Gender- and social class-based transnationalism of migrant Filipinas in binational unions

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flota\textsuperscript{a,b}

\textsuperscript{a}Centre for Migration Law/Institute for the Sociology of Law, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands; \textsuperscript{b}Interdisciplinary Research Center on Families and Sexualities (CIRFASE), Catholic University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

**ABSTRACT**

Empirical studies of Filipinos in France focus on migrant women domestic workers and consequently tend to overlook other components of the Filipino population in this country. Departing from these previous studies, I examine the case of migrant Filipinas in binational unions, that is, relationships based on marriage or cohabitation (legally registered or not) with a non-Filipino partner. Drawing from semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, this article demonstrates the intersectionality of gender and social class in the way these migrants maintain transnational familial ties. Influenced by the gender norms and ideology in the Philippines, migrant Filipinas strive to be 'good mothers' and/or 'dutiful daughters'. However, they do so differently depending on their social class belonging and on their family situation: migrants of modest social class background have usually children from previous relationships left under the care of their kin in the Philippines and feel compelled to send remittances and maintain regular communication with their family back home, whereas women of upper social class origin are neither obliged nor asked to do so. However, they send gifts and financial assistance voluntarily, pay frequent visits to their natal family and make some kin visit them in France.

**KEYWORDS**

Gender; social class; transnational practices; intersectionality; migrant Filipinas

**Introduction**

Cross-border marriages – ‘permanent relationships between people with different formal citizenship statuses’ (Williams 2010, 184) – represent a contemporary widespread phenomenon that notably concerns women of the Global South and men of the Global North. Its highly gendered character has prompted scholars to investigate its origin, dynamics and implications (Charsley 2012; Constable 2011). Existing works have underlined the agency of the women involved in these marriages (Constable 2003) and highlighted their multi-faceted lives, not only as ‘wives’ but also as ‘workers’ and ‘emigrants’ (Bélanger, Linh, and Duong 2011; Piper and Roces 2003). It is therefore hardly surprising that recent studies on cross-border marriages have started to document these women’s transnational practices and their impact on their family and village of origin (Bélanger
and Linh 2011; Lauser 2008; Suksomboon 2007; Yeoh et al. 2013). This emerging literature had shed light on their transnationalism from either the point of view of their receiving country or that of their country of origin. What remains largely lacking is the crossing of both viewpoints, which requires examining the ‘relations between emigrants and non-migrants in the country of origin’ (Carling 2008) and the ‘inter temporal aspect’ (Fresnoza-Flot 2015) that results from the interaction of the ‘before’ and the ‘after’ of migration.

To do so, this article analyses the case of Filipino migrant women in France who live in ‘binational unions’—relations based on marriage or cohabitation (legally registered or not) between two persons of different national origins. The lenses of gender and social class are adopted here as analytical tools for this purpose. The gender lens, on the one hand, underlines the socio-cultural mechanisms that structure transnational relations, interactions and practices. As Basch, Schiller, and Blanc (2003) argue, gender is ‘a location from which to construct identities that allow us to think beyond the nation building processes of particular nation-states’ (40). By ‘bringing gender in’ (Pessar and Mahler 2003), the present study aims to shed light on the way gender norms and ideologies ‘here’ and/or ‘there’ fashion the transnational engagements of migrant women married to foreign men. It pays attention to the gendered dynamics of interactions not only between spouses or partners, but also between migrant women and their non-migrant family/kin members in their country of origin. This contributes to a better understanding of the ‘power geometry’ (Massey 1993) and ‘asymmetries’ (Carling 2008) experienced by different social actors. On the other hand, the social class lens foregrounds the influence of migrants’ position within a particular social hierarchy of power on their transnational practices. The term ‘social class’ is used here as a heuristic device to capture the subjective and social meanings of migrants’ transnational activities. Given the polysemic character of ‘social class’, this article does not restrict the definition of this term to something economic (Marxist and Goldthorpe’s perspectives) but also includes the notions of prestige (Weberian viewpoint) and capitals (in Bourdieusian sense). It remains therefore open to the various significations of social class that are contingent on different socio-cultural and temporal contexts, as explained at the Introduction of this Special Issue (Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017).

The focus here on the case of migrant Filipinas takes place in the analytical continuity of the phenomenon of cross-border marriages and unions, which has been an object of increasing legal restrictions in many developed countries, notably in Europe. In fact, Filipino women constitute one of the leading groups of ‘marriage migrants’ (see Kofman 2004) in the world, that is to say individuals who migrate for the purpose of marrying a national of their country of destination (Constable 2003; 2011). Between 1989 and 2015, 456,471 Filipino women got engaged with or married foreigners versus 42,965 Filipino men during the same period (CFO 2016b). Among the 10 major destinations of Filipino marriage migrants, the United States, Japan, Australia, Canada and South Korea represent the leading receiving countries (CFO 2016a). This phenomenon has been a controversial issue in the Philippines because of some cases of reported violence against Filipino women. This led the Philippine government to prohibit in 1990 ‘mail-ordered’ marriages between Filipino women and foreign men. This prohibition did not put an end to marriage migrations: instead, they continue to flourish through the Internet and informal social networks linking Filipino migrants and non-migrants in the country.

