

The critical temporalities of serial migration and family social reproduction in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The prevailing neoliberal labour migration regime in Asia is underpinned by principles of enforced transience: the overwhelming majority of migrants – particularly those seeking low-skilled, low-waged work – are admitted into host nation-states on the basis of short-term, time-bound contracts, with little or no possibility of family reunification or permanent settlement at the destination. As families go transnational, ‘family times’ become inextricably intertwined with the ‘times of migration’ (Cwerner, 2001). In this context, for many migrant-sending families in Southeast Asian source countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines,

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parental migration as a strategy for migrating out of poverty or for socio-economic advancement requires the left-behind family to resiliently absorb the uncertainties of parental leaving and returning. Based on research on Indonesian and Filipino rural households (studied from 2008 through 2017) including paired life-story interviews with parental/non-parental adult carers and children, the article investigates the crucial links between the time construct of seriality in migration on the one hand, and the temporal structure of family based social reproduction on the other. It first focuses on how serial migration produces, and is produced by, spiraling needs and expanding aspirations, hence creating its own momentum for continuity. The paper then explores how competing temporal logics create difficult choices for migrants, leading to the recalibration of priorities within constrained resources. By drawing attention to the co-existence of and contradictions between multiple temporalities in the lives of migrants and their families, a critical temporalities framework yields new insights in understanding the social reproduction of families in a migratory context.

Keywords

Temporalities, serial migration, social reproduction, migrant families, life-course, temporary migration regime

Introduction

In recent decades, the ‘spaces and times of migration’ have become more complex and increasingly provisional. While traditional migration research has privileged permanent forms of migration and issues of settlement, adaptation and assimilation in host societies, time-space compression brought about by rapid advancements in transport and communication technologies, as well as the flexibilisation of contemporary life and work cultures under neoliberal capitalist conditions has given rise to more temporary and multidirectional modes of migration. A large corpus of what we call ‘migration’ today by and large include human mobility that does not take the form of permanent ruptures, uprooting and settlement, but are more likely to be transient and complex, ridden with disruptions, detours, multi-destinations, and founded on interconnections and multiple chains of movement. In short, for migrants, pathways to permanent settlement in host societies are narrowing and instead, the majority of international migrants negotiate temporal sensibilities underpinned by a prevailing climate of precarious temporariness in pursuing migration trajectories. Among labour migrants entering OECD countries in 2017, 583,000 held permanent visas while 4.9 million entered through temporary channels, with the latter group growing almost twice as fast year-on-year (OECD, 2019).

Temporary migration from Southeast Asia first arose in the 1970s, in response to massive labour demands in the Gulf states as a result of the oil boom, followed in the 1980s onwards by the growing need for migrant workers to fill 3D ('dirty, dangerous and difficult') jobs at the lower rungs of the economy shunned by the citizen workforce in newly industrialized economies within the Asian region. By keeping migrants transient, the temporary migration regime minimized challenges to the fragile imaginary of the host nation-state, while also ensuring the eventual return of citizen-sojourners for the sending state in order to secure remittance flows, homeward investments and transnational linkages (Yeoh, 2021).¹

The rapid rise of temporary migration in Asia and globally, alerts us to the urgent need to attend to the complex temporalities that underwrite family migration projects. Migration is primarily viewed as a spatial process, where migrants move from one geographical territory to another. The longstanding preoccupation with space in migration scholarship has meant that the temporal aspects of migration are often overlooked. This paper is hence motivated by the desire to train the spotlight on the links between time and temporalities in the temporary migration regime on the one hand, and the social reproduction of the family in Southeast Asia on the other. For the overwhelming majority of migrants – especially the low-skilled, low-waged workers – admission into destination nation-states are premised on short-term, time-bound contracts, with limited possibility of family reunification or permanent settlement given the principles of enforced transience undergirding prevailing neoliberal labour migration regimes. For many migrant-sending families in Southeast Asian 'source' countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, parental migration as a strategy of 'migrating out of poverty' or socio-economic advancement requires the left-behind family to absorb the constant flux, uncertainty and provisionality of parental leaving and returning. As families split and go transnational, the 'times of migration' (Cwerner, 2001) become inextricably incorporated into the temporalities of social reproduction within the family.

By foregrounding the mutually constitutive relationship between temporalities and spatialities in a migration and family context, the paper responds to Sheller's (2019: 338) call for research on how 'the temporalities of reproduction intersect with the temporalities of migration under various kinds of visa regimes and temporary situations'. It also builds on and further extends the work of feminist scholars who have drawn attention to gendered inequalities in women's experience in managing temporal conflicts and competing demands between paid productive work and unpaid reproductive work. Highlighting the social dynamics of reproducing the family in a transnational migration context allows us to grapple with how 'gender-based inequalities' intersect with 'geography-based inequalities' in 'further diversify[ing] and complicat[ing] temporalities (e.g. biological, economic, familial, cultural, and "transnational" time) embedded in care practices

