

Parreñas, Rhacel, Salazar. 2022. **Unfree: Migrant Domestic Work in Arab States**. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 221 pages.

In this masterful protagonist-driven ethnography, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas delineates the process taken by poverty-stricken Filipina women seeking livelihoods as domestic workers through emigration from rural areas in the Philippines to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Throughout her work, the author seamlessly weaves her vast content analysis, interview and participant observation findings into a narrative that sheds light on the relations between the governments, humanitarian activists, employers and workers implicated in this particular international domestic labour-market flow. The quick access and implicit trust granted to Parreñas by a hard-to-reach sample of 85 migrant Filipina domestic workers was eased by her being their *kabayan* (compatriot in Tagalog). However, the job of conducting interviews with a sample of 35 employers who may have suspected the author of being on side with their Filipina workers, was pre-emptively delegated to her European-origin colleague.

What Parreñas discovers is that although migrant domestic workers are objectively unfree in having little choice for survival except by leaving their homes for precarious domestic work elsewhere, her interviewees perceive themselves to be free if they are fortunate enough to be placed in the home of a “good” employer.

In the first chapter, Parreñas describes the *kafala* or guardianship system in effect in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where employers are required to assume full legal responsibility for their sponsored foreign workers. Employers are made liable if their workers: abscond without alerting the authorities, work with other non-sponsoring employers, or commit any crimes, including having unmarried sexual relations. Parreñas argues that this *kafala* system structurally infantilizes domestic workers by setting up conditions where employers are wont to curtail their employees’ freedom for fear that laws may be transgressed when their employees are not under their direct supervision. Hence, employers, contrary to international recommendations, often withhold their workers’ passports and refuse to give them one day off per week for fear of losing control over their “wards”.

The second chapter examines the Philippine government's crucial role in facilitating the south-to-south flow of migrant workers from the country's impoverished rural areas to the UAE, with the more educated urban labourers engaging in a south-to-north migration instead. Empirical evidence for this section is collected through 106 hours of participant observation of training sessions offered to migrants destined for the UAE. The message given to migrants is three-fold, yet contradictory. They are advised to tolerate any abusive behaviour meted out by their future employers. At the same time, they are encouraged to fight for a monthly wage of \$417 USD set forth in a standardized contract (this, in order to both send remittances back home and save money to set up small businesses upon repatriation). Despite labour standards and country-to-country memoranda being signed beforehand, in reality, these agreements are, at best, only aspirational. In the context of the *kafala* system, employers can and often do choose to ignore these contracts, not only to protect themselves from potential prosecution for any illicit activities engaged in by their wards, but also opportunistically, to economize on paying the full wages set by an unenforceable labour contract.

The third and fourth chapters highlight the experiences of Filipina domestic workers themselves. In Chapter 3, Parreñas introduces her conceptualization of how employees are treated, using the criterion of food consumption which the workers themselves avow to be the most important factor in their living conditions. In their employers' homes, the author argues that domestic workers are prone to be dehumanized, infantilized and unrecognized by either not being offered sufficient caloric intake or not being granted a food allowance to purchase the Filipino fare they prefer.

In Chapter 4, the author discusses extreme cases of abuse where those domestic workers who are no longer able to tolerate their employers' physical and sexual abuse, abscond before the contract's end. If they report their escape in due time, migrant labourers are afforded the safety net of being sheltered at the Philippine embassy/consulate and then being repatriated. Nonetheless, in order to ensure a continued source of income, some workers decide to stay on in the UAE as illegals under the extreme duress of earning even lower wages than before, and the constant threat of being captured and criminalized.

In the fifth chapter, Parreñas takes stock of the precarity

of domestic workers' lives, attesting that most of her interviewees fall into a pattern of serial migration. If employers do not renew their one- or two-year contracts, migrant workers are obliged to leave the UAE and re-enter once they have a new contract in hand. Although most may want to remain home in the Philippines upon their repatriation, the wages they earned in the UAE do not provide a cushion thick enough to either operate the viable small businesses they were initially encouraged to do, or to rebuild their properties after frequent climate disasters. Due to the continued unsustainability of making a living in their rural homes and the necessity of bankrolling their children's education or their family's healthcare, domestic workers find themselves with little choice but to enter once again into the vicious south- to- south migration cycle.

Parreñas' social constructionist approach leads her to critique the victimization verbiage adopted by migrant advocates (moral entrepreneurs) who concentrate their campaigns on extremely abusive cases. She is uncomfortable with the glib use of terms like human trafficking and slavery to describe what she sees as an employment relationship, one that is, admittedly, disadvantageous for the migrant worker. Due to the weight of her interview data where the domestic workers themselves portray the majority of their employers as acceptably "good" even under the *kafala* system, the author argues for a switch in the discourse. Given that employers everywhere, north or south, will try to cut corners to squeeze more work out of their migrant employees, the author cautions against selectively levelling harsh orientalist aspersions against the Arab world writ large. The attitudes of the employers her team interviewed in the UAE were not found to be terribly different from others accounts of employers elsewhere in the world.