Despite the strong scholarly interest in this phenomenon, the situation of Filipino women in binational unions in France remains understudied, perhaps because this
country receives a small number of Filipino cross-border marriage migrants compared with other countries (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau 2013). For instance, only 59 Filipino-French marriages were registered in France in 2010 (Beaumel 2012), compared with 521 Filipino-German marriages recorded in the same year (CFO 2014). The relative social and scientific ‘invisibility’ of binational unions involving Filipino migrants also stems from the very characteristics of Filipino migrant population in France that is composed mainly of migrant women separated from their families in the Philippines, working in the domestic service sector, and mostly in irregular situation (Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Mozère 2005). Hence, by examining the situation of migrant Filipinas in binational relations, this article unlocks the heterogeneity of Filipino migrant population and sheds light on its ‘transnational social field’ composed of ‘a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1009).

To attain the objective of understanding the transnationalism of migrant Filipinas in binational unions in France, I begin this article with a short review of related studies and with a presentation of my methodology and sample. At the main section, I explain in detail the causes of the migration and binational unions of Filipino women in France and delve into their transnational lives between the Philippines and France, notably demonstrating how gender norms and social class belonging influence these women’s transnational practices. By confronting the ‘before’ and the ‘after’ of migration, I also show how the pre-migration family situation of the migrants interviewed affects later on their transnationality.

Migration, binational unions and migrant transnationalism

The migration of men and women for the purpose of marriage or legal co-residence with another person of different nationality, known in the field of migration studies as ‘marriage migration’, consists of two subgroups. The first one comprises ‘second and subsequent generations of children of migrant origin (citizens and non-citizens) who bring in a fiancé(e)/spouse from their parents’ homeland or diasporic space’ (Kofman 2004, 246). The second one is composed of ‘permanent residents or citizens bringing in a partner they have met while abroad for purposes of work, study or holiday’ (Kofman 2004, 247). Individuals who met their partner in their receiving country following their migration do not fall in this marriage migration category, as they do not initially migrate in order to get married but for professional, touristic, scholastic or asylum purposes. Binational unions are either based on marriage, on legal co-residence or none of the two; regardless of their bases, binational unions may be transnational or not, or ‘in the process’ of becoming transnational (Williams 2012).

Recent studies document how migrants, notably women in binational unions, maintain various ties with their country of origin while at the same time fulfilling their role as wife and/or mother in their receiving country. This care work of women contributes to holding together households and their geographically dispersed members (Gardner 2006). Women’s simultaneous caregiving linked to migration and binational union formation are part of the phenomenon of ‘global householding’, that is, the global formation and maintenance of ‘households within a given society’ (Douglass 2010, 63). Strategies of global householding among migrants in binational unions include sending monetary
and material gifts, paying visits to the country of origin, making some members of the family of origin visit them in their receiving country, connect through telephone/internet communications and so on.

Regular remittance links migrants in binational unions to their country of origin. In their study of Vietnamese marriage women migrants in Singapore, Yeoh et al. (2013) observe that these women try to strike a balance in the ‘way they channel limited funds between the competing needs’ of their natal family in Vietnam and their marital family in Singapore in order to secure for themselves a ‘meaningful place’ in both families. The capacity of migrants in binational unions to send remittances appears to depend more on their situation in their receiving countries (the duration of their immigration, their relationship with their husband, their motherhood and so on) than the actual needs of their natal family (Bélanger, Linh, and Duong 2011). Global householding through remittance sending improves the status of these migrants within their natal family as well as within their village and country of origin.

Aside from monetary remittance, marriage migrants also send gifts and other material objects to their country of origin. For example, Mand (2012) documents the production and consumption of wedding videos among Punjabi Sikh transnational marriage celebrations in Britain. She explains that the circulation of these videos ‘supports transnational engagements and provides witness to displays of wealth and cultural capital to internationally dispersed audiences’ (175). Visit to natal families represents another transnational practice among migrants in binational unions. It is during this moment that migrants display their newly acquired status as ‘wives’ of a ‘First World’ national and transfer their ‘social remittances’ – ‘the ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving-to sending-country communities’ (Levitt 1998, 927). For example, Thai marriage migrants conceal from their families during their visits the hardship they undergo in the Netherlands, and exaggerate instead the financial advantages of their migration by dressing up fashionably or by giving gifts (Suksomboon 2007). There are also cases that show marriage migrants making some natal family members come to visit them or live with them in their receiving country (e.g. Iwai 2013). Telephone and internet communications are also part of the lives of migrants in binational unions, which resembles the case of migrant men and women workers separated from their families in their country of origin.