and relationships that have been shaped by ... state borders' (Zhou, 2015: 169). Training the analytical lens on transnational family social reproduction also shifts the focus to an under-explored area within the burgeoning literature on migration and temporalities. This recent rising interest in migration studies has primarily attended to visa regimes as a form of temporal control on migrant lives in receiving countries, requiring 'migrants to wait, put their lives on hold, and leave the future unclear' (Baas and Yeoh, 2019: 164). Focussing on transnational social reproduction not only allows us to enlarge the conceptual frame beyond the individual migrant to include left-behind family members but to foreground the family as an intermediate relational timescale between what Robertson (2019) calls the 'institutional timescale' of governmentality and the 'everyday timescale' of the individual migrant's lived experience of time. Work on the temporalities of reproduction in a migratory context goes beyond highlighting the migrant encounter with biopolitical borders, temporal control and precarity in host societies (a vibrant strand of research emerging from the 'temporal turn' in migration studies, see Griffiths, 2014; Axelsson, 2017; Boersma, 2019; Robertson, 2019; Stevens, 2019; Drangslund, 2020a, 2020b), and instead shifts attention to how 'migrants strive to sustain the reproduction of their families as they labour for the reproduction of capitalism itself' (Barber and Lem, 2018: 8). In other words, while research located in destination countries highlighting the border as 'an important mechanism of temporal management' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 134) has clearly flourished, it is time to also shift the locus of attention to the temporalities of migration operating at a transnational scale to include their effects on left-behind families and sending country dynamics.

In this light, we are interested in demonstrating the vital links between the time construct of seriality in transnational migration on the one hand, and the temporal dynamics of family based social reproduction on the other. The paper examines the way temporally structured migration decisions to leave, stay or return are integral to and recursively shaped by critical junctures, life events and how migrants organize and manage social reproduction. By characterizing the approach as '*critical* temporalities', we signal the importance of situating 'time' within an analysis of socio-political structures, gendered power relations and the human capacity for transformation. At the same time, the term also urges us to go beyond the constructions of time produced by legal systems and regimes of power, to foreground the importance of *critical* life events and junctures in giving meaning to time and social reproduction. In what follows, we first examine conceptual links between migration temporalities and family times, and the implications for social reproduction. We then explain how the prevailing temporary migration regime in Southeast Asian imposes a temporal order on the social reproductive lives of migrants and their families before outlining the methodological underpinnings for the research on which this paper is based. In the following sections, the paper turns to how migrants and their left-behind family

members organize, manage and navigate temporal structures in order to negotiate a balance between productive work and social reproductive work amidst 'temporal inequalities' of gender and geography (Zhou, 2015). Specifically, we draw on our research to investigate two interconnected strands: first, how seriality in migration produces, and is produced by, spiraling needs and expanding aspirations, creating its own momentum for continuity; and second, how competing temporal logics or the clash of different temporalities create difficult choices for migrants, leading to the recalibration of priorities within constrained resources. In the conclusion, we reflect on the importance of drawing on a critical temporalities framework in migration studies to give overdue attention to the simultaneous, yet unequal, co-existence of temporalities stemming from multiple domains including the temporary migration regime, the migrant's workplace and the left-behind family.

Serial migration and reproducing the family

In migration studies, the term 'serial migration' has different inflections. In the North American context where 'immigration and settlement' and 'family reunification' are part of the conventional aspirations (though not necessarily grounded reality) shaping migration regimes, 'serial migration' usually refers to family migration strategies 'where one family member immigrates first and then brings the rest of the family at a later time' (Cervantes et al., 2010: 275). This line of work is usually interested in the effects of immigration-imposed separations on the health and well-being of left-behind family members, as well as on family reunion, adaptation and parent-child/sibling relationships in the immigrant country of settlement (Smith, 2014; Phoenix and Bauer, 2012; Phoenix and Seu, 2013; Phoenix, 2019).

This understanding of seriality in migration is however not suited to the bulk of low-skilled contract-work migration in the Asian context, where the temporal logic is subject to 'use-and-discard' dynamics and characterized by limited pathways to family reunification and settlement in host countries. In reworking 'serial migration' for our context, we foreground 'sequence' (Phoenix and Bauer, 2012: 491) and preserve the idea that families often lack the capacity and resources to migrate as an intact family and instead have to depend on choosing one member to migrate. Here, we draw on Ossman's (2004, 2013) work in which she defines seriality in terms of multiple international migrations over a person's life-course.² Ossman's (2013) interest focuses on serial migrants who are able to 'develop bonds with multiple homelands ... [as they] move away from the here-and-there binary of one-time migration and toward a kind of global opportunism in which possibilities live in manifold places' (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2014: 469). In contrast, our research focuses on resource-constrained migrants whose serial moves are often dictated by where there is a demand for contract work in 3D

sectors (e.g. domestic work, construction work), and structured by economic livelihood concerns linked to supporting left-behind families.

Unlike Ossman's better-resourced serial migrants who can 'treat multiple homelands as so many chapters in the stories of their lives, mapping place on top of the times, life events, and relationships that define them' (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2014: 469), our capital-deficit migrants have not only to contend with long-term separation in family life but cope with the fractured temporal sensibility that where they actually live and work is not where they belong. While capital-rich serial migrants are able to knit together a sense of self that is simultaneously invested in multiple homelands, their capital-poor counterparts constantly live bifurcated lives across national borders separating work and family. Silvey and Parreñas (2020: 3457) in fact depict serial migration among domestic workers in irredeemably negative terms, as 'precarity chains' shaped by indebtedness, insecure employment, few rights, and limited occupational and financial mobility that persist and often deepen across the various stages of the migration cycle.

Seriality in migration thus has to be understood less in relation to individual navigation of 'global opportunism' or the aspiring migrant's 'hierarchical capital accumulation'; instead it is inextricably intertwined with the social reproduction of the family. Framed by grossly uneven development and gender-segmented opportunities for work in the region, the sequencing of migration episodes acquires its seemingly inexorable logic based not so much on static, absolute migration goals but on the in-built, moving spiral of material needs and wants powerfully driven by the human capacity to aspire. At the same time, serial migration may be temporarily paused (or permanently truncated) by family events (illness, death, procreation and birth) of critical importance in the social reproduction of the family. While committing to serial migration is precarious, it is not always the case that the risks outweigh the gains; rather, seriality in migration as a strategy of social reproduction is pivoted on balancing the family's capacity to absorb turbulence at every juncture and over stretches of time, constantly re-aligning individual members' desires towards an aspirational, longer-term, collective future as family.

