

## CHAPTER

# 10

# Pursuing Respectability in Mobility

## Marriage, Migration, and Divorce of Filipino Women in Belgium and the Netherlands

*Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot*

### Introduction

In 2005, Caroline, a participant in a study I was conducting in Paris at that time, shared with me the story of Maria, a Filipino woman who had two children in France with an Algerian man. When the couple divorced, Maria's ex-husband obtained the custody of their children and decided to take them with him to Algeria. Caroline told me that she saw Maria crying, shouting, and running after the car of her ex-husband as he departed for Charles de Gaulle Airport with their children. Not being able to see her children again drove Maria "crazy," in the words of Caroline. In addition to the loss of her children, she lost her family home and suffered financially. Caroline expressed to me her pity for Maria, who had lost everything she had achieved, as well as her sanity.

Maria's case indicates how divorce can efface one's moral esteem. It engenders the sympathy of other Filipino migrants like Caroline, who view marriage and an intact family as sources of respectability—that is, the ideal Filipino womanhood satisfying the normative expectations for them in the

Philippines to marry, and build and maintain a family, as well as to fulfill their caregiving role to their natal families. How do Filipino women in the context of migration pursue respectability? What are the forces that influence them to do so?

To provide answers to these questions, I examine the experiences of Filipino migrant women; specifically, the way their pursuit of respectability results in different forms of mobility and immobility (spatial, social class, legal), and how these (im)mobilities trigger their quest for respectability during their marriage, divorce, and post-divorce lives. Through the lens of tangled mobility (see Introduction chapter to the present volume), I discuss (im)mobilities that these women simultaneously experience, and pay attention to the influence of gender norms in the Philippines on their lives overseas. Mobility is understood here as “change of condition” in terms of “movements, networks and motility” (Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2008: 2). Among these three aspects, movements will be the focus of the present chapter. Specifically, I analyze transnational migration taking place in the Philippines and foreign countries, small-scale geographic motions that Filipino migrants are engaged in while in their receiving country (such as regular travel from home to workplace), these migrants’ change of social class positions in professional terms, and the modification of their legal status linked to their migration.

For this chapter, I have drawn from the empirical data I gathered for a qualitative study of divorces involving Filipino migrant women in Belgium and the Netherlands (see Fresnoza-Flot 2018, 2019). I examine the data from thirty-four semi-structured interviews of Filipino women: fifteen in Belgium and nineteen in the Netherlands. I met these women through a snowballing approach in urban areas in both countries. Among these women, only three had been formerly married to Filipino men. Although the main focus here is women who had been in binational marriages, the case of these three women can also provide insights. The other thirty women were in “mixed couples” in which the partners have different nationalities and ethnicities. They had met their husbands through pen-pal correspondence, an intermediary, or the Internet. They were mostly university-educated, younger than their ex-partners, and in their forties at the time of my interviews. A majority had children, and three women had offspring from their previous non-marital unions in the Philippines. Except for two, all the informants acquired the nationality of their receiving country. Their marriages lasted about fifteen years on average. To protect their anonymity, I have replaced all their names with pseudonyms, and modified other identifiable characteristics, such as age, profession, and place of residence.

I chose to study the Filipino women in Belgium and the Netherlands because the migration flows of Filipinos in these two countries share many

characteristics. First, both migration flows are composed mainly of women: 76 percent of 4,346 Filipinos in Belgium (Statbel 2019) and 78 percent of 14,546 Filipinos (first-generation with migration background) in the Netherlands (CBS 2019). These migration flows started after World War II. During the 1960s, Filipino nurses and midwives entered Belgium and the Netherlands as health workers in hospitals. During the 1970s and 1980s, many Filipino women arrived and concentrated in the service sector of the economy as domestic, entertainment, or sex workers. Second, although there have been Filipino men, especially seamen, who have married Belgian or Dutch women and stayed on in these two countries, the majority of the marriages took place between Filipino women and Belgian or Dutch men, and this pattern continues today. And third, the relatively long history of Filipino migration into Belgium and the Netherlands allows me to employ a longer temporal lens to study their tangled mobilities.

In the next sections, I delve into the literature of cross-border marriage and divorce to examine the mobilities and immobility entailed in the lives of mixed couples. After this literature review, I revisit the scholarly works on respectability in the context of migration to provide some insights on how migrants pursue it. The central part of the chapter presents the tangled mobilities that Filipino migrant women experience during their marriage and divorce, and thereafter. It also uncovers the way these women experience respectability during each phase of their lives.

## **Marriage, Breakup, and (Im)mobilities in the Context of Migration**

Contrary to the strong scholarly interest in cross-border marriages, the divorce of mixed couples has only recently started to capture scientific interest. Marriage and divorce are intertwined institutions, which can cause individual mobilities as well as immobility spatially, socially, and economically.

Spatial mobility has been observed in many cases of binational marriages, as marriage often precedes or entails migration. Studies most often explain these marriages and migrations as part of a social class mobility project of migrant spouses from economically developing countries (see Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Ricordeau 2012; Tosakul 2010). These migrants' marriages are therefore considered a form of hypergamy. However, this does not mean these individual migrants originate from a lower social class background than their spouses from developed countries. A few studies show the contrary: some migrant spouses from the so-called Global South had a university education and a middle-class family background in their own countries

(see Constable 2005; Thai 2008). By marrying working-class men from the Global North, their binational marriage appears to engender downward social class mobility, and this situation can be dubbed as hypogamy—that is, marrying someone with a lower socioeconomic status than one’s own (see Almanzar 2016). Moreover, many migrant spouses experience social class and spatial immobility after their relocation due to their economic and legal dependence on their citizen partners, notably during the beginning of their immigration (Strasser et al. 2009; Ishii 2016). Although their economic dependence on their citizen spouse does not make it easy for them to send financial support to their natal family back home, their legal status linked to their partner requires them to maintain their union and to be spatially immobile for a certain period of time to prove the veracity of their marriage to their receiving state. If their marriage breaks down before it reaches the required duration to be eligible for their receiving country’s citizenship or permanent residency, they would be in a legally precarious situation and, in the worst case, could be deported.

