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## From “brain drain” to “care drain” : Women's labor migration and methodological sexism

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### SYNOPSIS

The metaphor of “care drain” has been created as a womanly parallel to the “brain drain” idea. Just as “brain drain” suggests that the skilled migrants are an economic loss for the sending country, “care drain” describes the migrant women hired as care workers as a loss of care for their children left behind. This paper criticizes the construction of migrant women as “care drain” for three reasons: 1) it is built on sexist stereotypes, 2) it misrepresents and devalues care work, and 3) it misses the opportunity for a theoretical change about how skills in migration contexts can be understood.

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### Introduction

Research focusing on women's condition and emphasizing the value of care generally has been a driver of social change toward more gender equality. Sometimes, however, it can have the opposite effect: under some conditions, it can convey sexist stereotypes and devalue care. This article spells out the conditions of what can be called methodological sexism.

A case study for methodological sexism is provided by the construction of women's labor migration as “care drain”, a womanly parallel of “brain drain”. The metaphor of “brain drain” has been coined in the 1960s by British tabloids to describe skilled migration as a loss for the United Kingdom. The metaphor was a success: its use has been widely adopted and the idea that skilled migration is a loss for the sending country has not been questioned until the 1990s. In 2002, the sociologist Arlie Hochschild coined the metaphor “care drain” to describe women's labor migration as a loss. At the time she created the metaphor, women were not included in the “brain drain” debate, while their invisibility as skilled migrants has been discussed (Kofman, 2000). As a matter of fact, more than a half of women

that Hochschild analyzed were college-educated, but as they were hired as nannies, she dubbed them “care drain”. By coining a new metaphor, Hochschild intended to point out a “global injustice”: the “new imperialism” of the Global North which “extracts love” and “emotional resources” from the children in the Global South. But the unintended consequence of equating migrant domestic workers with “care drain” is sexist bias.

The aim of this article is threefold. The first is to show why Hochschild's construction of migrant nannies as “care drain” qualifies as what I would call methodological sexism. Sexism is usually defined as unequal treatment of men and women based on a traditional ideology about sex roles. While studying how women fulfill their traditional family roles is not sexist per se, it becomes sexist when three conditions are met: i) women are studied only as caregivers, ii) only women are studied as caregivers (men are excluded) and iii) women's failure to fulfill their traditional family roles is judged regrettable. I argue that Hochschild's analysis meets all the three conditions. My second aim is to argue that constructing women's migration as “care drain” is a way to devalue care insofar as care is described as: i) an attribute necessarily attached to particular categories of people (women, mothers); ii) that is drained by emigration and iii) cannot be gained in migration contexts. The third part suggests that understanding

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people's migration as a “drain” misses the opportunity of understanding the nature of skilled work. What interviewed migrants and feminist scholars suggest is that care requires competence and skills that are acquired. A more dynamic view of skills, inspired by care analysis, challenges the distinction commonly drawn between skilled and unskilled migrants.

### “Care drain”: Methodological sexism

Hochschild explicitly coined the term “care drain” to serve as a female counterpoint to the “brain drain”. “Brain drain” is a metaphor which suggests that skilled migration is an economic loss for the sending country. For decades, the detrimental character for the sending country has been hypothesized without reliable data on the emigrants' number, let alone on the economic effects of their departure.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the metaphor did the job. The hydraulic language, often used about migration,<sup>3</sup> depicts individuals as drown in a liquid that national borders are supposed to contain,<sup>4</sup> and whence any departure amounts, mechanically, to a loss (“drain”). The metaphor specifies the nature of the loss by associating individuals to a single social function: people who are educated are supposed to cause a “*brain drain*”, while women, according to Hochschild, cause “*care drain*”. Hochschild built the parallel between “brain drain” and “care drain” in the following way:

“Rowena's life reflects an important and growing trend: the importation of care and love from poor countries to rich ones. For some time now, promising and highly trained professionals have been moving from ill-equipped hospitals, impoverished schools, antiquated banks, and other beleaguered workplaces of the Third World to better opportunities and higher pay in the First World (...) But in addition to this brain drain there is now a parallel but more hidden and wrenching trend, *as women who normally care for the young, the old, and the sick in their own poor countries move to care for the young, the old, and the sick in rich countries, whether as maid and nannies or as day-care and nursing-home aides. It's a care drain*”. (Hochschild, 2002: 17, my emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

Usually, associating individuals to a single social value (e.g., brain, care) opens an avenue for stereotypes, but establishing which social value an individual is attached to is not a neutral choice. As it happens, Rowena, whose “life” is supposed to illustrate “care drain”, is a migrant who is both a college-educated woman and works as a nanny. That Hochschild choose to describe her not as “brain drain” but as illustrating a “parallel” and “new” trend she calls “care drain” is not trivial. Her choice is rather biased by sexist stereotypes.

Sexism is usually defined as unequal treatment of men and women based on a traditional ideology about sex roles. Traditional gender ideology separates sex roles especially in the family: men are supposed to fulfill their family roles through instrumental, breadwinning activities, while women are associated to nurturing, homemaking, and parenting activities.<sup>6</sup> In migration studies, the representation of women as attached to the household and/or to the family may explain how they were made invisible as migrants. While Ravenstein (1885) thought that women migrate more than

men, a century of scholarship has stubbornly assumed that they migrate less or mainly as wives. Those stereotypes left women's labor migration longtime understudied and lead nowadays to discover, and probably overestimate, the “feminization” of migration.