Migration and family in the Philippines and Indonesia

Under a temporary migration regime bereft of pathways towards family reunification in Asian host countries, most migrants seeking work opportunities abroad become serial migrants undertaking back-and-forth mobility across borders over an indeterminate, often open-ended, time period. As a temporalized form of migration that connects home and host countries, serial migration has become a common transnational householding strategy for Southeast Asian men and women grappling with rising costs, food insecurity and unemployment issues in their home countries. Indeed, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2012: 5)

reported that overseas labour migration has become institutionalized as a go-to economic development strategy to address national unemployment and underemployment issues in many developing Southeast Asian countries. The foreign exchange income earned through overseas remittances generated by the export of human capital has become one of the main contributors to economic growth in migrant-sending countries. In particular, for Southeast Asian women, the heightened global demand for waged care and domestic labour has created a gendered 'global care chain', as women migrants move across international borders to fill care deficits in more developed economies while leaving a 'care void' in the origin countries (Hochschild, 2000).

The Philippines and Indonesia are among the leading migrant source countries in Southeast Asia known for their institutionalized and systematized labour migration regimes. Pioneering the production and deployment of global workers, the Philippines has been characterized as the 'gold standard' in the sending of labour migrants, with 8% of the country's 100.98 million population working overseas in 2015 (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2015). By the 21st century, the country supplies 'workers of varying skill levels to over 100 countries' (Asis, 2005: 27). Institutional and legal frameworks are constantly being developed to ensure the efficiency of labour deployment and protection of migrant workers, from pre-departure training and on-site services up to the return and reintegration of Overseas Filipino Workers into the homeland. The migration regime of the Philippines is gender-segmented with women migrants accounting for 55% of the total deployment working in domestic, care and hospitality work, while men migrants are engaged in construction, manufacturing and marine services (PSA, 2017). Accounting for 10.2% of the Philippines' Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it is unsurprising that migrant remittances and labour migration are heavily relied upon for economic growth (de Vera, 2017), to the extent that Overseas Filipino Workers are often dubbed *Mga Bagong Bayani* (The New Heroes) for their modern-day sacrifice of taking risks in foreign lands for the betterment of their families and homeland.

Following the footsteps of the Philippines, Indonesia has also 'embrac[ed] the logic of remittance income as a reliable source of external finance' (Rupert and Solomon, 2006: 90). The World Bank (2017: 2 and 14) reported that in 2017, migrant remittances from its 9-million-strong overseas workforce accounted for 1% of Indonesia's GDP (amounting to US\$8.9 billion in 2016). Compared to the Philippines, Indonesia has an even more feminised migration deployment, in which 62% of migrants were women while remittances from female domestic workers accounted for 51% of total remittances (World Bank, 2017: 36). In Indonesia, remittances have proven to be significant in alleviating household poverty, as these have reliably exceeded official development aid since 2005 (Elias, 2013: 37).

In view of the growing opportunities provided by temporary labour migration for impoverished rural households to migrate and gain upward economic and social mobility, attention needs to be paid to understanding the mutually constitutive link between the systems of labour migration and family sustenance and reproduction in Southeast Asia. Under the prevailing temporary migration regime characterized by the constant churn of migrants across international borders, seriality in migration becomes normalized as a key householding strategy, one that imposes a temporal order - of sequence, simultaneity or recurrence - on the social reproductive lives of migrants and their families, and across generations.

Methods

This study is based on three phases of qualitative interviews conducted between 2009 and 2017 in rural communities with high levels of out-migration in Indonesia and the Philippines as part of a larger mixed-methods project. The communities are sited in provinces outside the main metropolitan areas, namely, East Java, Indonesia, and Laguna, Philippines. Although the interview questions and sampling strategy for each phase are different, there are several common thematic questions threading through the three phases including changes in migration status and in the household due to migration, impacts of migration and communication frequencies/strategies. During the first phase of the interviews conducted in 2009, 76 left-behind parental or non-parental carers and 32 children aged 9 to 11 from Indonesian and Filipino migrant households were interviewed. The second phase conducted between 2009 and 2012 included interviews with around 10 returned-migrant households per country comprising a returned-migrant, the left-behind carer and an adolescent child. Researchers returned to the same field-sites in 2017 and interviewed 83 pairs of carers/responsible adult (who may be a returned-migrant-parent or left-behind parental or non-parental carer) and children (ages between 11 and 20) from both countries. A small sample of respondents, members from nine Indonesian and 10 Filipino households, participated in at least two phases of the interviews. The study also interviewed members of non-migrant households whose narratives are not included in this paper. In all, the interviews conducted at different junctures of a migrant's trajectory provided rich 'narrative constructions' that reveal 'how narrators wish to represent themselves [to others] in relation to a life-course characterized by physical mobility' (Olwig, 2012: 831). Apart from providing valuable information on migration histories, decision-making and experiences of place, they are also 'navigational acts' whereby narrators 'construct an orderly world, locate [themselves] within it, and make [themselves] meaningful and understandable to [themselves] and others' (Rapport, 1997: 41 cited in Olwig, 2012: 831). The researchers conducted the interviews with the goal of collecting facts about migration history and trajectories as well as understanding how and why

respondents chose to retell and make meaning of their life stories in certain ways. By understanding how respondents chose their narratives about migration and life-course, the ideologies, cultural norms and societal expectations that shaped migration decisions and discourses were further foregrounded.