The few works on the issue of marital breakdown demonstrate how migrant spouses and their partners are caught in the web of laws, institutions, and sociocultural norms in their cross-border social spaces. For example, Sportel (2013) demonstrates that transnational divorce among Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Egyptian couples not only concerns the partners but also involves institutions in their countries of origin. During the divorce process, mixed couples often interact with two legal systems (one in their country of origin and the other in their country of residence) and with intermediary structures such as embassies, public or private organizations, and associations (*ibid.*; see also Sportel 2016). These breakups can lead to lengthy legal battles over the custody of children, and can affect the financial situation, social networks, and psychological well-being of the individuals concerned (Kim 2010; Singh 2008; Singla 2015; Suzuki 2003). In this case, marital breakdown entails immobility in social class and spatial terms in many aspects of an ex-couple’s lives. Despite the challenges of divorce, migrant partners in mixed couples find ways (for example, labor market engagement and re-coupling) to adjust to their situation.

Relationship breakups not only concern mixed couples, but also partners in “transnational families” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002) in which the members are geographically separated from one another but keep a sense of unity across time and spaces. Unlike the dissolution of mixed couples, which remains understudied, marital breakups in ethnically homogeneous families are documented in many societies: first, in the context of “parental migration” involving mothers, fathers, or both (Frank and Wildsmith 2005; Pribilsky 2004); and second, in the case of diasporic migrant communities in which the members originate from one country (Mand 2005; Qureshi

2016). In this literature, we observe how divorce mostly leads to downward social class mobility for women, especially among those with children (for instance, see Mortelmans 2020).

The scholarly works cited above unveil that marriage and marital breakup entail various forms of mobilities (spatial, social, economic, and legal) and also immobility linked to the often-marginal economic and legal situation of the migrant partner in the couple. They also have a gendered dimension in which migrant spouses (mainly women) experience subordination and become “emerging minorities” due to the restrictive migration and citizenship policies of their receiving societies (Ishii 2016). I argue that to illuminate better the different forms of (im)mobility, and their tanglement during marriage, divorce, and post-divorce lives, one should not solely focus on marital breakup itself—the dominant scholarly approach so far—but rather locate it within the conjugal life course of the couple. This approach facilitates an understanding of the logics of marriage, migration, and breakup, as well as the dynamics of power relations in the couple prior to, during, and after its demise. It is in this vein that the present chapter scrutinizes the experiences of marriage and divorce of Filipino women in Belgium and the Netherlands as they pursue respectability.

## Understanding Respectability in the Context of Migration

Many studies document how migrants aspire to respectability following the gender expectations in their country of origin. During the migration process, migrants try to achieve or maintain the ideal manhood or womanhood that their respective countries of origin uphold. In effect, migration itself is most often considered as a pathway toward the respected gender status they wish to acquire.

Respectability—the quality of being socially accepted—appears to depend on migrants’ capacity to satisfy the gender norms and expectations in their countries of origin. In societies where men are expected to fulfill the bread-winning role in the family, it is often by migrating and working abroad that they accomplish such a role, thereby becoming in the process a “good” father, son, or brother (for example, see Pande 2017). For instance, Filipino and Ecuadorian migrant men successfully fulfill their father role through remittance sending and visits to home (McKay 2015; Pribilsky 2012). Migration also allows some men to increase the chance of finding a bride in their country of origin. Low-wage Vietnamese migrant men convert their low status “in their pursuit of marriage” in the United States of America to high status in Vietnam through “everyday drinking,” “eating activities,” and “simple gift-giving practices” (Thai 2005: 317).

This social class dimension of respectability can also be observed in the case of migrant women. For example, Malagasy women coupled with French men convert their “migrant social status and wages” in France “into the quasi-mystical force of someone who ‘has the first word’ in Madagascar” (Cole 2014: S93). Likewise, Thai women in relationships with Belgian men strive to satisfy their obligations and duties not only toward their nuclear family in Belgium but also toward their natal family in Thailand, which make them “good” wives and mothers as well as filial daughters (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla 2018). *Curtidoras* in Mozambique—“women who look for white men in downtown Maputo and engage in transactional sex with them, and sometimes marry and move with them to Europe” (Groes 2018: 123)—pursue a middle-class position in their country of origin or destination through intimate relations with white men. For these women, respectability comes with their access to money and possibilities to learn “good behaviour, charm, and stylish appearance” from their white partners (ibid.: 131).

The above studies indicate that gender role fulfillment and upward social class mobility are constitutive elements of respectability. These elements can also be found in the case of Filipino migrants, whose country of origin views Filipino women as the emblem of its national honor and reproducers of the nation. Many studies of Filipino women’s migration reveal that they become “good” mothers and filial daughters through their transnational caregiving practices toward their nuclear and extended families, such as regular communication with them and the sending of financial support and gifts (e.g., Francisco-Menchavez 2018; Fresnoza-Flot 2009, 2017). The Philippine government also hails them and their Filipino male counterparts as “modern-day heroes” (*bagong bayani*) of the country because of their remittances boosting the local economy (Guevarra 2010). The respect gained from their entourage and the Philippine state symbolizes Filipino migrant women’s upward social class mobility. This valorized social status only declines when they fail to fulfill their family obligations or other gendered expectations (Yea 2008). Considering all these elements of respectability in the context of the Philippine international migration, I examine in the following sections how Filipino migrant women in Belgium and the Netherlands gain, maintain, lose, or reacquire respectability in mobility.