Studying the way in which solo migrant workers like Rowena are fulfilling, or not, their traditional family roles is not a sexist choice per se. It becomes sexist when three methodological assumptions are made: i) women are studied only as caregivers (their other interests are neglected), ii) only women are studied as caregivers (men are excluded) and iii) women's failure to fulfill their traditional family roles is judged regrettable. In what follows I show that the three conditions are met by the Hochschild's construction of “care drain”.

### Studying women only as caregivers

The first assumption of methodological sexism is to study women only as caregivers. The case of Rowena is eloquent since she is described by a new metaphor, the “care drain”, without even observing that the old metaphor, “brain drain”, was available for her. Rowena certainly works as a nanny in the US, but according to the description given by Hochschild herself,<sup>7</sup> she had “worked three years toward an engineering degree” in the Philippines (Hochschild, 2002: 16). We are not used to thinking of domestic workers as brain drain, but two years of tertiary education commonly classify a migrant as being among the highly-skilled migrants and the so-called “brain drain”. According to the International Organization for Migration, “the most basic definition of highly skilled migrants tends to be restricted to persons with tertiary education, typically adults who have completed a formal two-year college education or more” (IOM, 2008: 52). Rowena completed three, not two years of college education and is, strictly speaking, a highly-skilled migrant. Still, she is studied only as a nanny and a mother.

Rowena's case is not isolated, neither in Hochschild's sample, nor beyond. Hochschild's concept of “care drain” is inspired by interviews that she and Rhacel Parreñas conducted with Filipina domestic workers in Los Angeles and Rome. In Parreñas' sample, of twenty-six women interviewed in Los Angeles, eleven had college diplomas, ten of which in the field of education; of forty-six women interviewed in Rome twenty-three had college diplomas in fields like education, commerce or nursing, one of them having a master degree (Parreñas, 2001: 259). That means that almost half of them are college-educated, a proportion which is even bigger in the preliminary survey Parreñas conducted in Rome with some three hundred Filipina domestic workers (Parreñas, 2001: 260). This is not surprising: of all Filipina migrant women worldwide, the share of those who are college-educated is as big as 64%, based on the figures provided in Docquier, Lowell, and Marfouk (2009: 312). Thus, when hiring a Filipina maid there is a high degree of probability that one is hiring a highly-skilled migrant. Hochschild (2000) is aware that the pool of domestic workers she has in mind “includes college-educated teachers, businesswomen, secretaries (...) and *more than half of the nannies* [Parreñas] interviewed had college degrees”. Still,

Hochschild does not characterize any migrant maid as “brain drain” preferring instead to coin the term “care drain”.<sup>8</sup>

As a matter of fact, women's professional interests are not analyzed. For instance, Parreñas (2001: 251) observes that “of ten women [with college diplomas in education interviewed in Los Angeles] only two have been able to leave domestic servitude for a job commensurate with their training, as they are now employed as public school teachers”. This illustrates an important and well-documented trend: the over-representation of migrant women in jobs for which they are overqualified, a proportion which increases when women come from non-OECD countries (OECD, 2006). In Europe, “high-education migrant women born outside the EU are twice as likely to be employed in low-skill jobs as EU-born and native-born women with the same level of education.” (Rubin et al., 2008: xxiii). But Parreñas' interviews do not focus on how college-educated women cope with jobs unrelated to their training, on whether they chose domestic work as the only legal way to cross international borders (Momsen, 1999:1). The way women look at their professional life or at migration as giving or removing opportunities is not investigated. Parreñas explicitly admits that she does not “document the transformations that migration makes possible for women” (Parreñas, 2008: 14).

One possible reason why women's professional ambitions are neglected is that the focus is on caregiving, not on women. Yet, care is not studied as work: working relationships, their legal status, the strategies used by women to respond to eventual exploitation or to negotiate tasks are not documented. Instead, paid caregiving work is analyzed as an extension of motherhood, as an extraction of maternal love from one's own children in the South to the benefit of the employer's children in the North (Hochschild, 2002: 26). Hochschild looks for support in Marx and Freud to maintain that “immigrant nannies and au pairs often divert feelings originally directed toward their own children” (Hochschild 2002: 22). Both Hochschild (2002: 22) and Parreñas (2001: 76) quote Sau-ling C. Wong to support the view that care work is “diverted motherhood” because “time and energy (...) are diverted from those who, by kinship or communal ties, are their *more rightful recipients*” (Wong: 1994: 69, my emphasis). And Hochschild adds that “time and energy are not all that's involved; so, too, is love” (Hochschild 2002: 22).