Interviews were mainly conducted in the respondents' homes and in their local languages with the help of translators. These were then transcribed verbatim, translated into English and thematically coded using NVivo. Using time as a key analytical category, the anonymized data from both countries was repeatedly analysed through inductive thematic analysis to identify the experiences of friction, disjuncture, recalibration and adaptation among members of migrant households over the migration journey. The effects of such experiences on the household's plans and lives were also derived from the analyses. Written or oral consent/assent was sought from the respondents. For respondents under 18 years old, the interviewers followed a two-step assent and consent-taking process, where the permission of the adult carers to approach/interview the child was first secured, and thereafter to obtain the child's assent before commencing the interview. To ensure the safety and comfort of children during the interviews, interviewers with experience in interacting with children interviewed them within the sight but, in so far as possible, out of the earshot of an adult within the household. In most cases, this was achieved by ensuring that two interviewers visited each household together to simultaneously interview the adult carer and child, respectively, in separate areas of the house. This allowed for privacy for both the adult and child respondents. When this was not possible, we respectfully reiterated to the adult carers that all the interviews, including the children's, were private and confidential. In doing so, the interviewers and child respondents were given more space to conduct the interview without many intrusions. Occasionally, interviews may be disrupted by the bringing of snacks and drinks, which was a cultural practice of hospitality in our field-sites. In these instances, we either paused the interview momentarily or avoided the asking of sensitive questions when other family members are present. The study considers the responses from family members of different generations in order to provide a fuller picture 'on the multiple subjectivities within migrant households' (Dobson, 2009: 358).

How seriality in migration creates its own momentum for temporal continuity

For most cases, long-term and indefinite migration was not part of the initial migration plan, but was more of a product of having to address pressing and mounting financial needs one after the other. Against her husband's wishes, Wiryono (43-year-old Indonesian mother of two) decided to migrate abroad as a domestic worker because of the family's 'low economic condition'. Her migration journey that eventually spanned 17 years took her first to Sumatra, then

Abu Dhabi and Hong Kong. Her husband's earnings as a casual labourer in the local construction business were highly irregular, and it was Wiryono's remittances – sent without fail every three to four months – that sustained the family over the years. Wiryono came home after each contract, but would return to overseas work 'again and again' each time the money ran out. Apart from supporting the children's education as they grew up, money was needed, first for building a house, then for a motorcycle, after which for a handphone for the older of her two children, Adiratna (19-year-old university undergraduate). While Wiryono had not intended to migrate indefinitely, needs were pressing and wants continued to spiral one after the other. Wiryono said, 'She [Adiratna] hates [me] because I often left her'. Adiratna would plead, 'Please don't go mum' but was told by Wiryono that she needed to be away so that Adiratna could remain in school.

Wiryono finally returned home two years ago³ when Adiratna completed high school, primarily in response to her daughter's constant 'begging' for a sibling to ease her loneliness. While Adiratna was delighted that she now has a baby brother, she also lamented that the family's economic circumstances had reverted to pre-migration levels (*balik ke awal*): her own income as a part-time tuition teacher was enough only for personal needs, and the 'extras' once supplied by her mother's remittances were no longer within reach. In fact, the family had to rely on Adiratna's grandmother to provide money for rice while a maternal aunt working in Hong Kong with no children of her own covered her university fees.

In a culture where women's breadwinning migration goes against the grain of gendered norms, long-term serial migration is rarely intended at the start (see also Chan, 2018). Some like Wiryono had to fight opposition, and all interviewees spoke of having to suppress heavy and conflictual feelings, in order to embark on the first migration episode. Most women resorted to migrating for work as a short-term measure to address immediate needs for money or to be able to activate a particular plan of action for improving family circumstances. Juliana (28-year-old Filipino caregiver to her siblings) explained the confluence of events leading to her mother's still on-going migration to Qatar some 16 years ago. Her baby brother had been admitted to hospital, her father's export business had failed, debts had accumulated and furniture and appliances had to be sold, while their house was used as bank collateral. Juliana's mother left with the specific purpose of 'saving their house', and while this was successfully accomplished after a few years, other expenses such as the children's education soon emerged, causing the migrant mother to extend her migration stint for a few more contracts. With the hospitalization and subsequent death of her husband, Juliana's mother had little choice but to continue her migration, and even then, the remittances she carved out of her salary as a domestic worker was barely enough to tide the family over from one critical event to the next.

Even in cases when the migration strategy was relatively successful in raising the economic fortunes of the family, seriality in migration became necessary to fund expanding aspirations. Wahid (64-year-old Indonesian father of two) explained that his wife migrated for work 25 years ago in order to cater to the needs of their newborn disabled daughter. With her earnings overseas, they were able to build a large house, buy land, invest in rice-fields and a pick-up truck for transportation, and importantly, with better yields from the diversified and expanded agricultural harvest, put their two children through school (including special needs education for their daughter). While much has been accomplished, she remains a serial migrant so that they can afford to undertake pilgrimage in the future and accumulate savings for retirement.