What drives migrants in binational unions to maintain ties with their country of origin? Gendered role and expectations appear to influence these migrants’ transnational practices. To fulfil family obligations as daughters, sisters or mothers, many migrant women in binational unions strive to send remittances to their natal families. They try to meet the expectations attached to their marriage or union with a foreign man. For instance, Cole (2014) observes among Malagasy women married to French men that their vadimbazaha (‘spouse of a European’) status came with caregiving obligations towards their kin in Madagascar. To satisfy these expectations they had to earn their livelihood in France, to negotiate with their husbands, and to “give life” to their French families and communities and their kin in Madagascar simultaneously (93). When migrants are unable to fulfil the gendered expectations ‘here’ and ‘there’, it often leads to either conflict with their partner or their inability to fulfil the needs of their family members in the country of origin, thereby tarnishing their social status (e.g. Yea 2008). Hence, unbalanced transnational householding endangers marital relations and devalues migrants’ reputation. Binational union appears in this case as a resource and as a site of constraints for many migrants.
As evidenced by previous studies, gender influences the ‘global householding’ strategies of migrants in binational unions. What remains unclear is the way this factor intersects with social class, which can unveil the not-so-visible dynamics of power within the transnational social field of migrants. The figure of a migrant originating from a rural area and a working social class family dominates the literature on binational unions, in which (s)he is often presented as an economic actor using marriage or binational relationship to access ‘First World’ citizenship and status. However, what if a migrant comes from a well-off family or occupies a socially valorised profession prior to his/her union with a foreign partner? How about if the migrant is a single mother? Yea (2008) shows in her study of Filipino women married to United States military men in Korea that having an offspring left under the care of the extended family in the country of origin is a strong impetus to send remittance back home. This points to the importance of considering alongside gender and social class the pre-migration situation of a migrant in binational union.

Methods and sample

The data presented in this article originate from two different research projects conducted in France in the Ile-de-France region, where Filipino migrants are mostly concentrated. The first one was conducted during my doctoral study on the transnational family dynamics of Filipino migrant mothers in France, and the second one during my postdoctoral research on ‘1.5-generation’ Filipinos. For these projects, I interviewed in total 142 persons, 11 of whom were migrant Filipinas with foreign partners. Despite the difference in focus and objectives of these two studies, I expected that crossing the interview narratives of migrant women in binational unions with one another would offer interesting insights on their transnational ties and practices.

The women interviewed were mostly in their thirties and forties. Seven had Filipino nationality, one was a naturalised French citizen and the three others held double nationalities: Filipino and French for two of them, Filipino and American for the third one. Seven of the women interviewed had French husbands and the four others lived with their partner of respectively Russian, German, Indian and Sri Lankan nationalities. Among the women respondents, four had postgraduate degree, four were college graduates, one had finished high school and two had only elementary-level education. Five respondents mostly worked in the domestic service sector and six others were white-collar workers (among whom one was retired). The average number of children of the respondents was two and their average length of stay in France was 12 years. In terms of family situation and social class belonging, the respondents could be divided in two groups. The first group was composed of five women who had left their children from previous relationships in the Philippines. These women had mostly low educational attainment and worked in the domestic service sector in Paris as two house cleaners, a nanny, a guardian of a building and a massager. Three of them found themselves in hypergamous relationship with their husbands, respectively, a retired public employee, a private company employee and a cook in a restaurant. The partners of the two other women worked as a janitor and as a driver in a foreign embassy. On the contrary, the six women of the second group had no children left in the Philippines, belonged to middle and upper social class families like their partners, and mostly held Masters’ degrees. They had socially valorised professions in France: an engineer, a teacher, a banker, an entrepreneur and two
office workers. Their non-Filipino partners had also tertiary-level education and engaged in valorised professions: an architect, a manager, a researcher, two entrepreneurs, and an artist. In short, these couples fit what Çelikaksoy, Nielsen, and Verner (2006) call ‘educational homogamy’, that is, interethnic marriages involving partners of the same level of educational attainment.

**Overlapping causes of migration and binational unions**

Binational unions involving women of the global South have been interpreted as a result of globalisation, notably because improved means of communication and transportation make it easier for people of different countries to meet and find a potential partner. Other scholars attribute these unions to the transformation of gender order in many developed countries, where women have become professionally active but where the ‘conception of women as mothers and homemakers’ (Kojima 2001, 200) has not been modified, an ideal that some men continue to seek when looking for a partner. At the individual level, women in binational unions are usually assumed to aim at improving their economic condition (Freeman 2005), which downplays the possibility of love and romance in their relationships (Constable 2003). The possibility that all these factors may act simultaneously or successively on individuals has not been explored either, although it could shed light on the link between migration and binational unions.