#### *Studying only women as caregivers*

The second assumption of methodological sexism is that only women count as caregivers. Indeed, the migration of women, not of men, is supposed to cause “care drain”, fathers' migration does not give rise to any comparative analysis. Rowena's case is again a good example. We learn from Hochschild (2002: 16) that “the father of [Rowena's] children went to Korea in search of work and, over time, he faded from his children's lives”. By contrast, Rowena migrated without having faded from his children's lives: she calls them, writes to them and sends \$450 of her \$750 monthly earnings “for her children's food, clothes, and schooling” (Hochschild 2002: 18). Yet, the mother's migration, not the father's, is analyzed as depriving the children of care. While Hochschild (2002: 29) parenthetically remarks that “it is men who have for the most part stepped aside from

caring work, and it is with them that the “care drain” truly begins”, she is actually referring to the men from the rich countries whose greater involvement in care work could reduce the need to hire nannies and, with that, the incentives for migration.<sup>9</sup>

Without exception, all domestic workers interviewed by Parreñas are women. Was there any reason not to interview men? Migrant male care workers were not missing at the time Parreñas wrote: for the period prior to her research, the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration *officially* registered 1300 men going to Italy with working contracts as domestic helpers.<sup>10</sup> In Italy, the majority of Filipino workers are domestic helpers, irrespective of sex. Research on migrant men working as caregivers in Italy is already done: for instance, using a sample with equal numbers of men and women, Näre (2010) has documented men's attitudes to jobs that they viewed as “women's jobs”. Writing on Hochschild's concept of the “global care chain”, Kilkey (2010) remarks that men are “the missing link of the care chain”.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars even warned that such “an exclusive focus on women in studies of gender and migration could easily fall into the trap of accepting the long-dismissed sex role theory”,<sup>12</sup> while others stressed that such research “reifies stereotypical gendered conceptions of domesticity and affect” (Manalasan, 2006: 238). There is indeed no apparent reason to refrain from studying how the men hired as care workers feel and cope with both the family roles and the emotional labor required in the workplace.

One reason to focus exclusively on women may be to document the “globalizing mothering” hypothesis, as Parreñas aimed. But then, there is no reason to generalize that hypothesis since not all women in the small sample she studied had children living in the Philippines. Those women hardly accounted for more than a half: “twenty-five of forty-six in Rome and fourteen of twenty-six in Los Angeles”. Admittedly, they “constitute a greater portion of the sample” (Parreñas, 2001: 19), but a small majority of a small sample provides a weak basis for theorizing about “globalizing mothering”. And a big minority with no children left behind provides enough basis *not* to equate migrant nannies with “care drain”.

#### *Deploring women's failure to fulfill traditional roles*

Hochschild's main thesis is that the “care drain” is not only regrettable, but a “global injustice”. She characterizes it as a “new and quieter imperialism” in which “women are central” because “love and care” became the “new gold” “extracted” from the Third World by the First World. But what exactly is extracted?

There is some ambiguity about what is supposed to be “drained”: is it care, love or the women themselves? At first sight, it must be care as “care drain” metaphorically suggests a loss of care for the children whose mother migrated. This is a plausible hypothesis that can be empirically confirmed or infirmed provided that the requisites of care are specified. There is indeed an increasing literature about how families with migrant members reorganize childcare, about the role of remittances and about how children with migrant parents fare on different dimensions (education, well-being, health) compared to children whose parents are at home.<sup>13</sup> However, those results do not measure the loss of care and it

would be simplistic to deduce that children are better cared for because they either receive remittances or have their parents present home. Unfortunately, Hochschild gives no hint about how to assess the care drain. Instead, her conclusions about the existence of a loss of care are drawn exclusively on interviews conducted in the First World, with domestic workers, not in the Third World with children and their caregivers. Parreñas (2005) did study the “children of globalization”, but only after she established that there was a “globalizing mothering” trend. The hypothesis of “care drain” did not emerge from defining care and observing children's loss of care but was *deduced* from the mother's absence.

A second way to understand care drain is to assume that what is drained is not exactly care, but love. Commenting on one migrant woman, “Vicky Diaz, a college-educated school-teacher”, Hochschild maintains that “she has taken part in a global heart transplant” (Hochschild, 2002: 22). The “heart transplant” does not refer to the pupils' dispossession of a good teacher, or to the biological children's loss of care: it refers to “love”. The interest for love is coherent with Hochschild's past sociological writings on “emotional labor” and how workers' feelings are commercialized through a “transmutation” from the private to the public sphere to create observable emotions consumed by customers (Hochschild, 1983). Accordingly, she sometimes casts the “global injustice” of care drain in terms of “emotional resources”. She compares “the emotional deprivation of the [Third World] children with the surfeit of affection their First World counterparts enjoy” (Hochschild, 2002: 22). Unfortunately, the asserted emotional deprivation is not based on any study comparing the children's “emotional resources” before and after their mother's migration. While Hochschild never claims explicitly that migrant women love their own children less, she assumes that something is extracted from those children.

So what is “care drain” if it can be asserted without investigating how the children fare after their mother's departure? What the children are certainly losing is their mother's bodily physical presence. But a loss of care cannot be inferred from the mere mothers' bodily physical absence and a growing number of studies show how children are cared for by other family members and how transnational parenting take new forms through ITC and circular migration (see e.g., Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2011). To deduce from the mere mothers' bodily physical absence an important loss of care is to assume that the traditional way of mothering, literally homemade, is essential for childcare. However, an important social change has been the possibility, for women, to leave the house, to work and to earn her and her children's living. In a purely descriptive sense, all those changes implied “care drain” as women's time and energy have been diverted from caregiving to work and other activities. But nowadays few would interpret mothers' becoming breadwinners as an injustice. Hochschild's lack of appreciation for the women's efforts to provide “children's food, clothes and schooling” suggests that however good the mothers are as breadwinners, their failure to fulfill the traditional role of housekeeper is assumed to be essential and qualified as a “global injustice”.