Among some return migrants, the impulse to migrate did not completely dissipate upon 'homecoming'. Miriam (44-year-old Filipino mother of four) met her husband when they were both working on a cruise ship. After marriage, they returned to the Philippines and invested in a small bakery business. When the children came along, they both realized that the earnings from the bakery were not enough to sustain the needs of their growing family. Miriam's husband decided to go back to working on a cruise ship, and while Miriam had wanted to join him, she stayed home to care for the children. After 14 years working on a cruise ship, Miriam's husband decided to come home permanently. At this point, they had the bakery, savings, and enough capital to start a new business distributing herbal supplements. Miriam shared that it was her husband's homesickness – having been away from the children for 14 years – that prompted him to return home. This was aside from the fact that he was also getting older and the contracts were getting shorter and harder to come by. Miriam, however, harboured feelings of resentment and regretted her husband's decision to come home. Although the family now enjoyed some level of financial stability, she felt that the money was tighter now compared to when her husband was abroad. They had enough for everyday expenses, but not enough to give their children some of the 'extras' they wanted or enrol them in extra-curricular enrichment classes. In her mind, her husband's homecoming had denied her children the opportunity to study in the best private schools in Manila, as they could now only afford to send them to local colleges. The resentment that Miriam felt at her husband's homecoming also ignited her own desires of going abroad, dreams that she had put on hold as a young wife responsible for taking care of her children. From time to time, she dreamt of going back on the cruise ships, but thought that the time and opportunity had already passed since she had not worked in this line for a long time. At the point of the interview, however, Miriam was actively pursuing her dreams of going abroad by seeking out ways to work in Canada, asking help from her relatives and other friends who have migrated there. Although her husband was not really keen on the idea that the family should be torn apart

again, Miriam felt that her migration aspirations would help fulfil her own dreams for her family, dreams that her husband had given up when he decided to cut short his migration stint.

Even when homecoming migration is founded on the relative success of the migration project, seriality in migration may be so ingrained in the family life-course as to become indispensable (see also [Deshingkar et al., 2014](#)). In a context when options for viable life chances and resources at home remain narrowly limited, reversing the split-family labour migration strategy can be highly fraught, if not resisted by particular members of the migration enterprise as seen in Miriam's case. Migration has become an indispensable part of the yearning for a better life, as explained by another return migrant interviewee, 'As women, we are never satisfied... Yes, sometimes deep inside my heart, to be honest [I want to migrate again]... I am lying if I [say] no'. This quotation illustrates two points. First, it alludes to how the culture of migration has ingrained migrating for work as a viable and sought after route to migrate out of poverty. Second, it also highlights how migration has opened up gendered pathways for women to equitable or even higher incomes than their male counterparts due to the high-demand for feminised labour overseas.

Once started, migration has its own seemingly inexorable logic, as new priorities and pressing needs arise when the initial reason for migration has subsided. What was originally conceived as short-term can spiral indefinitely, as plans become unscrambled by unplanned illness and other downturns, remittances develop into the primary (if not the only regular) source of financial support sustaining the family through the life-course, aspirations gradually expand upwards, and migrant men and women's absence becomes accepted as necessary for the greater good of the family. Even if migration as a livelihood strategy fails to meet daily needs (as in the case of Juliana's mother), women tend to persevere in their migration trajectories given few income-earning opportunities at home to sustain the quality of life they wanted for themselves and their children.

With few safety nets yet growing needs and wants, reproducing the family across transnational space often means that the times of migration have to be endured until they become ingrained as a habitual part of everyday life. The lack of other options at home suggests that for this generation of mothers, the temporalities of home and work have to be lived separately but with creative synchronization between the two spheres. The debt-financed temporary migration regime also imposes a disciplinary structure in terms of short (usually two years) contracts that can be renewed but not prematurely truncated in order to reap the full financial benefits of migration (as the first few months of the contract goes towards financing migration debt before the migration can generate remittances) ([Platt et al., 2017](#)). As home leave is not built into these contracts, most migrants would not have the opportunity to visit home until they complete their contracts,

only to repeat the same 2-year cycle all over again in producing what [Silvey and Parreñas \(2020\)](#) call ‘precarity chains’ across the migrant life-course. In some cases, migrants may decide not to come home for fear of losing their jobs or that they will no longer be competitive for the next contract. Adelia’s (18-year-old Indonesian left-behind daughter) mother, for example, feared that she would be too old to secure a job if she returned home and hence chose not to come home for many years. In response to Adelia’s constant pleading for her mother’s homecoming, the latter would say, ‘mother will come back home later, please be patient, I will come back when I have the money’. As seen, in many cases of serial migration, ‘homecoming’ is often indefinitely postponed (given the spiral of needs and aspirations), or when actuated, rendered temporary as the ‘return’ migrant soon re-embarks on migration to continue reproducing the family along aspirational pathways.

How competing temporal logics create difficult choices for migrants and their families

While the temporalities that shape serial migration often involve a degree of migrant agency in terms of planning and realized goals, they are also perforated with unanticipated moments of difficulty, loss or even failure. In this sense, the precarities that undergird migrants’ work contracts, visas and employment conditions may become unanticipated critical moments that curtail migrants’ choices and limit agency. Previous studies ([Silvey and Parreñas, 2020](#); [Parreñas et al., 2019](#)) have noted the structural forces underpinning the temporary migration regime, moulding migrants’ serial migration patterns into precarity chains. Here, we give attention to the critical moments of instability and turbulence that occur in the left-behind family life-course that lead to clashes of different temporalities and a possible recalibration of priorities.