Unlike in some other countries, Filipino women in binational unions in France do not fit the cliché of ‘mail-order brides’ met by their partner via the Internet or matrimonial agencies (see Robinson 1996; Suzuki 2003). As four respondents in my study confided, they ‘met their partners in the Philippines’. One came to know her husband in her work place, one in a bar through friends, another one met her husband by chance in a public place and the fourth met hers in a Yahoo chat room on the Internet. The remaining seven respondents met their husbands or partners in France through friends or at their place of study, work or residence: one woman interviewee, for instance, ‘fell in love’ with her German neighbour and the two got married afterwards. These cases suggest that many Filipino women in binational unions are not marriage migrants but immigrated first to France for work or study before meeting their partner there. In addition, two of the women interviewed were neither married nor legally cohabiting with their partner, which illustrates the diversity of binational union arrangements in France.

What motivated the migration of most Filipino women to this country was their desire to work in order to sustain their family in the Philippines. Nine of the women interviewed migrated first before they entered into a binational relationship and moved with their partners under one roof. Five of them had children from previous relationships who were left to the care of relatives in their country of origin. These women portrayed their former Filipino partners as ‘lazy’, ‘unthoughtful’ and not participating much in taking care of their children. Rachel3 (29 years old) described her situation in her previous relationship:

I was the father. Him [her former partner], he did not worry, drank alcohol. Even preparing the milk for his son, he didn’t like to do it. He said ‘you’re the mother of the child, you’ll be the one to prepare’.

Her experience reflects the gender ideology in the Philippines, where mothers are responsible for most of the caregiving responsibilities related to children and to the house. Several
respondents told me how their ex-partners used this ideology to justify their non-involvement in caregiving. Another respondent named Darla (48 years old) complained about her former husband not financially supporting his family regularly: as a result, she resorted to ask for help among her relatives. Such conjugal relations shaped by gender inequality push Filipino women like Rachel and Darla to seek financial autonomy and independence.

During the migration process, a migrant’s husband may become unfaithful or die, resulting in some migrant women finding themselves overwhelmed with solitude. Such situation provides a fertile ground for a binational relation based on mutual emotional support to blossom. Some women in irregular situation may also become motivated to find a French partner to regularise their situation. This is the case of Maria (42 years old and mother of three): thanks to her marriage with Alain, a retired French man she met through her Filipino friends, she obtained her residence permit five years after arriving in France. Their marriage was based on the agreement that Maria would pay Alain if after three months of living together he would not fall in love with her. Alain did feel something for Maria but not the other way around. Despite the absence of mutual love, they decided not to separate. Maria’s case underlines how binational marriage facilitates access to a regular migration status and subsequently to other entitlements.

Moreover, the intention to study abroad, to escape a political crisis in the Philippines or to follow the wish of one’s parents, can push some women to migrate, particularly among those of middle and upper social class backgrounds. The social, cultural and economic capitals of these women facilitate their geographical movement. Four respondents were in this case: two entered France through a student visa, one had an international visa as she worked in an international organisation, and another one came to France via Italy without a visa (at a time when a tourist visa was not required for Filipinos to visit Italy or France).4

I was going to do Political Science and a bit of linguistics, which involved coming to France for the linguistic part, and I decided to come to France before I started schooling to freshen up my French, and then I met my husband. (Melissa, 46 years old)

Falling in love changed the initial project of Melissa and three other women interviewed: it shifted from temporary migration to settlement for the purpose of family formation. Love and family formation were also the main impetus for four other respondents, who met their French husbands in the Philippines prior to their migration to France. Two of these women had a child from a previous relationship and felt lucky to find a partner who accepted their situation. In the Philippines where the ‘ideal family’ is composed of a father, a mother, their children and their extended family, single parents and their children are not socially accepted as a ‘family unit’ (Roces 2014). Thus, respondents with children from previous relationships found in their union with a foreign man the opportunity to achieve their ‘ideal family’ project, including their intention to find a job in France to financially support their children and natal families back in the Philippines. Among the four respondents who met their husbands in the Philippines, only one migrated with the sole aim of starting a family. For this woman of middle social class background, a binational marriage followed by migration was the means to obtain the status of a wife of a ‘First-World’ husband, thereby reinforcing her social class belonging.

The cases of the 11 women interviewed underline the connection between migration and binational union. Some women migrate and later on enter in a binational relationship,
whereas others start such a relationship and formalise it afterwards through migration. The various reasons behind these decisions overlap with one another and include satisfying family obligations, forming an ‘ideal family’, seeking personal liberty and financial autonomy, and so on. These factors are shaped by the gender ideology and norms in the country of origin of these migrants, a process that may continue through time as migrants maintain ties with their country of origin.