## **Marriage and “Ideal” Filipino Womanhood: Understanding Spatial and Social Class Mobilities**

Womanhood in the Philippines means satisfying certain social expectations, including that of building a family based on marriage, and at the “right” time (biologically speaking). Such expectations, together with the

desire for improved social status, influenced each informant's decision to find a partner to construct their family unit, which subsequently led to their tangled (im)mobilities across national borders in spatial and social class terms.

Joan was born to a working-class family in the southern Philippines. Due to her academic excellence and her parents' support, she was able to obtain a bachelor's degree in engineering and passed the national licensure examination for engineers. She dedicated herself to working as an engineer for a local company, which allowed her to provide for the needs of her natal family. She was approaching thirty when one of her office co-workers put her in letter contact with a Dutchman. After a few months of correspondence, this man invited her in 1991 to live with him in the Netherlands to get to know each other. "Out of curiosity," Joan left her stable job as an engineer and moved to the Netherlands with a "fiancée" visa. However, this relationship did not work out, and she returned to the Philippines in 1993. Before her return, one of her Filipino friends introduced to her a potential Dutch partner, with whom she stayed in contact by mail. This man visited her in the Philippines in 1994 and asked her hand from her father: "My father was so eager that I get married. He said to him, 'no problem.'" It was her father who was encouraging her to get married "to have a child," particularly as she was almost thirty-two years old. Asked whether she had feelings for her soon-to-be husband at that time, Joan replied:

Love was absent. My goal was to get married in order to have a child. My mother told me that romantic feelings could develop later. But I met someone (in the Philippines) with whom I fell in love, but he had a girlfriend at that time. So, I was crying and crying. So, which one will you choose, the one you love but is not there (available) or the one who loves you and is willing to get married with you?

Joan chose the latter option. In 1994, she got married and migrated to the Netherlands to start a family with her Dutch husband. Due to her low proficiency in Dutch and her husband's disapproval of her working, Joan decided not to engage in the labor market, and instead became a housewife. However, not being able to work frustrated her as she could not afford to support her natal family or acquire socially valued possessions back home.

Joan's experience demonstrates how the family pressure on her to get married due to her age and to have a child in wedlock influenced her decision to tie the knot with a man she was not in love with and to move with him to the Netherlands. Her previous live-in relationship with a Dutchman also decreased her attractiveness in the local marriage market as it practically announced that she was no longer a virgin or a sexually inexperienced

woman. In the largely Catholic Philippine society, regardless of social class background, not only do single mothers encounter difficulty in finding a prospective “good” partner in the local marriage market (see Ricordeau 2012), but highly educated women and those over thirty years of age, like Joan, also confront the same challenge. This situation drives some of them to get married to non-Filipino men (Angeles and Sunanta 2007), who are, as Suzuki observes, “more lenient about their sexuality” and live “in a foreign place where the women could escape from the moral punishment against their suspected sexual deviancy” (Suzuki 2017: 131). Although binational marriage allowed Joan to attain an ideal Filipino womanhood (that is, becoming a wedded wife and mother), it impeded her professional career. For Filipino migrants with a working-class background like her, becoming a stay-at-home wife and mother without economic resources makes it difficult to move up the social class ladder in the Philippines. In this case, Joan’s spatial movement, which ensued from her binational marriage, tangled with her social class immobility.

Unlike Joan who had a professional career before migration but stopped working after marriage, a few other informants, like Trina below, were engaged in the Dutch labor market either part-time or full-time following their marriage, which allowed them to slowly fulfill their dream of upward social class mobility in economic terms in the Philippines.

Trina came from a working-class family in a province adjacent to Manila. She did not finish her secondary education because of the economic difficulties experienced by her parents. Although not married, she became a mother at the ages of seventeen and then twenty. Her relationship with the father of her two children did not last long. To support her children’s needs, she worked as a cashier in a supermarket while applying to migrate to another Asian country to work there. Her plan to go abroad did not materialize as she decided to pursue a new relationship with another Filipino man with whom she said she had fallen in love. During that time, a friend of her cousin introduced her to David, a Belgian man ten years older than her who was on vacation in the Philippines. David became interested in her and kept contact with her when he returned to Belgium. Once, David asked her if she would like to go to Belgium: “I replied, ‘Yes, why not?’ What I did not know was that when I said ‘yes, why not?’, he started processing (my travel) papers.” David sent her plane tickets, and Trina had to decide “in the last minute” whether to go to Belgium or not. Her married Filipino boyfriend at that time persuaded her to leave the Philippines; he told her, “You don’t [wouldn’t] have [a] future with me. If you would like to go, just do it.” Upon hearing this, Trina made up her mind to go to Belgium “for the future” of her children. When she arrived in Belgium, Trina worked part-time as a home cleaner, which allowed her to send remittances for her



children back home, who were under the care of her mother and offered them a comfortable life.

Three informants, including Trina, had children outside of wedlock, which decreased their chances of good marriage prospects in the Philippines. Due to this situation and to their concern over the future of their children from previous relationships in the Philippines, they decided to migrate and marry non-Filipino men. Becoming a wife living in an economically developed country opened up possibilities for their offspring to migrate to that country, study there, and enjoy certain social rights. In this case, a mother's spatial mobility is tangled with not only their children's spatial mobility but also with these young people's social class mobility. This relational mobility echoes Ogaya's (2015) finding regarding the connection between motherhood and childhood in Filipino transnational families in Canada: the mobile motherhood of Filipino migrant women converges with their children's mobile childhood during family reunification.