As already evident in the accounts in the last section, among serial migrant mothers, the birth of a child as a planned life event is usually accompanied by a short period of time at home (usually a year or two) but unlikely to permanently truncate their migratory trajectories (or dreams to re-migrate in Miriam’s case). Often, the opposite is true, and the arrival of children serves to propel migrant mothers into continuing their migration for the sake of their children’s future. Both Adiratna and Adelia’s mothers left before they turned two, and while the former was able to reunite with her mother Wiryono during her visits home between contracts, the latter has not seen her mother in person since she was one and a half years old. In the case of Juliana’s mother and also Wahid’s wife, their migration trajectories were triggered by the birth of a child who was sickly or disabled, hence rendering the need to build up financial resources to support their children even more compelling. In other words, serial migration may be punctuated by planned births, but not necessarily curtailed.

While serial migration is temporally elastic enough to incorporate planned episodes such as the arrival of children (and may even be motivated by this life event for many migrant mothers), unanticipated critical family life events have a greater potential to cause major disruptions to migration temporalities. Yet, not all major family events lead to disruptions of the migration trajectory. For many temporary migrant contract workers, the deteriorating health of family members does not necessarily halt serial migration but may instead spur it on. We turn to two sets of narratives – Juriyah and Bintoro – to illustrate different outcomes when capital-poor transnational families struggle with family illness.

Interrupting her migration trajectory only to accommodate the birth of children, Juriyah (50-year-old Indonesian mother of three) has worked on multiple contracts in Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker and a cook for 16 years in order to fund house construction, support her children's education, and build up capital to open a provision shop in the village. In the initial years, her husband partnered her in migrating and worked as a driver in the same household as Juriyah but had to return home when he developed kidney stones. Juriyah kept returning as a solo migrant as the earnings from the shop were not enough to help cover her husband's operation fees: 'What reason I departed again? Because my husband was ill, have [to undergo] operation two times in a year...The important thing is my husband can recover'. Furthermore, she needed to fund her children's education, 'So at the end with a heavy heart, for my children, for their future, I have to find capital again'. As a seasoned serial migrant, Juriyah felt that migration was an emotion-heavy and risk-laden endeavour but also one that could be calculated to yield success as long as there is a measure of good fortune: 'My plan is, *Inshallah*, hopefully God gives me some fortune. Well, need to plan thoroughly. By chance, *Alhamdulillah*, even though it's with a heavy heart, but it's for them'. For Juriyah, major family illnesses only served to strengthen her resolve to continue with her serial migration project in order to secure the welfare of her husband and children.

Bintoro's (57-year-old Indonesian left-behind husband) household is one of the poorest in our sample. For many years, his breadwinning wife was a serial migrant to Saudi Arabia and Brunei before and after marriage, a trajectory that continued soon after the birth of each child. She returned four years ago when their 15-year-old younger daughter Hera had a mild stroke, contracted gout and suffered from restricted mobility in one of her hands. While their daughter's illness was the straw that broke the camel's back, the health of both parents had long cast an ominous shadow on the serial migration project. Bintoro used to be a logger in Sumatra until he had a stroke and became semi-paralyzed. On returning home, he also contracted liver problems. His wife was working in Saudi Arabia at the time, and he kept his illness from her as he did not want her to worry. She learnt about his health problems from relatives on her return in between contracts. Bintoro was no longer capable of hard labour in the rice-fields to earn an income: 'I don't dare to go to the rice-field to work anymore'. While working in

Brunei, Bintoro's wife developed kidney stones and had to use much of her earnings to pay for medical treatment (according to Bintoro, 'her boss didn't know about it... She used her own salary'). Bintoro encouraged her to return and for a while she vacillated, 'My wife was sick when she was there. She didn't send much money home... She didn't come back for good at first. She renewed her contract again... But after she was sick [and her daughter also became ill], I didn't allow her to go there anymore... I told her "Just stay here. There is land and food here." She has stayed here [in the village] since then'. Bintoro observed, 'The people who went there have known the meaning of money...they don't like to stay at home anymore...Well, now she [his wife] can only surrender to God'. Bintoro now cultivates sweet potatoes, while his wife works as a helper at a food stall in a primary school within walking distance of their home. While money is tight and his wife wants to migrate again to improve the family's financial condition, Bintoro is against it, 'The negative is, both husband [and wife] and children can't gather together...If something happens, we won't know about it'.

Like the planned birth of a child, unplanned illness among left-behind family members may add renewed urgency to continue seriality in migration in order to fortify family financial resources (as seen in Juriyah's case). Conversely, critical family life events including death, major illness, or a crisis of care in the family may also lead to permanent return, thereby prematurely truncating the migration project. While often desired by some left-behind family members (such as Bintoro, and many serial migrants' children), homecoming migration – especially when unaccompanied by economic success – may be resisted by the migrants themselves, as they have tasted the 'meaning of money'. Under these circumstances, returning for good is not so much associated with a triumphant homecoming but a 'surrender to God'. Despite the allure of money, serial migration in the case of Bintoro's family was eventually brought to a precarious end-point in the face of a powerful confluence of serious health troubles involving the migrant, her husband and her daughter.

