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Author/s:

Fernandez, B

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Crossing the Gulf: Love and Family in Migrant Lives by Pardis Mahdavi

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016 216 pp.

Bina Fernandez

University of Melbourne, Victoria

In *Crossing the Gulf*, Pardis Mahdavi presents a poignant and compelling analysis of the intimate lives of migrants in the Persian Gulf countries of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Drawing on richly layered, multisited global ethnographic research that spanned a decade, the heart of the book's argument is that the emotional dimensions of migrants' lives are deeply intertwined with their mobility *and* their immobility. The book introduces the key concept of "im/mobility" to articulate "immobility as a factor sutured with mobility in shaping both migration and the intimate lives of migrants" (p. 23).

Through her examination of how migrants' ties of love, family, kinship, and sexuality shape their decisions about mobility and immobility, Mahdavi offers a nuanced counter to the hegemonic state discourses on human trafficking and migrant labor regulation that tend to flatten migrant agency and identity and assume migration as structurally determined. The analysis of the *intimate lives* of migrants also provides an important shift away from the emphasis in the scholarship on gendered migration on the *intimate labor* of migrants (Boris and Parrenas 2010). Thus, while some of Mahdavi's interlocutors are engaged in forms of paid intimate labor (domestic work, childcare, sex work, etc.), for others, such labor may be unpaid and engaged in as part of the relationships and emotional bonds they have with children, family, partners, and, sometimes, employers.

Central to the structure of the book are the narratives of migrant women who have children while they are working in the Gulf cities of Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai. The intersection of the *kefala* (migrant-sponsor) system with *Zina* laws (which criminalize sex outside marriage) subjects women to a "deportation regime tethered to their sexualities" (p. 45). Unmarried migrant women are prohibited from marrying or giving birth to children, and if they do, they and their children are thrust into a precarious, liminal status. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the stories of migrant women—from Nepal, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, and the Philippines—who have had children as a result of either voluntary or forced sexual relationships. After giving birth, many of these women were forcibly separated and deported to their home countries without their children. Reflecting on their stories, Mahdavi juxtaposes the economic and social mobility that migration generated for them and their families with the immobility (for them and their children) that resulted from the choices they made in intimate relationships. As she notes, the "bonds of love were often both mobilizing and immobilizing, for the migrants as well as their transnational families, sometimes at the same time" (p. 69).

Chapter 3 outlines how inflexible economic-citizenship regimes and family ties in source countries compel migrants' mobility. But it also shows how migrants with children become enmeshed in and constrained by the highly restrictive and rigid laws pertaining to family reunification and citizenship transfer to migrants in the Gulf countries. We learn of the plight of *bidoun*, or stateless children born to unmarried migrant mothers whose fathers are known. These children are denied the citizenship of their mother with no possibility of returning to her home country or of ever obtaining

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citizenship where they were born, even though it is the only country they have ever known. Mahdavi shows how migrants' and their children's responses are nevertheless flexible, finding room to creatively maneuver and survive within these constraints.

Migrant flexibility is demonstrated again in chapter 4 with a closer look at the motivations of young migrants as they leave, and return, "home." The chapter illustrates the complex subjectivities of women like Leela from India and Sylvie from Madagascar, who sought to escape marriage by migrating, and of Gabriella and Amina, who sought to escape motherhood. We also meet women for whom migration is an opportunity to explore their sexuality through dance, multiple partners, or lesbian relationships. Through these narratives, Mahdavi effectively unsettles our understanding about what constitutes "home" for these women, and in doing so, challenges the assumption within dominant antitrafficking discourse of a "home" to which "victims" of trafficking should be returned.

In chapter 5, Mahdavi introduces the exceptional condition of children abandoned by their migrant mothers, and whose fathers are unknown. These children are "adopted" by the Emir and given a better life than their mothers would have been able to provide them. Yet this liminal status produces an ambiguous sense of belonging and uncertain futures as adults in the country of their birth.

The final two chapters turn the analysis to the effects of migrant lives on state policies, and vice versa. Mahdavi argues that attention to the narratives of the intimate lives of migrants has the potential to destabilize the dominant antitrafficking discourse. She suggests that effective state responses would be less restrictive and punitive and better acknowledge the autonomy and intimate lives of migrants.

Notably, this book is moving in its honest and deeply personal reflections on Mahdavi's own journey as a woman, mother, activist, and scholar whose life journey has intertwined with those of her interlocutors. An important shift in trajectory she documents is the modification of the position she took in her previous book (Mahdavi 2011), which viewed the antitrafficking framework as possibly beneficial, to her position in this book, which views it as producing more harm than good.

Crossing the Gulf is a valuable contribution to the scholarship on migration, with vital policy implications, particularly regarding the situation of those women and their children who are "immobilized" by the laws and regulations in the Gulf countries. Mahdavi has achieved a commendable balance of providing an in-depth portrait of their lives without the polarizing discourse that demonizes their employers and host countries that so often characterizes discussions on migrant workers in the Gulf.

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