To sum up, Hochschild's construction of women's migration as “care drain” meets the three conditions of a gender

biased methodology: women are studied only as caregivers, only women are studied as caregivers and women's failure to fulfill traditional family roles is judged regrettable. Of course, the most salient feature in this analysis is that a focus on the effects of women's migration obscures the women themselves. The existence of highly-skilled nannies in the sample illustrates it well, showing how women's professional interests and discrimination on the job market are made invisible. While the metaphor of the “care drain” is unfair to women, it also misrepresents care work, as I argue in the next section.

### “Care drain”: Three ways to devalue care

It may be tempting to think that the metaphor of “care drain” is an analytical category which symbolically serves to raise the value of care: by proclaiming it a “global injustice” one asserts its worldwide importance. This is misleading. The metaphors of “care drain” and “brain drain” only *assume* that particular activities or specific groups have social value. The aim – remember that both metaphors made their fortune in migration studies – is to warn that something valuable has crossed national borders, not to contribute to a better understanding of what is socially valuable.

Contemporary understanding of migration as a “drain” shares some presuppositions with mercantilism. Mercantilism is a nationalist doctrine developed in the 17th–18th centuries which viewed the world's economy as a zero-sum game played by the (then-nascent) nation-states. Demographically, mercantilists equated the presence of a large population in a country with wealth and therefore, favored immigration and opposed emigration. Like mercantilism, the contemporary understanding of migration as a “drain” views emigration as a loss. Unlike mercantilism, it does not favor immigration and opposes emigration on a selective basis, by highlighting a loss of value allegedly produced when some categories of people cross the borders.

Here, I suggest that “care drain” and “brain drain” are analytical categories which serve to devalue “care” and “brain”. They are simple variables to document a zero-sum game played by nation-states. More precisely, in what follows, I will show how the “care drain” metaphor devalues care by inaccurately describing it: i) as an attribute necessarily attached to particular categories of people (women, mothers); ii) that is drained by emigration and iii) cannot be gained in migration contexts. Such assumptions are not only stereotypical, arbitrarily attaching people to social functions and places, but they convey an inaccurate, conservative and static understanding of care skills. To illustrate these assumptions, I will use what women did say in the Hochschild's interviews as evidence for a possible care *gain* or what would be a more dynamic account of skills.

### Care as a property attached to particular groups

The first way to devalue skills is to view them as an inherent characteristic that particular groups possess. The “drain” metaphors assume that before crossing the borders, mothers necessarily did care work and graduates were certainly skilled. No investigation about the existence and the



quality of care and skills is needed to declare those groups' emigration as a loss for the sending country.

While the loss assumption is invariable, the standards according to which social value is attached to a given category of people, and the basis for this, are constantly changing. Firstly, several standards of value are competing in the upsurge of different "drain" metaphors. For the tenants of "brain drain", the source of value is higher education, which is assumed to create "highly-skilled" people, supposed to be economically more productive; a view contested both by the tenants of "brawn drain",<sup>14</sup> who stress the indispensable role of the "low-skilled" for any economy and by the tenants of "care drain", who value activities oriented toward social reproduction, both intrinsically and as a condition for economic productivity.

Secondly, the makeup of the groups whose emigration has been perceived as a loss to the sending country has changed over time. While the country's loss of skills is assumed certain, a short look to the history of the "brain drain" debate shows that their meaning has been changing (Dumitru, 2009). In the 1960s, the valuable people were those holding PhDs in the sciences. When the metaphor of "brain drain" was launched by British tabloids to alert the public to the "massive" loss of British scientists immigrating to the United States, no figures supported the complaint. The commission eventually appointed to estimate their number focused exclusively on PhDs in the sciences: biochemistry, mathematics, botany, metallurgy, etc. (Royal Society, 1963: 358). In the 1970s, the definition of "brains" changed. After the US abolished the quota system privileging European migrants, it opened its immigration gates to developing countries and extended the worries about the "brain drain" to them. The "brains" came to refer to any "professionals, technical and kindred workers" (see e.g., Lacroix, 1972; Bhagwati & Dellalfer, 1973). The category originated in the US classification of occupations, and included people without doctorate degrees, from architects to funeral embalmers and from radio operators to clergymen. But not all of them were considered "valuable": some scholars insisted that "artists, athletes and clergymen do not play a key role in economic development" and should be isolated in the figures about "brain drain" (Watanabe, 1969). Indeed, changes in theories of economic development influenced the construction of the "brain drain": interest in the emigration of engineers' in the 1970s is explainable by the emphasis on technology as the key factor of development, gave way to an interest for the emigration of doctors and teachers in recent decades, when development begun to be understood, from the 1990s on, as "human development", measurable by health, education and income indicators. With time, the level of education needed to earn the label "highly skilled" and qualify as a loss to one's country has dropped: instead of the once-obligatory doctorate, two years of tertiary education is now sufficient. Thirdly, on which empirical basis the emigration of some categories of people is assumed to produce a loss? Over decades, the loss produced by the "brain drain" has been debated on the basis of theoretical models that often diverged and had not been supported by empirical evidence. No serious study about how much value is lost and how many "highly-skilled" are needed to cause the loss accompanied the debate. One reason is that the first harmonized international data set on migration rates by education level is recent (Carrington

& Detragiache, 1998). While the data have been increasingly improved, the OECD (2008) still warns: "the available information on the brain drain, its consequences and the professions most affected is insufficient to make sweeping generalizations".