**Gender and social class in migrant women’s transnationalism**

Becoming involved in a binational relationship does not automatically sever migrant women’s ties with their country of origin. On the contrary, binational union often provides them means to maintain their contacts with their natal families. In the case of the interviewees, gender and social class determined and structured their transnational practices.

Having a child left back home represented for five respondents a strong driving force to regularly send remittance to the Philippines. The gendered expectation on Filipino migrant mothers to fulfil their reproductive role by sending remittance exerts pressure on them to be ‘good mothers’. That is why prior to their binational union, these women made it clear to their partner that they need to accomplish their caregiving obligation towards their offspring. Their partner’s expression of willingness to support them in this regard and their children’s acceptance of their partner carried important weight in their final decision whether to pursue their relationship or not. In a few cases, parental support also mattered, as migrants’ parents were usually the ones taking care of the child when his/her mother migrated to join her foreign husband. In such case, binational union is a family affair that goes beyond the couple, and tensions may arise when the couple finally settles in a country where gender norms operate differently from those in the country of origin of the woman. This is why the respondents, notably the ones with children back home, used certain strategies to position themselves between the conflicting gender norms in their countries of origin and immigration in order to prevent conflicts with their partner. In France, gender norms are mainly based on equality between partners and they influence the attitude of the respondents’ partners towards ‘doing couple’ and ‘doing family’.

You know that being helpful to our family is natural to us Filipinos. For French, what they earn individually is only for them, each one keeps his earnings. Me, I am shy to always ask him [her French husband]. If you ask [money], he will give you but not that big. (Berta, 31 years old)

Berta also confided that she and her husband had separate bank accounts and shared equally the household expenses. This arrangement prompted her and Rachel, another respondent with a child left back home, to work in the domestic service sector to be able to contribute to their couple’s budget in France and to send money to their families in the Philippines. By working, these women were able to satisfy the expectations of their husband in France and of their family in the Philippines, thereby avoiding possible tensions. This resembles the case of Malagasy women married to French men who are able to secure their status in their country of origin and maintain peace at home with their husband in France by understanding the gender norms of their receiving country (see Cole 2014).
Other women with children left in the Philippines prevented conflicts with their partner by refusing to marry him in order to retain their independence. As Grace (48 years old) remarked, ‘If we are just like this [unmarried], he has no right over me. I am free. I have no one to take care of.’ This meant remaining separate in terms of finances, which allowed her to send as much money and other gifts to her children without reproached from her partner. This strategy of living together with their partner but remaining separate for financial matters was the case of five respondents with children left in the Philippines and four others who had socially valorised jobs prior to their binational marriage. The remaining two respondents who settled with their partners when they did not yet have jobs received regular financial support from their husbands, who opened bank accounts for their wives where they regularly deposited money to sustain the household budget as well as their wives’ personal expenses.

Maintaining links with natal family also requires that the foreign partner understands how family functions in the Philippines, an important condition for a binational union to last. Aside from explaining to their partner their family situation prior to cohabitation or marriage, single-mother respondents immersed their partner in their family lives. They shared their life stories with them (e.g. their former Filipino partners, children, economic difficulties), introduced them to their children during telephone conversations, went with them during vacations to the Philippines (in three cases), and involved them in their family projects (e.g. starting a business, buying or building a house). Intimacy in binational relationships encourages women to open up to their partners and makes interpersonal dialogues easier for the couple. Maria who got married in order to obtain ‘papers’ and stayed married without love on her part complained that her husband ‘did not like phone calls’, which made it impossible for her to call as much as she wanted her children and kin in the Philippines and even to receive calls from her friends in France. This situation and verbal conflicts with her husband pushed her to stay most of the time in the service room (chambre de bonne) provided to her by her employer. In contrast, other respondents whose partners understood their care obligations and with whom they maintained intimate relations described them as ‘caring’, as they assisted them in ensuring the well-being of their transnational household members, as one woman remarked below.

My children accepted him [her Sri Lankan partner]. He already went to the Philippines even during the funeral of my daughter [of a previous relationship]. It was him who sent my children to school and was helping me. […] He even gives money to my ex-husband’s children [with other woman]. (Darla, 48 years old)

This respondent was also proud that she and her partner built a house in Sri Lanka, which meant that they were simultaneously managing three households in three different countries. To do so, they mobilised their kin networks by sending them regularly remittance and gifts. This ‘kin caring’ (Alicea 1997) practice appears common among respondents whose children back home were under the care of their extended family. Maria, for instance, sent once per year ‘balikbayan boxes’ filled with material gifts to different persons in her extended family: ‘one box for my brother, two boxes go to Manila, one goes to Leyte [a province in the eastern central part of the Philippines] for my mother, one for my children, one for my sister’.