The case of Trina above unveils how her migration and binational marriage facilitated her upward social class mobility in the Philippines. Unlike Joan, Trina was able to send financial support back home thanks to her paid employment, which provided a comfortable life to her children, thereby increasing her social status. Taking into account Trina's case and that of those who marry to become wives-mothers like Joan, there appear to be two faces of the "ideal" Filipino womanhood: wifehood and motherhood alongside upward social class mobility. The gender and family norms in the Philippines, where women are expected to fulfill reproductive and care roles in the family, fashion these faces and provide the framework through which to identify those that are worthy of social respect. In this case, pursuing respectability is tantamount to the quest for the "ideal" Filipino womanhood, and it is this quest that brings the Filipino women in the present study to Europe. During this process, their spatial movement tangled with their social class mobility and, in a few cases, also with their children's spatial and social mobilities.

Furthermore, other informants married non-Filipino men because they felt in love and/or aspired to attain a better socioeconomic situation by migrating. Suzuki (2017) qualifies the latter reason as a "postcolonial desire"—that is, a yearning to experience a "modern" lifestyle similar to that of people in the United States, the past colonial power in the Philippines. Hence, being a "good," "modern" woman in the Philippine context implies, on the one hand, that one becomes a wife and a mother and satisfies one's reproductive/care role in one's natal family, and on the other hand, that one attains the "postcolonial desire" of migration to an economically developed country like Belgium or the Netherlands. In the next section, I uncover how Filipino migrant women in my study attempted to conform to

the “ideal” wife-mother figure during their conjugal lives, while experiencing in many cases tangled (im)mobilities.

### **Migration, (Im)mobilities, and Marital Breakdown**

After they had moved to their husbands’ countries, the women interviewed in the present study each experienced settlement differently in their new country: some became stay-at-home wives, like Joan, whereas others engaged in the labor market, like Trina. This situation evolved along with the life courses of the women interviewed—most notably when they became fluent in the language of their receiving country and when they gave birth. Nonetheless, regardless of whether they worked or not, many informants experienced an unequal gendered division of labor in the home, where they were mainly in charge of the reproductive work. This care obligation limited the informants’ spatial movement, and made it difficult for them to enhance their natal families’ economic situation back in the Philippines.

Aida had met Bernard (a Belgian man four years older than her) through exchanging correspondence, and they got married in the Philippines in 1992. She had a university degree in engineering and a stable job, whereas Bernard had only finished senior high school and was working as a farmer. After their marriage, Aida moved to Belgium and became unemployed. She decided to study and master French while looking for job possibilities. At home, she was in charge of domestic chores: cleaning the house, cooking, and washing clothes. Her husband was spending most of his time on the farm, and the main household task they did together was going to the supermarket to buy food. At that time, Aida’s only spatial mobility was between her home and the supermarket. Not being able to continue her engineering profession in Belgium in the form of salaried employment, she looked for a job in the service sector, and applied for a driving license. She became a part-time office cleaner at a company situated in the next town from where she was residing, and she obtained her driving license. Her job neither changed her housewife role at home nor improved her social class status, but her driving license did improve her spatial mobility. When Aida became a mother, her family obligations suddenly increased, but she did not receive support from her husband:

It was fine for me to [take] and pick up the kids (in school). I knew already how to drive; I did not have a problem with that. So, when Bernard arrived at home, he would eat; the kids were already there. I had already washed them. What was becoming the problem was that

after [some time], all [the responsibility] was falling on me because he was on the farm.

When Aida found out that her husband was cheating on her, she did not hesitate to separate from him and filed for divorce. She found a full-time office job and brought her children with her to a new home in Brussels to start afresh.

Aida's story shows that one form of mobility sometimes results in immobilities. Her migration from the Philippines to Belgium kept her in the beginning within the confines of home, and hampered her engagement in the labor market. These spatial and professional immobilities changed as she strived to master the language of the receiving society, looked for a job, and applied to get a driving license. Aida's spatial and professional mobilities contributed to her courage to end her marriage and pursue a life with her children as a single mother (at least for a short period, as she later re-partnered with a divorced Belgian man). Like Aida, many informants found themselves caught in spatial and professional immobilities during the early period of their immigration—one characterized by the unequal division of household chores.

Only a few informants started their immigration experience with both spatial and professional mobilities. For example, those Filipino care workers who migrated to these countries with a work contract as a nurse or au pair were able to improve the lives of their natal family in the Philippines via regular remittances. Then, before their work contract finished, they met and fell in love with a Belgian or a Dutchman, and decided to stay in their receiving country to form a family.

