common assumption of the international division of labour theory is the existence of a universally shared understanding of how occupations are gendered. This assumption may prove Eurocentric. While computer programming is a male-dominated occupation construed as “masculine” in the Western countries, this is not the case everywhere. Women account for half of the students and/or professionals in the computer sciences, in countries such as Malaysia (Mazliza and Rodziah 2006; Lagesen 2008); Turkey (Ecevit, Gunduz-Hosgor, and Ceylan 2003; or Mauritius (Adams, Bauer, and Baichoo 2003).

More generally, the feminization of skilled migration is confirmed by data from the U.S. census. Thus, Filipina migrants in the U.S. are most often educated (90 per cent are at least High School graduates and 52 per cent have at least a Bachelor's degree); they most often work in “management, business, science, and arts occupations” (42 per cent); and their mean annual earnings stand at \$52,020 (US Census Bureau 2011–2013). Neo-Marxist scholars are right in predicting migration from the Philippines is strongly feminized as almost 60 per cent of the 1.8 million persons living in the U.S. and born in the Philippines are women. But they mistakenly expect the women are in low-skilled, low-waged, and gendered occupations.

The feminization of skilled migration from the Philippines goes beyond the U.S. The data collected by Brücker, Capuano, and Marfouk (2013) by sex and education on migrants in 20 OECD countries show that the proportion of migrant women from the Philippines who have a tertiary education was already 60 per cent in 1980 and reached 71 per cent in 2010. For the period 1980–2010, the emigration rate of Filipina with tertiary education was 4.8 per cent and increased faster than that of women with secondary education (4.7 per cent) and with a lower educational level (2.2 per cent).

Feminization of *skilled* migration is not a specificity of Philippine's migration. But the growing neo-Marxist literature on the “feminization of migration” tends to make women's diploma invisible.

## Conclusion

This paper used data about Filipino migrants to show that neo-Marxism is a source of bias. The POEA data show (1) that Northern America and Europe

are destinations for only three per cent of Filipino flows of domestic worker; (2) that the European countries are singled out as privileged destinations for important flows not of women, but of men domestic workers; and (3) that the U.S., a major investor in the Philippines, drove more than twice as many computer programmers as domestic helpers, with an equal number of women for each occupation.

The paper suggested that neo-Marxist expectations are pernicious for gender and migration research as they hinder understanding of important gendered effects affecting migrants. Two examples of such effects have been given: (4) the higher vulnerability of migrant men employed as domestic workers in Italy and (5) the higher participation of migrant women in the computer programmers' flows from the Philippines to the U.S.

The international division of labour theory does not stem from the empirical study of migration, but from a comprehensive critique of globalization. As migration is viewed as a byproduct of capitalism, neo-Marxist scholarship tends to neglect the political factor and the states' role in shaping the occupational structure of migrant workers. Yet, as the Italian example in this paper shows, migration policies can have a significant impact on men's recruitment in female-dominated occupations. More research is needed to understand various gendered effects concerning migration and their determinants. Gender and migration research would benefit more from studies that are more sensitive to empirical data and less committed to general theories with complex agenda.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees for this suggestion. However, neither data nor the place in this paper is sufficient to develop an alternative explanation.
2. The original book was published in German in 1977.
3. 662 of 892 articles containing the words "Filipina migrant" also contain the words "domestic worker". A search with the single word "domestic" gives 692 results and raises the proportion to 77 per cent. The search was done in April 2017 through ProQuestia and the proportions remain stable during the precedent year despite an increase of the number of articles by hundred new papers.
4. The Law n°2/2009 allowed employers to declare recruitment, extension, and termination of a work contract to the INPS without resorting to the employment centres.
5. Cf. Circular n°101/2009 and Legislative decree n° 109/2012.
6. Circular n°23/2011.

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