The case of "care drain" is similar: while the metaphor invariably refers to a loss produced by emigration, the basis on which different categories of people are assumed to be endowed with care skills varies. For scholars working on transnational families, care is an attribute necessarily attached to all the mothers or, less often, to parents.<sup>15</sup> In general, migration of women, regardless their parental status, is at stake. "Care drain" is associated to the "feminization of migration" on the assumption that women are either potential caregivers for the elderly or other family members in the sending country, or professional caregivers in the receiving countries, or both. A lesser strand of literature use "care drain" to describe migration of health care professionals, sometimes isolating nurses and lesser-trained professionals.

It may be claimed that what counts in describing women's migration as "care drain" is a call for better recognition of care work. Unfortunately, the "drain" metaphors are unable to add value to some occupations: they only assume it when emigration is at stake. "Brain" and "care" are valued when and to the extent that they cross a border; their value is not assessed before crossing the border and no comparative study supports the judgment that emigration causes a loss. Just as the "brain drain" debate lasted for decades without reliable data about the welfare loss, the "care drain" metaphor persuades us that there must be a loss somewhere even without meeting the children concerned. One's belonging to a (formal or informal) occupational category is taken as enough evidence that one's emigration is a loss.

A good illustration of how persuasive the metaphor of "care drain" is *against* the evidence can be found in Hochschild's interviews. One of the women interviewed, Maria, declares that while she loves the children of her employer, she did not treat her own children in the same way. She rather describes her mothering in the sending country as harsh:

"My kids, I treated them as my mother treated me. (...) My mother wasn't warm to me. She didn't touch me or say 'I love you'. She didn't think she should do that. (...) she put me to work as a 'little mother' caring for my four brother and sisters." (Hochschild, 2002: 24)

Hochschild comments on this, by reporting that such practice of mothering is common in the Philippines countryside. But she situates it in the past ("during the 1960s and 1970s"). She deals with Maria's childhood that she describes as "premodern" and even "reminiscent of fifteenth-century France, as Philippe Ariès describes it in *Centuries of Childhood*, (...) a childhood before the romanticization of the child and before the modern middle-class ideology of intensive mothering. Sentiment wasn't the point; commitment was". A one-page digression ultimately conceals Maria's declaration that she treated *her kids* as her mother did.

We cannot know from this excerpt how harsh Maria was to her children, whether she was uncaring or only cold, or whether she put them to work. The way the migrant women actually behaved with their children is not an issue: when

one is convinced that women's emigration creates a “care drain”, there must be some way in which Maria was a loving and caring mother. If Maria explicitly says that she loves her employer's child more than hers, Hochschild interprets it as a “paradox” relevant at a global level: “on the one hand, the First World extracts love from the Third World. But what is being extracted is partly produced or ‘assembled’ [in the First World]”. The “paradox” is unlikely to weaken the hypothesis of “care extraction”: “is Maria's love of a First World child really being extracted from her own Third World children?” Hochschild asks. And she replies: “Yes, because her daily presence has been removed, and with it the daily expression of her love”. However unsentimental Maria might have been, there must be some expression of love that migration extracted.

The problem with assuming a loss of care is not that some migrant women are uncaring and there is no “care drain” when they leave (although there is no reason to rule out this case). The problem is that when care is assumed to be a characteristic inherent to a group (e.g., mothers, women), its value is lowered, not raised. When all the members of the group are assumed to be caregivers, there is indeed no need to empirically assess how much “care drain” everyone's emigration provoked. But when daily presence is taken as evidence of care, then care is just whatever the members of the group provide. Without a definition of care, the metaphor of “care drain” cannot raise the value of care.

#### *Care as necessarily drained by emigration*

A second way to devalue care is to assume that it is necessarily drained by emigration. While the first kind of devaluation comes from equating caregiving with a category of persons, the second one comes from the assumption that care is lowered or lost by physical absence.

Let us call “the absence effect” the absence-related consequences of migration, as do some “brain drain” theorists (Kapur and McHale, 2006). The economic consequences of skilled migration polarized the “brain drain” debate from the beginning, pitting nationalists (e.g., Pitkin, 1968) against internationalists (e.g., Johnson, 1968). While the former insisted that the absence effect is negative, the latter claimed that it must be close to zero, explaining that wages increase for the professionals left behind, making the occupation attractive, and pushing new candidates to acquire the skills and replace the absentees (Dumitru, 2012). In the late 1990s, a “beneficial brain drain” thesis came to support a positive absence effect: the prospect of migrating to a richer country, where skills are better remunerated, creates incentives for increasing investment in education in the poorer country (Mountford, 1997). An important literature on “brain gain” has emerged then. Kapur and McHale (2006) summarized it to the study of four effects: i. *absence effect* (which is positive when there is a high rate of unemployed professionals in the country); ii. *diaspora effect* (remittances, commercial and technological exchange due to diaspora); iii. *prospective effect* (influence of the prospect of immigration on schooling); iv. *return effect* (improved human capital for return migrants).