Another case is that of Helen, who became the principal family breadwinner. While working as an architect in the Philippines, she had met her Dutch husband via correspondence through one of her friends. After a few months of exchanges, the man went to see her in the Philippines and proposed marriage to her. In 1987, they got married there, and Helen migrated to the Netherlands in the same year. It was only after she had arrived in this country that she found out that her husband had in fact resigned from his job before going to the Philippines. As a result, they did not have enough money to rent an apartment for themselves. They lived for a while in the house of her husband's mother. In the meantime, Helen found an office-cleaning job to help with their financial difficulties. Helen got pregnant, but continued to work even after her child was born. Her husband worked sometimes, and they mostly relied on his unemployment benefits and her salary to sustain their needs. They later moved to an apartment, and Helen remained the breadwinner of the family. She described the division of labor at her home: "Mostly, I did the household chores,"

and from time to time her husband “did the shopping.” She added that she also went shopping sometimes: “It was okay for me. I don’t mind those [things]. I was just hoping that he had the motivation to look for a job. That’s it, because mostly, I don’t know if it was depression, he was always sleeping.” One day, she discovered that her husband was cheating on her, which became the final push for their divorce. She moved out with her child to a new apartment and looked for a job that suited her university education. She found the job she was looking for—an architect in a private company—thanks to her Dutch proficiency. She eventually reached a high position in the company, which moved her up the social class ladder, not only in the Netherlands but also in the Philippines. On top of it, her new salary allowed her to visit the Philippines or other countries whenever she wished, unlike before when she was an office cleaner.

Helen’s family trajectory is marked with tangled spatial mobility and professional immobility at the beginning, but later by both spatial and professional mobilities. Her experience, and that of Aida and other informants, shows that although marriage with non-Filipino men leads to spatial movement from a less developed country to a more developed one, it does not always result in financial betterment, either for them or for their natal families in the Philippines. More often, the Filipino women informants underwent either downward social class mobility or immobility coupled with limited spatial movements. In the latter case, stay-at-home informants felt stuck in their situation: they could not exercise their profession in their receiving country, and had no economic resources of their own. By fulfilling the vast bulk of reproductive work in their homes, they satisfy at least the “ideal” Filipino womanhood as “the light of home” (*ilaw ng tahanan*) and in charge of care work in the family. However, in many cases, the respectability gained from binational marriage and migration to Europe was challenging to maintain in the Philippines without economic resources in the receiving country to improve their natal family’s socioeconomic situation. When they engaged in the labor market, the informants could keep their respectability by financially providing for their natal families’ needs. Nonetheless, despite their paid employment, their care work at home remained the same, and they still strived to fulfill them both. Hochschild (1989) describes this situation as “double shifts” in which women perform productive (first shift) and reproductive labor (second shift). Among the informants, only a few declared to be on an equal footing with their husbands in terms of division of labor, and only one confided that it was her husband who was doing more household tasks than her, saying that “he’s much better” at it than her.

The pursuit of respectability can also be observed when informants decided to end their marital union after discovering that their husband had

transgressed certain moral expectations. In the section that follows, I unveil the tangled (im)mobilities that the informants underwent after divorce, and the way they regained or maintained respectability.

## Divorce and Its Underlying (Im)Mobilities

Most of the informants were the ones who decided to put an end to their conjugal lives. This gendered aspect of marital dissolution echoes previous studies' observation that it is the women who predominantly decide and initiate divorce among heterosexual couples (e.g., Boylan 2007; Kalmijn and Poortman 2006). Such gender gap highlights women's agency to introduce a radical change in their family life trajectories. This change took place after several years of trying to keep their relationships afloat—behavior shaped by the Catholicism-influenced ideology in the informants' natal country, which values the marital bond and family unity.

Anticipated disapproval from natal family members drives some informants to conceal their plan of divorce, and only to contact them after their marriage has been dissolved—proof that the dominant family ideology in the Philippines can cross national borders. As Joan, the mother of two introduced before, relayed, “My family knew (about my situation); then my father advised me: ‘Don’t divorce’, but I said that I didn’t like this situation.”

A few informants who had retained an idealistic image of the family aligned with the ideology in the Philippines expressed their sadness and regret about what had transpired in their marriage, whereas others shared how they and their entourage viewed divorce.

I never expected that I would end up in this situation when I arrived here (Belgium). I told myself, “If I only knew, I would not have come here.”  
(Rosa, mother of one)

They (natal family members) could not accept (my divorce), but it was really done. I even heard my brother saying (angrily) like, “If I were your husband and you leave me, you’ll see (what I will do)!” It was fine; my (Dutch) husband and I were already divorced (at that time). I was only waiting for the (social) housing (I had applied for). My family could not imagine it. They could not accept it. (Lila, mother of two)

My former classmates in high school (in the Philippines) ... When we had a reunion, it was like, hello, difficult (to say). I did not really tell (about my divorce) to other classmates because their mentality was different. They would not understand, or they had a different (life) framework. (Rita, mother of one)

Divorce affected many informants' respectability in the eyes of their kin and friends in the Philippines, and this was especially the case when the cause of the divorce could be traced back to the women's behavior. For instance, one informant confided that she fell in love with another man and that her mother could not accept her divorce with her husband because of this. Losing respectability due to divorce appears also linked to the fact that many informants struggled economically after their marital breakdown. Only seven informants with children aged eighteen years and below received monthly child financial support from their former husbands (see Fresnoza-Flot 2021). The rest of the informants underwent abrupt downward social class mobility immediately after conjugal separation. This situation was aggravated when, as in many cases, the informants moved out of the family home and needed to find a new place to live with their children. Women who were not earning an income at the time of separation encountered difficulties: some sought refuge in a friend's home, while others obtained assistance from their friendship networks, government agencies, or associations to get an affordable apartment or social housing. For example, Helen borrowed money from her employer to be able to rent an apartment for her and her child as well as to take care of her divorce process. She asked her employer to deduct the money she borrowed from her monthly salary.