Stresses and strains in maintaining the marital relationship across the distance is yet another potential source of turbulence that could threaten to disrupt the migration temporalities underpinning the sustainability of the transnational family. Unable to secure long-term work after several attempts, Neil (39-year-old Filipino father) first left 12 years ago for Jeddah where he worked as a machine operator ('it seems so hard to get a factory contract [in the Philippines]... After [one contract], you apply and there's nothing again... As long as you're overaged, you'll have a hard time getting a job. So I said, I have to really try to venture abroad'. Battling bouts of homesickness in Jeddah ('my brain stayed in the Philippines'), Neil learnt from scratch how to use the computer and smart phones in order to communicate with his family back home, but after struggling with long-term separation for a few

years, he decided to return home. His marriage was crumbling under the combined weight of distance and jealousy, and he discovered that while technology such as cheap text messages that promised synchronicity and instantaneity made long-distance communication easier, it also fuelled the insecurities in the marriage:

Not all the time I can text [my wife]. Of course, there are times when work is too busy. It's very hectic sometimes and you need to finish the job. How can you text at that time? You have arguments that are difficult to settle because both of you are far away... When you're together, your arguments are easily settled. You can hold them, you can explain it like this... Compared to when you're on the phone. Those things sometimes prove to be an obstacle. Just like you're texting each other and you suddenly ran out of load. You can't immediately obtain load. How do you explain that? Of course,[your wife] will think why you are no longer replying or why you're taking too long to reply... Sometimes there are people who convince her that there might be another woman... Yes, gossip... maybe you have chicks there. [I also experienced jealousy,] yes, of course, because that's your wife. You start thinking that, or, maybe, this and that... It's really hard when we have misunderstandings. It came to a point when you fight through [text messages].

After remaining in the Philippines for three years earning an uncertain income by driving a tricycle, Neil decided to re-migrate as the children were growing up and he needed to figure out how to pay for their college education. He decided to join his brother in Singapore as he reckoned that homesickness would be easier to manage in an 'open country' with many more socializing opportunities as compared to his time in Saudi Arabia. However, his stay in Singapore was short-lived (lasted less than a year) because openness and the freedom to socialize, ironically, cured his homesickness but intensified jealousy in the couple's marriage, a situation further exacerbated by the rise of Facebook as a communication tool:

I wasn't friends with [only] guys, I made friends with girls. When my wife saw that on Facebook, she said, why do you have so many women around you? She didn't know that they were from church. And then [she saw on Facebook] they were joining pageants. Things like that, it kind of breaks [marriages]. [In Saudi Arabia], it's not allowed. But in Singapore [without draconian rules against social mixing], you just feel like your family could slowly break apart.

While his migration trajectory had reached a full stop at the point of the interview, Neil was still looking for work opportunities abroad through his connections on Facebook:

My work [in the Philippines] is so hard and my salary is just too low... So if I have an option, I want to go to a country where I would have a decent pay ... that would probably push me to go.

In other cases, serial migration as a family aspirational project unravels in the face of marital dissolution. Dandi's (13-year-old Indonesian) mother left for Abu Dhabi when he was seven months old and had, returned once for a month's visit between contracts before he turned seven. While his migrant mother's remittances funded household needs (including the house itself as well as presents for Dandi such as a bicycle), his left-behind father Cahyo (41-year-old Indonesian) assumed the role of primary caregiver with paternal relatives – Dandi's grandmother, aunt, uncle and cousins – providing a supportive web of care. When Dandi turned nine, his mother asked his father for a divorce, first over the phone, and when refused, she returned to ask again in person. She had married the driver of the household where she worked in Abu Dhabi. Since the divorce, her remittances had dwindled significantly, causing Cahyo to contemplate becoming a migrant himself. He eventually decided against this pathway, not only because of the high cost of migration,⁴ but also because Dandi had grown rather insecure and emotionally dependent on his father ('if I leave him [Dandi], he will be hungry... He's always tense every time I leave him for a social gathering in the village... Even for that, he would say "faster come back home"... I would scold him, "You're grown up, why are you talking like a girl?" [but] he's still scared'). According to Cahyo, Dandi now refuses to receive calls from his mother, saying, 'Mother is a jerk, huh... [but] it's okay, let her be. Her heart is bad'.

Serial migration is hence predicated on a long-term spatial-temporal division of labour between the solo migrant and left-behind family members, accompanied by close synchronization of economic production to generate remittances on the one hand, and social reproduction, including care for the next generation, on the other. For low-waged contract workers, seriality in migration needs to be sustained over many years of the family life-course – often a major part of the marital life-course and the growing up years of the children – in order to yield results. When asked when his migrant wife was expected to return from Greece where she had been working as a midwife for the past 11 years, Hermawan (an Indonesian in his 50s) replied, 'until [my son's] university graduation... until I have a daughter-in-law... [and] until my grandchild is one year old'. This generation-spanning endeavour places a large and continual emotional and psychological weight on the family, with many interviewees expressing sadness of time slipping away, or bitterness in missing birthdays, graduations, weddings, the birth of grandchildren and other milestones that could not be accommodated within the temporal logics of serial migration. Beyond missed moments that punctuate the life-course, 'doing family' across borders also requires family members to transcend the temporal 'lags' between 'here' and 'there.' In this respect, while strained marital

relationships can sometimes be repaired and restored by re-calibrating migration temporalities to include provisional pauses and longer reunions (as seen in Neil's case), they may also lead to marital dissolution which, in turn, is likely to upend the family's migration project (as seen in Cahyo's case).

Conclusion

As [Katigbak \(2015: 521\)](#) argues, negotiating transnational familyhood 'requires not just feelings but also morally framed production and distribution of (scarce) resources...[which] in reality...are co-dependent, although not always in a harmonious fashion'. Building on this observation, we have argued in this paper for the value of including a temporal perspective in understanding the conditions under which transnational familyhood is produced, sustained, or ruptured through serial migration. In drawing the paper to a close, we draw out three ways in which a critical temporalities framework is helpful for our study, and, more broadly, migration and family studies.