This regular sending of monetary and material remittance did not apply to six respondents of middle and upper social class backgrounds whose partners shared the same social
class origins. This is because they did not have children of previous relationship left in the Philippines and their well-off natal families did not need their financial support. Two respondents only sent gifts or remittance when they were solicited. Linda (45 years old), for instance, never transferred remittance to her natal family, but only sent one ‘balikbayan box’ every year to her mother who asked her for specific products such as chocolates, wines, coffee or toilet papers with designs. Other respondents sent financial help back home on a voluntary basis, particularly in times of emergency: ‘I did remittance once after a typhoon, and I heard that our house in Cebu is severely damaged, so I sent money to have it repaired, but they [her natal family] never asked me to send money’ (Melissa). When their parents retired or get old, the six respondents of well-off natal families decided to financially support them together with their siblings; without being asked or obliged to do so. Unlike respondents from less privileged background, these women were not expected to send material gifts and aid to their natal families. However, having interiorised filial piety and woman’s care role in the family during their socialisation in the Philippines, they felt the need to ‘give something back’ to their aging parents as one respondent explained.

This feeling translates into ‘emotional flows’ (Takeda 2012) characterised by a feeling of concern over the well-being of aging parents and at the same time, into what I call ‘emotional concealment’ driven by one’s intention to keep problems to oneself to prevent others from worrying. This means that the respondents select what sort of emotions and stories they can communicate or not to their natal families. Melissa used to send letters to her mother and share to her all her feelings and problems, but she later changed after seeing the effect of it:

One time, my mother was hospitalised. I didn’t know she was so affected by my problems here. My brother sent me a letter saying that if I have a problem, I should not reveal it and tell it to my mother.

Emotional concealment can be observed among all the respondents, which was also documented among other groups of migrants in previous studies (e.g. Baldassar 2007; Schmalzbauer 2008). The respondents from well-off backgrounds do not feel obliged to communicate regularly with their natal families, which distinguishes them from other respondents with modest social class belonging and who had children left back home. The fact that they did not regularly send remittances or made phone calls all the time to their natal families did not make them ‘bad daughters’ or ‘bad sisters’ in the eyes of their families. As one woman remarked: ‘even if we don’t call each other, I think basically we are really, really close, so it’s not a matter of time, it’s not a matter of distance’. The privileged situation of their natal families made a big difference, as it gave these women a space of personal liberty allowing them to decide for their lives in France. Aside from ‘emotional flows’, they fulfil their feeling of giving ‘something back’ to their parents through other symbolic gestures of care. For example, they paid visit to their natal family members and make some of their kin come to visit them, notably during vacations or when delivering a baby. In one case, an ill mother came to France to be treated and her children (including one woman I interviewed) voluntarily contributed money for the expenses:

There was a time at which they [her parents] stayed here for almost a year for mama’s treatment in the hospital. They also brought a maid or someone like that for one year. The last time it was really a nurse. They brought a nurse here for three months. The thing is, it’s
not who pays or whatever. I mean all of us. We contribute, but nobody asked. Nobody was obliged. All of us had initiative, even if nobody asked. (Tessa, 44 years old)

Nevertheless, the situation was different when the woman and her partner in France did not earn much despite of their privileged background. This made difficult for one respondent to sustain ties with her natal family, and it is her parents who sent her help from the Philippines:

When my son was a baby, my parents sent us plane tickets to go home to the Philippines and try to live there, because they knew how difficult it was for us here. But we found out that my husband could not stay in the Philippines, so we all came here. […] It took us several years, I think eight years, before we had enough resources to go home, and when we started to go home it was only once every two years. (Melissa, 46 years old)

Despite her difficult economic situation, Melissa did not feel socially declassed thanks to her husband’s ‘bourgeois background’, ‘known journalist mother’ and ‘artist profession’ – which made them receive regular invitations from ‘upper class people’. This highlights the complexity of social class belonging in migration context: it can either be coherent ‘here’ and ‘there’ thanks to the prestige of one’s profession, to one’s natal family and one’s social networks; but in other cases, there can be a large discrepancy between one’s social class belonging ‘here’ and ‘there’ due to one’s job and earnings. In the case of Melissa, this complexity created a room for her natal family to take an active part in her couple’s transnational social field. Likewise, the social class belonging of the natal families of other respondents influenced their transnational practices alimented by the gender norms in their country of origin.

Impact of binational unions

Binational union affects migrant women in many ways: gender oppression in the form of domestic violence, social class mobility, social insertion in the receiving countries and so on (Constable 2011; Scott and Cartledge 2009; Williams and Yu 2006). Among Filipino women in binational relations in France, their involvement in such a relationship generally brings more advantages than constrains.