“Care drain” cannot be analyzed using the same model. While in some respects, it is regrettable that a new concept

was needed to describe care workers' migration, as if care and brain referred to different things, the concept of “care drain” has the advantage of casting the absence effect in terms of care. The problem can be raised for any person regardless their professional status: is care lost or lowered when a person usually providing care is physically absent from the country?

To be sure, physical presence is not conceptually required by any definition of care. For none of the understandings of care – as a kind of work or activity (Ruddick, 1989; Tronto, 1994), a relationship (Friedman, 1993), a moral disposition or virtue (Slote, 1998) – is caregiving made impossible by physical absence. While the mother–child relationship is often taken as paradigmatic, the mother's physical absence is a mark neither of an uncaring mother nor of an uncared-for child. And childcare is rarely understood as exclusively maternal: in many societies, other persons (adults and children) have either important roles or provide at least half of the childcare (Barry & Paxson, 1971).

Of all understandings, the definition of care as work is perhaps the most demanding in terms of physical presence. But if care work is about meeting needs, as Joan Tronto famously argued while advocating a work-based approach, then physical presence cannot be a requirement for care work. Tronto identified four phases of care: (1) *caring about* a person firstly requires attentiveness in order to identify that person's needs; (2) *taking care of* the identified needs implies assuming responsibility, by determining the correct way to respond them; (3) *care-giving* involves skillful work to meet the needs and provide successful care; and (4) *care-receiving* requires consideration for how the object of care respond to the care received (Tronto, 1994: 105–108 & 126–136). Of the four phases, the third one – care-giving – seems to require physical presence: Tronto describes it as implying “physical work” and “contact” with the objects of care; on that basis, she suggests that giving money is a form of taking care of rather than a form of care-giving. However, she also insisted that good care is impossible without competence. To illustrate it, she gave the example of an incompetent teacher who, although being present in the class room, is unable to respond to the students' needs to learn mathematics. The example suggests not only that physical work is not a necessary condition for care, but also that care depends on correctly identifying the ways to meet the needs.

Identifying children's needs and the way to respond to them can be the object of disagreement: Hochschild may think that the mothers' physical presence and emotional resources are important, while some migrant mothers, like Rowena, may think that “food, clothes, and schooling” are more important and trump physical presence. Rowena estimated that the way to respond those needs is to work abroad. She sends her children \$450 which is an important part of her rather low monthly earnings of \$750. Deciding that care is lost or lowered when a woman deprives herself of such an important part of her earnings is a way to devalue care understood as a way to meet one's children's needs.

Discrediting remittances as a way to care for one's family goes beyond Rowena's individual case. A study on Indonesian domestic workers migrants in Asia finds that despite lower wages, and accordingly, lower levels of remittances, women

send home a greater share of their earnings: 1.5 times more than men, and 69% of their monthly earnings (UNIFEM, 2009). Orozco, Lowell, and Schneider (2007) hypothesized that women remit longer and to more distant family members than men. But the evidence is fragmented and contrasted. On the basis of a survey with 1128 households from Philippines, Semyonov and Gorodzeisky (2005) found that women remit less than men, even after controlling for differences in earnings. Despite a high interest in remittances, there are few data sets disaggregated by sex and no general conclusion can be drawn about differences between men and women. That's all the better for those who suggest using gender, not sex, in the remittances analysis (Malher & Pessar, 2006).

Discrediting remittances as a way to care about one's family is also a way to discredit those family's needs. One may not declare oneself concerned by global inequality and ignore that to alleviate severe poverty, emotional resources are not enough. Remittances are a net contributor to poverty reduction. Based on data from 71 countries, Adams and Page (2005) showed that both international migration and remittances significantly reduce the level, depth, and severity of poverty in the developing world. Sometimes discounted as being "unproductive", family assistance is now four times official development aid.

Far from being a "global heart transplant" (Hochschild, 2002) diminishing intimacy in transnational families (Parreñas, 2005), remittances, both monetary and "social" (Levitt, 1998), are part of transnational intimacy. As Nina Nyberg Sørensen and Luis Guarnizo argued based on Dominican and Columbian migrant women experience, "a focus on global care drain risks missing the nuances surrounding motherly love and ways of caring" (Sørensen & Guarnizo, 2007: 165). Analyzing the emotional connections of a Hong Kong-based Filipino couple with their children and extended family, Deirdre McKay unpacked the "assumptions about universal emotions and family forms that underpin care chain accounts" (McKay, 2007: 178). Her interview with Aldo, a husband who joined her migrant wife, also highlights the link between remittances and caring obligations as an emotional link: "Sending dollars shows feeling! I am happy sending because I know they need it and that's my obligation" (McKay, 2007: 187).

#### *Failing to consider care gain*

A third way to devalue care is to assume that care cannot be gained through migration. Conversely, a way to value care is to highlight its nature is skilled and improvable work, or what I call "care gain".