First, in examining how family decision-making around migration, care practices and social reproduction are recursively shaped over time, we situate the crucial links between seriality in transnational migration and the temporal dynamics of family based social reproduction in the context of global geography-based inequalities, and the complicit role of both home and host nation-states. Living with the paradox that the family has to be split in order to be together as 'family', Southeast Asian families that have embarked on serial migration need to contend with the stresses and strains of different - and sometimes conflictual - temporal logics for different family members in order to constitute a viable way of being family. This raises the bar for 'doing family' and shifts the burden of responsibility onto the migrant and the left-behind family, while exposing the lack of decent work opportunities and safety nets for sustaining family life at home. Concurrently, host countries' labour migration regime based on short work contracts and non-integration policies require serial migrants and their families to accept modes of temporariness - the corroding wear and tear of always-yet-provisional leaving and returning - as a precarious foundation for building family life. As [Schmalzbauer \(2004: 1329\)](#) observes, capital-poor transnational families 'represent a new family form born out of the inequality in the global economy and reproduced by means of dependence on a transnational division of labor'. Adopting a temporal perspective hence makes it amply clear that time is a scarce resource, and that temporal control is a means of power that features at all scales in the power interplay between the migration governance regime on the one hand, and migrants and their families on the other. How temporalities are regulated not only matters in shaping transient migrant experiences of border crossing, legal processes, work discipline, spatial mobility, integration and belonging in host society (as demonstrated in [Robertson's \(2021\)](#) work, for example) but also to

their homeward social networks and care relationships. Employment contracts with adequate interstitial time to take home leave for family reunion and repair – without having to put their lives on hold, or grapple with the uncertainty of securing the next contract – would allow migrant families to organize and manage time so as to negotiate a balance between productive work and social reproduction amidst broader temporal inequalities.

Second, by highlighting the simultaneous, yet unequal, co-existence of multiple temporalities in the distance-separated lives of migrants and their families, a critical temporalities framework in migration studies points to the significance of ‘being together in time across space’, or more generally, how the spatial separateness of serial migration can be modulated by fostering togetherness in synchronous times. Synchronicity implies a shared sense of time or ‘temporal coincidence’ (Cwerner, 2001: 22), and as Robertson (2015: 55) puts it, when migrants and their families succeed in creating synchronous times, ‘they simultaneously create historic trails of the past, synchronize different time zones in the present and express imaginaries of the future’. Where they fail, a sense of disjuncture may set in and transnational family life may begin to unravel or rupture. This line of thought leads us to foreground issues relating to reducing cost, increasing access and improving competencies in the use of digital technologies of communication across distance. At the same time, as Madianou (2016: 185) cautions, it is also important not to ‘romanticize the role of communication technologies for “doing family” because, as with non-mediated practices, acts of mediated communication can have complex consequences, both positive and negative, depending on a number of factors, including the relationships themselves’. Mediated intimacy across distance is often a two-edged sword. The disjuncture between ‘imagined proximity and physical separation’ may catalyse new sources of conflict, such as the unfulfilled expectation to be ‘always present’, or heighten the moralized subtext embedded in acts of disengagement and the deliberate creation of social distance (Wilding, 2006: 133). Transnational families are thus also ‘transtemporal’ (Coe, 2016), and their engagement with communication technologies to overcome spatial distance highlights the complexities they confront in synchronizing work time and family/social time across borders and time zones.

Finally, a critical temporalities approach urges us to attend to how migrants and their families manage temporal conflict over the life-course. Feminist scholars have already shown how women often manage the temporal conflicts between care/family and paid work in ways that reflect ‘multiple exploitations, including self-exploitation, of women as unpaid caregivers’; a life-course perspective further reveals the ‘gender inequalities embedded in their temporal “flexibility” even when they have become migrant breadwinners for the family (Zhou, 2015: 168). A temporal perspective that considers the life-course provides contextualized insights, allowing us to gain deeper understanding into how difficult decisions are made at critical junctures of the family life-course. For many migrant women as well as men, migration decisions to leave,

stay or return are intimately and temporally related to critical junctures and family life events, including birth and death, sickness and health, and the milestones marked by birthdays, the start of the school year, examination time, graduation, anniversaries, weddings and the arrival of grandchildren. These occasions - whether celebratory, commemorative or calamitous - give meaning to migration temporalities by punctuating migration times without prescribing temporal decisions. By foregrounding 'the individual's capacity to mediate time in a transnational context' (Zhou, 2015: 178), a life-course perspective on migration provides a useful complement to a focus on the temporal orderings of the migration regime and other structural forces in constructing the multiple meanings of time.

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Notes

1. Temporariness is a condition that goes beyond labour migration systems but is also central to border control in asylum and encampment policies, as seen in recent work foregrounding temporal bordering practices, the politics of waiting and the appropriation of migrants' time (Andersson, 2014; Tazzioli, 2018; Papoutsis, 2021).
2. Ossman (2004) examines how people who have moved across national borders more than once alter their ties to others, their sense of self, and their political or religious ideals. She defines serial migrants as people who have lived in at least three countries for a significant period of time, defining the 'significant' period as at least a 3-year period of residence in each place. She further limits the category of serial migrants in her study to people for whom the stakes of 'integration' in each successive home are presumably quite high, thereby excluding those who move under a regime of enforced temporariness.
3. All ages and years mentioned are with reference to the time when in-depth interviews were conducted.

4. While Southeast Asian women are often able to migrate as domestic workers through a ‘fly now, pay later’ system mediated by recruitment agents, men often are required to pay significant sums of money in advance to secure a spot in overseas labour markets (Platt et al., 2017).

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