

International Conference on
Population and Development in Asia: Critical Issues for a Sustainable Future
20 – 22 March 2006, Phuket, Thailand

Abstract

Sustaining the Household in a Globalising World: Gendered Dynamics of Business Travel for Singapore Households

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Recent literature has given attention to the implications and impact of globalization and transnationalism at the scale of the 'family' or 'household', noting in particular that it is often at this scale that the strategic logics and emotional dynamics of transnational processes are worked through in an everyday sense. This has focused attention on what has been called 'transnational families' – where family members are distributed in two or more nation-states but continue to function as a collectivity in economic and emotional terms – as a strategic response to the rapidly changing social, economic and political conditions of a globalizing world. The split-household transnational family is, however, but one variant of social formations produced by the multiply inflected impact of globalization on families/households. We observe that in rapidly globalizing societies, household members have had to become more mobile in their everyday geographies, particularly in response to the demands of increasingly globalised workplaces and the need for transnational connectivities. As such, households have to adjust not only to long-term separation (as in the case of spatially dispersed transnational families) but also short-term disruptions to the household routine as a result of frequent travel on the part of one or more household members.

Singapore exemplifies a rapidly globalising city-state where the impact of globalization has penetrated deep into the family/household in a number of ways. For example, transnational domestic workers have been introduced on a large scale into the Singapore household to help Singapore women carry the domestic burden. At the same time, the state has also been proactive in encouraging Singaporeans to venture abroad and join the ranks of transnational business and professional elite from the developed world in engaging the greater Asian region and building the Singapore economy's "external wing". This has further introduced stresses and strains into the Singapore household as it becomes more common for household members (usually the

husband/father) to be absent from the day-to-day running of the household for business and work-related trips abroad.

In light of these larger trends, this paper draws upon a large-scale questionnaire survey as well as focus group discussions with Singapore women to examine how the Singapore household grapples with the demands of participating in globalised work through business travel. In focusing on the household, we highlight its value as site of analysis because it is here that individual household members engage with contemporary trends of globalization and social transformation that impinge upon their daily lives. More specifically, we examine the case of Singapore households where one or both spouses engage in business travel. In doing so, our paper (a) emphasises the need to look beyond long-term household restructuring under globalization to also focus on processes that bring about shorter-term transnational variations to a household's daily geographies and how household members negotiate these disruptions; and (b) demonstrates that the transnationalising household rests on taken-for-granted gender ideologies to reproduce and sustain it, whether it is through having women carry the reproductive burden while their spouses travel, or through the role that female transnational domestic workers play in liberating their Singapore women employers to travel. As such, our paper validates other work that contends that globalization has done little to destabilize patriarchal gender norms in society.