The testimonies of the workers showcased in *Unfree* are narrated in a smooth and digestible manner and could conceivably stand on their own even without further conceptualization. In ethnographic studies, it is common practice to apply analytical concepts not before but while and after the data is collected in order for a "best fit" that is organic to the data to be identified. Parreñas attempts to theorize her portrait of domestic work in the UAE at a micro-sociological level with a discussion linking worker freedom to employer morality. In so doing, the contradiction she tackles is the following: Her findings show that domestic workers enjoy an exceedingly limited amount of freedom (e.g. lack of unsupervised

time off under *kafala*, lack of control of food consumption). Yet despite all the constraints rendering migrant domestic workers unfree, most interviewees, against all apparent odds, “freely” choose either to stay with their employers or, after their contracts have expired, continue to return to the UAE to toil as domestic workers under the sponsorship of different employers.

In her contemplation of the relation between employer morality and worker freedom, the author encounters a variety of moral stances (moral, amoral or immoral) taken by employers in the treatment of their domestic employees. From the point of view of the domestic worker, the more moral (or “good”) employers are, the more freedom they will experience. (Parreñas, for the purposes of analysis, seems to substitute her interviewees’ interpretation of “good” employer with “moral” employer. In her interviewees’ words, a “good” employer allows them the freedom: to choose their own food, to take unsupervised time off and to renew their contract or be released to work for another sponsor, whereas a “bad” employer does not.) The problem with the morality argument is the following: How, in light of the findings, can employer morality be pre-established even before they take some sort of action toward their domestic workers? How indeed can “good” employers be pre-determined to be animated by good morals? Without the benefit of further research on the employers’ prior ethical behaviour, the morality argument risks being tautological and frankly, not very useful to understanding migrant workers’ unfreedom.

Although the social constructivist approach used in this book helps describe the positions of non-governmental and governmental moral entrepreneurs (bureaucrats and advocates) and of employer and worker claims-makers, the analytical angle of employer morality / worker freedom that the author has chosen, does not sufficiently accommodate the depth and breadth of the data generated. For greater explanatory value, we are left to search for other, more useful conceptualizations. To reiterate, finding a theoretical best-fit, post-data-collection is normal practice in inductive qualitative research.

In her quest to explain the active agency of precarious workers attempting to exit a web of poverty in the rural south, Parreñas might be nudged to seek inspiration from any one of the analytical literatures on social reproduction, migration, precarity or international labour rights that more closely fit her findings on the interplay between agency and unfreedom. In Parreñas’ own previous

ethnographies based on interviews with domestic workers, she entertains more robust conceptual discussions on precarity (2021) and on reproductive labour (2000). The fact that the theoretical discussions in this book train on the more esoteric and less thorny issues of freedom and morality, might be, as she herself has hinted, due to her need to avoid broaching notions of system change in order to maintain access to her sources.

To find a more holistic fit for the impressive data generated by Parreñas' team, these few suggestions of recent works may help further our understanding on ways in which migrant domestic workers are rendered unfree whilst still perceiving themselves as having some agency. Hein de Haas's review of mainstream migration perspectives suggests that instead of simply viewing migrant laborers as being pulled and pushed by external market forces (hence, unfree), their agency should also be taken into account as they actively weigh their aspirations for better opportunities abroad against their capability to survive poverty at home. Faisal Hamadah's (2022) region-specific critique can help us to gain perspective on how employers engendered in the *kafala* system might take the moral stance that they are in fact defending their allegiance to their state by curtailing the freedoms of their non-citizen domestic workers. Valeria Pulignano and Glenn Morgan (2022) underline the gravity of the unfreedoms endured by female migrant domestic workers in the precarity of their work and in the forced abandonment of their own social reproductive role in their countries of origin. Moving forward, Anne Boucher's (2022) empirical study of hundreds of court cases of abuse against migrant workers can help alert labour organizations and workers of dangerous workplace practices that render them unfree. Judy Fudge (2019) suggests that advocates of the rights of international migrant workers could be most effective by being familiar with international trends, yet at the same time, putting pressure on their own governments and civil society organizations to carry out reforms locally.

In order to find a better fit for the monumental empirical findings showcased in *Unfree*, instead of fruitlessly turning to the literature linking employer morality to worker freedoms, a handful of other possible bodies of work are suggested above to reset the analytical direction of this book's findings. Conceptualizing the changing forms of precarity, social reproduction and working conditions globally, as well as documenting those changes in specific

communities, as Parreñas has done tirelessly for decades on behalf of Filipina domestic workers, may be the best way that academia can contribute to elucidating and improving the plight of migrant labourers.

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