When you stay in the Philippines, your neighbour will gossip about you. You cannot just go out anytime you want. You are not free when you are in the Philippines. I was freed when I came here. I felt free when I arrived here. I can do whatever I want. (Josefina, 32 years old)

Binational relationship that leads to migration provides an opportunity to get out of the social control that women like Josefina undergo in their country of origin. Although social control does exist among Filipinos in France through surveillance and gossiping (Fresnoza-Flot 2010), most migrant Filipinas in binational unions do not generally frequent their compatriots’ meeting sites such as the Filipino Catholic church in the 16th district of Paris. Among the 11 respondents, only 3 were immersed within the Filipino migrant population: one was already member of a religious group long before she met her partner, another one led an association helping Filipino migrants and the third one attended mass every Sunday as a means to find Filipino clients for her sideline massage activity. The other respondents constructed their own social networks outside of the Filipino population and mostly mingled with non-Filipinos. Their foreign partners or husbands integrated them in their respective social circles, which gave them opportunities...
to master the French language. This is why all the respondents (except one who had just arrived in France at the time of the interview) were fluent French speakers. Their mastery of the French language often caused curiosity and doubts among the Filipinos they met in public places. Rachel who worked as a nanny complained how Filipino migrant domestic workers reacted to her French fluency:

Those [Filipino women] I met in Palais Royal area were arrogant. [...] they asked me how I got here. They asked me, 'how come that you speak French like that? We are here for already nine years, why we are not yet good in French? [...] they do not like to believe that I am good in French only after studying it for three months.

These experiences prompted Rachel to develop a close friendship with another Filipino woman in binational relationship rather than with other women who were not in this situation. Her fluency in French made her feel comfortable to interact with her husband’s entourage and other French people. French linguistic competence allowed five respondents of privileged social class background to pursue their professional career, thereby reinforcing their social class belonging. Binational union also permitted another respondent from a well-off family in the Philippines to maintain her social class status through her marriage with a foreign partner of the same social class belonging. For five women interviewed who had a working social class background, entering a binational union facilitated their social class mobility. Rachel and Berta, for example, were able to migrate, find a job and financially support their natal families back home. Maria avoided deportation thanks to her binational marriage that regularised her migration status, whereas Darla and Grace accumulated socially valued assets such as house and land with the help of their partners.

Concerning gender experience at home, the women interviewed stressed the advantage of being in a binational union. They enjoyed some independence from their partners not only in terms of financial matters but also regarding their social and productive life. They went out with their friends and worked outside of their home. They also emphasised their husbands’ implication in reproductive work at home such as shopping, cooking and cleaning the house. This contrasts with the traditional gendered roles of husbands and wives in the Philippine context: the husband has the breadwinning role, whereas the wife accomplishes reproductive labour by doing household work and taking care of the children (Eviota 1992). In general, the husband gives his monthly salary to his wife who keeps the household purse and manages the family budget. This is the reason why most of the respondents were uncomfortable during the interview to reveal their separate purse arrangement with their foreign partner or in a few cases to say that their husband was the one budgeting for their household. Such situation changes through time, notably when the Filipino wife starts to work as the case of Melissa below.

At the beginning, it was my husband [doing the budget] because he was working at that time. But then, it was me. After a while, each did his own thing, we contribute. I pay for this bill. He pays for the other bill, like that.

The impact of gender equality-based arrangement on the women interviewed included learning ‘to be independent’, ‘to save money’, and to be organised as one woman said ‘time is important, that’s what I learned from him [her husband]’. Since their migration and binational union provided them with the opportunity to work, all the women
interviewed were planning big projects in the future such as starting a business and travelling for leisure purposes in other countries. As time passed by, their binational relationships and their residence in France made these women realised something about their country of origin.

I think we [Filipinos] really grew up very family-oriented. My husband’s family is not really close the way we are. So when I think about when I die, to be buried with these people that I barely know, for me it’s unnatural. I wanna be buried with my [natal] family. We have our family plot [in the Philippines]. (Thea, 37 years old)

Strong family bonds in the Philippines seem to be well valued, as the respondents often distinguished them from the ‘not-so-close’ family relations in France. Like other Filipinos in diaspora, these migrants used the family as an important ethnic identity marker differentiating ‘them’ (the Filipinos) from the ‘others’ (see Roces 2014).

In addition, binational unions, notably through marriage, provide the respondents access to the citizenship of their foreign partner or to a regular status in their receiving country, which gives them future possibilities. Maria planned to make all her children come to France through the family reunification programme, a plan that impeded her from divorcing her French husband despite the latter’s difficult behaviour and her absence of love toward him. Two women with children back home were also planning to reunite with them in France, as soon as they would have saved enough money and would have received French nationality. For others, having French nationality or residence permits made them decide to spend their retirement in both France and the Philippines, an imagined transnational life that will be contingent on their husbands’ decision and on their children’s chosen place of residence and work.