The informants' spatial mobility within their respective receiving countries increased after a marital breakdown. This increase can be attributed to two often overlapping factors: first, shared child custody with the ex-husband, and second, engagement in the labor market. In the first situation, depending on the arrangement with their ex-husbands, fourteen informants regularly brought their children to their ex-husband's place or picked them up after from there. In the second case, many informants entered the labor market after divorce, and for this, they needed to take their car or public transportation to go to their workplace. Despite their employment, most informants could no longer afford to regularly take their children to visit their natal families in the Philippines, as their husbands were usually the ones who took care of the round-trip plane tickets for the whole family. Hence, it is evident that the informants' increased spatial mobility within the borders of their receiving country existed simultaneously with the decrease in their transnational mobility.

As downward social class mobility tangled with their spatial mobility at the local level and with transnational immobility, legal immobility emerged following an informant's divorce. This form of immobility arises when a law or policy of a state impedes the change of one particular legal status to another, which subsequently triggers constraints in the lives of individuals concerned. The Family Code of the Philippines for

non-Muslim Filipinos is an interesting example to evoke here. Compared to their non-migrant husbands, all the informants but one (a Muslim Filipino woman) were subjected to this law, particularly those who still possessed Filipino nationality and/or maintained active social ties with the Philippines. This represents another gendered aspect of these women's marital breakups. When a divorce is not registered in the country where the marriage was solemnized, it may lead to challenges in the post-divorce lives of the former partners. Many informants in my study ended up after divorce having two different legal identities—that is, “divorced (or, in one case, widowed) ‘here’ but married or single ‘there’” (Fresnoza-Flot 2019: 526). These dual legal identities complicated the lives of a few of the women interviewed who intended to acquire properties in the Philippines or to regain their family name when they were single. The Family Code of the Philippines requires that a migrant with Filipino nationality needs to obtain a divorce in his/her country of residence, which must be initiated by his/her foreign partner (see Article 26 of the Family Code). If the migrant concerned is no longer a Filipino citizen, (s)he can directly file the divorce by him/herself and then seek the judicial recognition of this overseas divorce from the Philippine court. Not doing so means that if they remarry abroad, their former husbands can file bigamy against them in the Philippine court.

Moreover, legal immobility appears in the life of a few informants when family law intersects with religion, so remarrying may be difficult for Filipino migrants, notably the ones who were formerly married to a Filipino man. For instance, Darla and her Filipino partner got married religiously in the Philippines in 1991 and migrated to the Netherlands afterwards. They acquired Dutch nationality in 1996 and 1997, respectively. Due to the emotional gap between them, they divorced in 2011. Darla stayed in the Netherlands with her child, whereas her ex-husband renounced his Dutch nationality and decided to reside in the Philippines permanently. A few years later, via a social networking site, Darla met Roman, a former school classmate in the Philippines who was informally separated from his wife. They started a long-distance relationship and planned to get married. The problem was that they were still considered married to their respective former spouses in the eyes of the Philippine law as well as of the Catholic Church, and therefore could not get married there, neither in a civil nor a religious way.

As many Filipinos like Darla and her former husband get married through a religious ceremony, which is legally recognized in the Philippines, nullifying, voiding, or dissolving their marriage in a civil way does not allow them to remarry in a church. Those who decide to keep their marriage due to the costly and lengthy procedure to terminate it usually opt for an informal

live-in arrangement with a new partner. This strategy allows these migrants to counter the legal immobility that the Philippine family law produces. The post-divorce lives of women like Darla show, on the one hand, the tangled mobilities and immobilities they are experiencing, and on the other hand, how the institution of marriage and the procedures of divorce are interlinked, like two sides of one coin (Fresnoza-Flot 2019).

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This chapter has investigated the pursuit of respectability by Filipino migrant women in Belgium and the Netherlands, resulting in and from tangled (im) mobilities they incurred during their family trajectory. Such a pursuit stems from their desire to achieve or the pressure to conform to an “ideal” Filipino womanhood that the gendered and family norms of their country of origin dynamically shape.

The normative expectations for them to marry, build a family, and give birth to children push them to enter a legal union. Among my informants, except for care workers or tourists who migrated to their receiving country before getting married, many women interviewed migrated after their marriage, especially after marrying foreign spouses. Although marriage allowed them to be “good” Filipino women, it also brought them frustrations for various reasons, including professional immobility. The religious ideology that values the marital bond and family unity in the Philippines often prevents them from introducing immediate changes in their conjugal lives, notably regarding whether or not to break their marital vows. My interview data reveal how important maintaining a united family is to Filipino migrant women. Whereas marriage is both a resource and an effective way to attain “ideal” Filipino womanhood, divorce is an avenue for emancipation from an unhappy marriage—but at the same time, it indicates a failure to meet the “ideal” Filipino family in the Philippine context. When their marriages ended in divorce, the women interviewed turned to the labor market, thereby showing their flexibility and readiness for mobility, as well as their intention to regain respectability. The way they live with and confront their situation indicates their agency to move forward and give meaning to their lives.

It is not only the gender and family norms in their country of origin but also the legal norms in terms of marriage and conjugal separation that shaped the lives of the Filipino women interviewed. The Philippine family law requiring them to apply for judicial recognition of their divorce in the Philippines produces dual legal identities, which creates legal immobility when Filipino migrants intend to remarry in their country of origin where



they remain “married,” or in a religious wedding that should be preceded by a civil wedding in their receiving country. Legal immobility does not stop Filipino migrant informants from pursuing their projects, notably in maintaining or reinforcing their respectability.