Evidence for how care skills are acquired through migration is not missing. For instance, Aldo, the Filipino migrant interviewed by McKay (2007) in Hong Kong, described himself before migration as "an unemployed, heavy-drinking and emotionally distant partner, father, and brother" but explained that "work abroad has allowed him to 'respect' Alicia properly, provide for his son and offer him good 'advice', and engage with his siblings as both equal and patron, thus to forge what he feels are closer and more appropriate ties with his family". Aldo and his wife Alicia were both "familiar with the widespread concerns that parental absence will produce emotional distress and maladjustment in children like Oscar, but they judge that the alternative – a life of poverty and malnutrition

with quarreling parents – would undermine whatever emotional advantages his parents' presence might bring" (McKay, 2007: 188).

For Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller who studied how UK-based Filipina domestic workers related to their children through multiple communicative opportunities (polymedia), the evidence is more contrasted: "being in constant contact did not mean parents actually had a better understanding of who their children were" (Madianou & Miller, 2011: 465). But surprisingly, for some of the children interviewed, closer relationships with parents were favored, not prevented, by distance: "Cecilia, like several other participants, was also positive about the potential of media to reduce the embarrassment in expressing intimacy, noting it is easier 'to say things on the phone than to talk to [my mother] in person'. Bea also mentioned that 'I would make it a point to say "I love you" to her, or "Goodnight" whenever we talked with her on the phone. But we really didn't usually do that while she was here because it was embarrassing, and we didn't see the need to.' (466).

A focus on "care drain" neglects any positive absence effect in terms of care. In Hochschild, there is evidence that care is gained both for the migrant's biological children and the employers' ones. For instance, Maria, whose childhood is qualified by Hochschild as "premodern" and who said that she treated her children as her mother treated her, explains that due to migration, she and her children *learned* a new way to treat each other. She explained: "I tell my daughter 'I love you'. At first it sounded fake. But after a while it became natural. And now she says it back. It's strange, but I think I learned that it was okay to say that from being in the United States" (Hochschild, 2002: 25). That kind of positive effect falls within what Peggy Levitt called "social remittances": "ideas, behaviors, identities and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-countries communities (Levitt, 1998: 927). What scholars have observed to a lesser extent is that social remittances go in both directions. For instance, Hochschild reports that the child Rowena is caring for "started babbling in Tagalog, the language Rowena spoke in the Philippines" (Hochschild, 2002: 16). For both children, the women's migration made a care gain possible: one acquired a way to express her emotions; the other learned, and became aware of, some elements of a new language. But a focus on "care drain" neglects both of the ways that the children benefitted, or interprets them negatively, as expressing the mother's feeling of alienation.

To sum up, equating women's migration with "care drain" is a way to convey an inaccurate, conservative and static understanding of care skills which devalues them. It is inaccurate because care is not a natural characteristic, inherent to some people which disappears when they move, but rather a skilled activity that everyone can engage in and which aims to meet people's needs. It is conservative because it views women as responsible for care and focuses on the loss of care after migration, without asking whether the division of care work before migration was fair. It is static because care is viewed as an all-or-nothing thing dependent on the mothers' physical presence, and not as a skill that can be learned. By contrast, an interest for "care gain" assumes from the start that care can be improved and conveys a dynamic view of care as skills.

## Valuing care as skilled work: A brief proposal

The “care drain” metaphor misses the opportunity to value care as a skilled activity and hence, to challenge the distinction between skilled and unskilled migrants in a new way.

Usually, skills are defined either as a learning outcome or as a function of the complexity of the task involved. When learning is the criterion, the qualification may be acquired either in a formal institution or in an informal environment. For instance, European law defines the highly qualified migrants as those who possess either a higher education diploma or five years of professional experience (Council Directive 2009/50/CE). The complexity view of skills is endorsed by the Australian law and defined as “a function of the range and complexity of the set of tasks involved” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

The construction of the “highly-skilled” migration has already been criticized for lack of a consistent definition or methodological conception (IOM, 2010), for being gendered biased in defining some competencies as skills, by excluding others (Steinberg, 1990; Zulauf, 2001) or by including economically productive occupations and excluding welfare and social reproduction related sectors (Kofman, 2007). In the gendered context of care work, skills recognition is particularly difficult (Boddy, Cameron, & Moss, 2006). As Findlay et al. put it “many caring skills are not recognized as skills but as the natural, innate or acquired attributes of women (Moss et al., 2006). This lack of recognition denies their learned (or earned) nature and defines them as unworthy of significant reward. Childcare work is particularly problematic as its association with mothering skills militates against its recognition as learned and valuable” (Findlay, Findlay, & Stewart, 2009: 423).

However, as care workers and feminist scholars suggest, there are good reasons to include care work among the skilled occupations. Instead of artificially separating skilled migration a.k.a. “brain drain” from women's migration, as if women cannot be skilled and as if care is different from brain, one can use feminist theoretical resources to argue that migrant care workers can be skilled workers. Both criteria of skills – complex tasks and learning outcome – are met by care work. On the one hand, Tronto's definition of care suggests that good care is a highly complex activity, requiring a vast range of tasks and skills such as attentiveness, evaluation of different alternatives to meet the needs, responsiveness. On the other hand, interviews with migrants care workers provide evidence that care skills are learned, improved and diversified. By contrast, viewing care as a natural ability of mothers is a way to devalue it, by treating it as raw labor, as the initial earning capacity of an individual considered before any acquisition of human capital (education, work experience).