Furthermore, binational union and residence in a country far away from the Philippines affect the relationships of the women interviewed with their natal families. Respondents with modest social class background expressed how their cross-border marriage and migration to France reinforced their family relations. Their regular remittances provided a comfortable life to their natal families who felt lucky that their daughters got married with a foreigner. Nevertheless, their absence from home modified their relations with their children: ‘when I call, my son always says “later on [I will talk to you], I’m still playing”’ (Rachel, 29 years old). Concerning the respondents with well-off background, the impact of binational unions appears obvious in the reduced communications between them and their natal families. As Melissa remarked: ‘I used to write them 15-page letter every week yeah, and then when I met [my husband], [my letters became] very few.’ The absence of regular communication between well-off respondents and their natal families could not be automatically interpreted as the weakening of family ties. As explained above, they maintain ‘emotional flows’ and have symbolic gestures of caregiving conforming to the gender ideology in the Philippines, which allow them in some way to be ‘dutiful daughters’ like their counterparts with modest background.

Conclusion

The analysis of the transnational practices of migrant Filipinas in binational unions highlights the overlapping causes of their migration and binational relationships. It demonstrates how the relations between these women and their families in the country of
origin are influenced by gender norms and social class. These relations and the impact of these women’s past life shape their transnational activities between France and the Philippines.

Migrant Filipinas maintain ties with their country of origin to sustain their linkages there, notably with their natal families whose social class belonging determines the extent of their transnational practices. Because of the gendered expectations on mothers in the Philippine society, the pressure to send monetary, social and other material remittances back home appears high for women of modest social class background whose children from previous relationships were left under the care of their natal family. This pressure is also reinforced when the natal family finds itself in a difficult economic situation. The smooth engagement of migrant Filipinas in transnational activities to accomplish family obligations depends on their capacity to balance their ‘global householding’ (Douglass 2010). This appears to be influenced by the level to which they and their foreign partner understand the gender norms operating in the Philippines and in France. The case of these migrant women suggests that they (re)work through marriage and/or migration the ‘gendered geographies of power’ (Pessar and Mahler 2003) wherein gender and social class dynamically interact.

For the women interviewed who come from a privileged background, their social class belonging appears to mitigate the pressure emanating from the traditional gender ideology in their country of origin. Their economic resources ‘here’ (in the form of a job and of their partner’s financial assistance) and ‘there’ (in the form of the material and moral support of their natal families) both contribute to this process. This group of women are neither obliged nor asked by their families to send material remittances, in contrary to the other group. One may wonder what would happen if these women had children from previous relationships left in their country of origin: like the respondents of lower social class origin, would they then feel compelled to send remittances to their family? Probably not, as their socioeconomic capital would make it easy for them to make these children join them in Europe and live with them under one roof. In addition, the absence of pressure on women of privileged social class origin to conform to the gender ideology in the Philippines does not translate into a complete absence of transnational caregiving practices. Their ‘emotional flows’ (Takeda 2012), the way they conceal some of their feelings from their natal family to prevent them from worrying, their symbolic gestures of caring (such as paying regular visits back home) and their voluntary sending of material remittances attest that they too, like migrant women of modest social class background, strive to be ‘dutiful’ members of their natal family.

What is clear is that binational union has different significations for migrant women of different social class backgrounds. For those coming from well-off families, living with a foreign man means reaching their goal of building a family of their own and reinforcing their social class belonging. Those with a modest background appear to see their binational union as a way to fulfill family obligations and as a ladder to upward social class mobility since it facilitates their settlement in a developed country and their access to various forms of entitlements there. In short, their cross-border marriage allows them to become ‘First World wom[e]n’ (Ricordeau 2012). It remains to be discovered how the foreign partners of these women perceive their binational union and what (dis)advantages they gain from it. Likewise, the way the children of these binational unions grow up within a ‘mixed’
family and their transnational ties with their mothers’ country of origin represent an interesting analytical object for future studies.

**Notes**

1. To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, I modified two of the nationalities mentioned here.
2. A binational union is described as hypergamous if a woman is ‘marrying up into a higher socioeconomic group’ (Constable 2011, 10). The contrary to such relation is called hypogamy.
3. All the names of the respondents were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy.
4. This respondent went to Italy in 1970, at which time no visa was required for Filipinos to enter the country. In Italy, she applied for a student visa to England where she stayed during four years. From England, she went to France without a visa to study French and it was during this time that she met her Russian husband.
5. A box of various sizes that Filipino migrants use to send material gifts, personal things, home decorations, and other objects to their families and friends in the Philippines.

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