The case of these migrants underlines the forms of mobility and immobility that can become tangled during their family and migration trajectories, as well as the different modes of entanglement. First, spatial mobility becomes associated with social class mobility in the Philippines, notably when the informants marry non-Filipinos who are citizens of an economically more developed country, and when they migrate to this country. Second, spatial mobility can nonetheless lead to downward social class mobility when some informants become stay-at-home wives/mothers and cannot realize their caregiving roles toward their natal families back in the Philippines. This combination usually takes place when migration to a new country prevents individuals from practicing their profession or being engaged in the labor market. Third, spatial immobility and downward social class mobility occur during the married lives of many informants, when they become confined within the four walls of their home, are not engaged in the labor market, and have no driving license. Fourth, spatial mobility, downward social class mobility, and legal immobility coexisted at one point following divorce. All these crisscrossing (im)mobilities imply that individuals can simultaneously experience two or more forms of (im)mobility during their life course in the context of migration. Aside from social and legal norms, life course events such as marriage, migration, the arrival of children, and divorce exert influence on this process. Comparing tangled (im)mobilities in the context of migration with those in non-migration settings can yield additional insights on how (im)mobilities are produced and reproduced in various social situations, as well as how gender and power are incorporated during the process.

## **Acknowledgments**

The Radboud Excellence Initiative fellowship (2016–17) of the Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands supported the present study. The success of this research would not have been possible without the intellectual guidance of Betty de Hart and the trust of all the study informants. Previous versions of this chapter were presented at the conferences “Gender in the Philippines: Challenges within the domestic sphere and beyond” (21 November 2017) and “Intimacy, Sexuality and Family in the Process of Migration: European/Asian experiences compared” (18 December 2018) at the Université libre de Bruxelles.

**Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot** is a tenured Associate Researcher of the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) and a Senior Lecturer (*maîtresse de conference*) at the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC) at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in Belgium. Her recent works include the co-edited volumes *Mobile Childhoods in Filipino Transnational Families: Migrant Children with Similar Roots in Different Routes* (with Itaru Nagasaka, 2015) and *International Marriages and Marital Citizenship: Southeast Asian Women on the Move* (with Gwenola Ricordeau, 2017). Her other publications deal with transnational family dynamics, conjugal mixedness, and intergenerational transmission, as well as marriage and divorce involving Filipino and Thai migrants in selected European countries. Her ongoing research focuses on the contextual mobility of Belgian-Asian couples within their cross-border social spaces.

## REFERENCES

- Almanzar, Josephine Marie. 2016. "Hypogamy." In *Encyclopedia of Family Studies* (vol. II), ed. Constance L. Shehan and Melanie Duncan, 1087–89. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Angeles, Leonora, and Sirijit Sunanta. 2007. "Exotic Love at Your Fingertips: Intermarriage Websites, Gendered Representation, and the Transnational Migration of Filipino and Thai Women." *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 22(1): 3–31.
- Boylan, Kristina A. 2007. "Revolutionary and Not-so-Revolutionary Negotiations in Catholic Annulment, Bigamy, and Divorce Trials: The Archdiocese of Mexico, 1929–40." In *Faith and Impiety in Revolutionary Mexico*, ed. Matthew Butler, 167–83. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bryceson, Deborah, and Ulla Vuorela. 2002. *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*. Oxford: Berg.
- Canzler, Weert, Vincent Kaufmann, and Sven Kesselring. 2008. *Tracing Mobilities: Towards a Cosmopolitan Perspective*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek). 2019. "Population; Sex, Age, Migration Background and Generation, 1 January." Retrieved 10 July 2020 from <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/en/dataset/37325eng/table?ts=1594917093288>.
- Cole, Jennifer. 2014. "Producing Value among Malagasy Marriage Migrants in France." *Current Anthropology* 55(9): 85–94.
- Constable, Nicole, ed. 2005. *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Francisco-Menchavez, Valerie. 2018. *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Frank, Reanne, and Elizabeth Wildsmith. 2005. "The Grass Widows of Mexico: Migration and Union Dissolution in a Binational Context." *Social Forces* 83(3): 919–47.

- Fresnoza-Flot, Asuncion. 2009. "Migration Status and Transnational Mothering: The Case of Filipino Migrants in France." *Global Networks* 9(2): 252–70.
- . 2017. "Gender- and Social Class-based Transnationalism of Migrant Filipinas in Binational Unions." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43(6): 885–901.
- . 2018. "Social Citizenship and Divorce: Filipino Migrant Women (Un)claiming Social Rights in the Netherlands and in Belgium." *Nijmegen Migration Law Working Papers*, series no. 2018/01. Nijmegen, The Netherlands: Radboud University Nijmegen.
- . 2019. "Interacting Legal Norms and Cross-Border Divorce: Stories of Filipino Migrant Women in the Netherlands." *Migration Letters* 16(4): 521–29.
- . 2021. "The Best Interests of the Child in 'Mixed' Couples' Divorce in Belgium and the Netherlands: Filipino Mothers' Socio-Legal Encounters about their Children." *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 11(4): 990–1011.
- Fresnoza-Flot, Asuncion, and Laura Merla. 2018. "Global Householding in Mixed Families: The Case of Thai Migrant Women in Belgium." In *Making Multicultural Families in Europe: Gender and Generational Relations in Transnational and Inter-Ethnic Families*, ed. Isabella Crespi, Stefania Giada Meda, and Laura Merla, 25–37. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Groes, Christian. 2018. "Mobility through the Sexual Economy Exchanging Sexual Capital for Respectability in Mozambican Women's Marriage Migration to Europe." In *Intimate Mobilities: Sexual Economies, Marriage and Migration in a Disparate World*, ed. Christian Groes and Nadine T. Fernandez, 122–42. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Guevarra, Anna Romina. 2010. *Marketing Dreams, Manufacturing Heroes: The Transnational Labor Brokering of Filipino Workers*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie. 1989. *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Viking.
- Ishii, Sari K., ed. 2016. *Marriage Migration in Asia: Emerging Minorities at the Frontiers of Nation-States*. Singapore and Kyoto: NUS Press and Kyoto University Press.
- Kalmijn, Matthijs, and Anne-Rigt Poortman. 2006. "His or Her Divorce? The Gendered Nature of Divorce and its Determinants." *European Sociological Review* 22(2): 201–14.
- Kim, Doo-Sub. 2010. "The Rise of Cross-Border Marriage and Divorce in Contemporary Korea." In *Asian Cross-Border Marriage Migration: Demographic Patterns and Social Issues*, ed. Wen-Shan Yang and Melody Chia-Wen Lu, 127–53. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Mand, Kanwal. 2005. "Marriage and Migration through the Life Course Experiences of Widowhood, Separation and Divorce amongst Transnational Sikh Women." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 12(2–3): 407–25.
- McKay, Steven. 2015. "'So They Remember Me When I'm Gone': Remittances, Fatherhood and Gender Relations of Filipino Migrant Men." In *Transnational Labour Migration, Remittances and the Changing Family in Asia*, ed. Lahn Ann Hoang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, 111–35. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mortelmans, Dimitri. 2020. "Economic Consequences of Divorce: A Review." In *Parental Life Courses after Separation and Divorce in Europe*, ed. Michaela Kreyenfeld and Heike Trappe, 23–41. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