While the literature on care has enough theoretical resources to raise the value of care, by emphasizing a dynamic account of skills, it also has the potential to challenge the distinction between skilled and unskilled migrants. Such a challenge has been addressed by Williams and Baláz (2008) who argued that no migrant is an “empty vessel” to be called unskilled. From this perspective, constructing migrant (more and less educated) women as unskilled “servants of globalization”

(Parreñas, 2001), and contrasting them to the “information economy” (Sassen, 1994) appears inaccurate. Evidence about migrant care workers as “social remitters” rather supports the view that “all migrants are knowledge bearers with the potential if not always the experience of knowledge sharing and learning” (Williams & Baláz, 2008: 14).

## Conclusion

This paper used the construction of migrant women as a “care drain” to illustrate a case of methodological sexism. I defined methodological sexism as a conjunction of three assumptions: i) women are studied only as caregivers, ii) only women are studied as caregivers (men are excluded) and iii) women's failure to fulfill their role of caregivers in the traditional way is judged regrettable. Methodological sexism is a kind of ‘groupism’, that is, a tendency to assume “discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups” and to take them as “the fundamental units of social analysis” (Brubaker, 2002: 164). Sex-based groupism may contribute to reify and naturalize sex groups. Combined with an understanding of migration as a “drain” it directs attention on the effects of women's migration to the expense of the women themselves. Thus, it fails to identify women's discrimination and to describe the social processes which associate women with childcare and homemaking.

While such an approach may be motivated by the intention to emphasize the value of care globally, the enterprise backfires. Constructing women's migration as a “care drain” is a way to devalue care insofar as care is described as: i) an attribute necessarily attached to specific categories of people (women, mothers); ii) that is lost or lowered once they cross the borders and iii) cannot be gained in migration contexts. Understanding people's migration as a “drain” misses the opportunity to describe how care can be gained, learned and improved, including in migration contexts. What interviewed migrants and feminist scholars suggest is that care requires competence and skills that are acquired. Feminist scholarship has theoretical resources to operate a theoretical change and challenge the distinction between skilled and unskilled migrants. Provided that we do not begin by separating brain and care.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Personal address: 7 rue du Terrage, 75010 Paris, France.

<sup>2</sup> The first comprehensive data basis about skilled immigration in OECD countries appeared in Carrington and Detragiache (1998) and has been extended by Docquier and Marfouk (2006). The idea that skilled migration can be a brain gain for the source country has been presented in theoretical work by Mountford (1997), Beine, Docquier, and Rapoport (2001) and has



been empirically confirmed by Beine, Docquier, and Rapoport (2006), who found a positive and significant effect of migration prospects on human capital formation in 127 developing countries. For a short and non-technical paper resuming the gains, see Kapur and McHale (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Green (2002: 2) remarked that migrations are described as “currents”, with their “eddies” and “shallows” which “spillover”.

<sup>4</sup> The idea that states are viewed as “containers” of the societies is highlighted by Agnew (1994) as one of three assumptions forming the “territorial trap” in International Relations Theory.

<sup>5</sup> The parallel is drawn in subsequent work see e.g., Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild (2008).

<sup>6</sup> For definitions of sexism and gender role ideology see e.g., Lind (2007) and Kroska (2007) in the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*.

<sup>7</sup> Hochschild drawn on Robert Franck “High-Paying US Nanny Position. Puncture Fabric of Family Life in developing Nations” Wall Street Journal 18 Dec. 2001, but she repeats in her description that Rowena worked toward an engineering degree. <http://www.mindfully.org/WTO/Nanny-Developing-Nations.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> As mentioned above, at the time when Hochschild pointed out the injustice of “care drain”, Kofman (2000) had alerted that women’s brain drain was still invisible in academic research. They were actually counted for the first time some years ago, after a half-century debate of “brain drain” by Morrison, Schiff, and Sjöblom (2007), Docquier et al. (2009), Dumont et al. (2007). See also Raghuran (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Hochschild refuses to endorse the solution of keeping women home to care for their children (2003: 27). However, her approach to migration is ambiguous: she interprets migration as “private solution to a public problem” (2003: 23) and argues that the “ideal solution” would be to develop the Philippines and the Third World to such a degree that “the Rowenas of the world could support their children in jobs they’d find at home” (2003: 28).

<sup>10</sup> Data are provided for the period 1993–2010. From 1993 to 1999, 1300 men are registered as domestic helpers for Italy. Cf. also ILO (2004: 16). In the next decade (2000–2010) Philippines overseas employment agency registered more than 4300 men for the same occupation and same destination.

<sup>11</sup> See also the special issue of *Men and Masculinities*, 2010, 13(1) dedicated to migrant men in domestic work.

<sup>12</sup> Hondagneu-Sotelo (1999) cited by Parreñas (2008: 15).

<sup>13</sup> The literature is huge see e.g., Battistella and Conaco (1998), Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo (2010) on children’s school performance and attendance; Valero-Gil (2009) assessing the impact of remittances on children’s health; Lutz and Palenga-Möllenbeck (2012) for how migrant mothers reorganize childcare in families left behind.

<sup>14</sup> The metaphor of “brawn drain”, initially used to refer to the “low-skilled”, is nowadays frequently used to describe the migration of the sportspersons.

<sup>15</sup> For an exception, see Gheaus (2012).

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