- Official Gazette. 1987. "The Family Code of the Philippines." Government of the Philippines. Manila: Presidential Management Staff. Retrieved 19 July 2020 from <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1987/07/06/executive-order-no-209-s-1987/>.
- Ogaya, Chiho. 2015. "When Mobile Motherhoods and Mobile Childhoods Converge: The Case of Filipino Youth and their Transmigrant Mothers in Toronto, Canada." In *Mobile Childhoods in Filipino Transnational Families: Migrant Children with Similar Roots in Different Routes*, ed. Itaru Nagasaka and Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot, 205–21. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Palriwala, Rajni, and Patricia Uberoi, eds. 2008. *Marriage, Migration and Gender* (vol. 5). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Pande, Amrita. 2017. "Mobile Masculinities: Migrant Bangladeshi Men in South Africa." *Gender & Society* 31(3): 383–406.
- Pribilsky, Jason. 2004. "'Aprendemos a Convivir': Conjugal Relations, Co-Parenting, and Family Life among Ecuadorian Transnational Migrants in New York City and the Ecuadorian Andes." *Global Networks* 4(3): 313–34.
- . 2012. "Consumption Dilemmas: Tracking Masculinity, Money and Transnational Fatherhood between the Ecuadorian Andes and New York City." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38(2): 323–43.
- Qureshi, Kaveri. 2016. *Marital Breakdown among British Asians: Conjuality, Legal Pluralism and New Kinship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ricordeau, Gwénola. 2012. "Devenir une First World Woman: Stratégies Migratoires et Migrations par le Mariage" [Becoming a First World Woman: Migratory strategies and migrations by marriage]. *SociologieS*. Retrieved 20 August 2019 from <http://sociologies.revues.org/3908>.
- Singh, Kirti. 2008. "Child Custody Cases in the Context of International Migration." In *Marriage, Migration and Gender* (vol. 5), ed. Rajni Palriwala and Patricia Uberoi, 326–47. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Singla, Rashmi. 2015. *Intermarriage and Mixed Parenting, Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing: Crossover Love*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sportel, Iris. 2013. "'Because it's an Islamic Marriage': Conditions Upon Marriage and After Divorce in Transnational Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Egyptian Marriages." *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 3: 1091–110.
- . 2016. *Divorce in Transnational Families: Marriage, Migration and Family Law*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Statbel (Office Belge de Statistique). 2019. "Population par Commune Selon la Nationalité et le Sexe depuis 1992" [Population by municipality based on nationality and sex since 1992]. Retrieved 20 November 2019 from <https://statbel.fgov.be/sites/default/files/files/documents/bevolking/5.1%20Structuur%20van%20de%20bevolking/popstranger-1992-fr.xlsx>.
- Strasser, Elisabeth, Albert Kraler, Saskia Bonjour, and Veronika Bilger. 2009. "Doing Family." *The History of the Family* 14(2): 165–76.
- Suzuki, Nobue. 2003. "Transgressing 'Victims': Reading Narratives of 'Filipina Brides' in Japan." *Critical Asian Studies* 35(3): 399–420.

- . 2017. “Postcolonial Desires, Partial Citizenship, and Transnational ‘Un-Mothers’: Contexts and Lives of Filipina Marriage Migrants in Japan.” In *International Marriages and Marital Citizenship: Southeast Asian Women on the Move*, ed. Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot and Gwénola Ricordeau, 121–39. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thai, Hung Cam. 2005. “Globalization as a Gender Strategy: Respectability, Masculinity, and Convertibility across the Vietnamese Diaspora.” In *Critical Globalization Studies*, ed. Richard P. Appelbaum and William I. Robinson, 313–23. London: Routledge.
- . 2008. *For Better or for Worse: Vietnamese International Marriages in the New Global Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Tosakul, Ratana. 2010. “Cross-Border Marriages: Experiences of Village Women from Northeastern Thailand with Western Men.” In *Asian Cross-Border Marriage Migration: Demographic Patterns and Social Issues*, ed. Wen-Shan Yang and Melody Chia-Wen Lu, 179–99. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Yea, Sallie. 2008. “Married to the Military: Filipinas Negotiating Transnational Families.” *International Migration* 46(4): 111–44.