



# Maids for Madams: Toward a Theology of Global Neighbors

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**B**ecause of the globalized economy, we find strangers and aliens in our communal backyards. This requires us to raise critical questions about labor trade and to propose a theological platform for resolutions. Knowing God or seeking to know God, we must rethink 1 John 4:7–21 in the light of our new immigrant neighbors.

As it pertains to women, the discourse of globalization is heavily punctuated by issues of hierarchy, inequalities of power and wealth, and gender policies that are elitist and intended to benefit middle-class and professional women, while neglecting the rights of migrant ethnic minority women.<sup>1</sup> The absence in mainstream debates of the effect of globalization on marginalized ethnic migrant minority women is because “the global market place is male and white.”<sup>2</sup> The beneficiaries who are most enthusiastic about the new global order are “almost exclusively male elite who head the transnational companies and the national and international

<sup>1</sup>Marjory Lister and Maurizio Carbone, *New Pathways in International Development: Gender and Civil Society in EU Policy* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006) 18.

<sup>2</sup>Christa Wichterich, *The Globalized Woman: Reports from a Future of Inequality* (New York: Zed Books, 2000) viii.

*For all its touted economic efficiencies, globalization does not come without great human costs. This unstoppable movement calls the church to consider anew its role and its voice in support of the new migrants.*

bureaucrats who facilitate the process.”<sup>3</sup> Although journalist Christa Wichterich argues that, due to globalization, women’s lives have become more similar—or globalized—as they increasingly enter low-paid employment, with concomitant competition, insecurity, exposure to sexist violence, and growing consumerism,<sup>4</sup> I argue here that globalization has created maids for madams, a process accurately identified by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild as “the female underside of globalization.”<sup>5</sup>

## THEOLOGY OF GLOBAL NEIGHBORS

What creates passion and compassion for the victims of globalization I identify in this essay is the love of neighbor clearly articulated by Jesus Christ (1 John 4:7–21). This is not just a curiosity-driven association with the “other” to satiate the inquisitive, searching beast in us. It is an ongoing inquiry into what it takes to be guided by the word of God, to know love and to know God, who is love. It is about our great call to love our neighbors as Christ would have loved them.

In order to follow this call, we must first know and understand these neighbors. We are not now called to an impersonal love for all those suffering in faraway places, but to a deep involvement in the needs, quests, fears, dreams, and formidable challenges of those we struggle to consider as neighbors, the new immigrants in our communities and parishes. They now literally live next door to us, constantly filling the air we share with strange fish and curry smells or speaking incomprehensible languages to our children in the common patio. The call for passion and compassion extends to those sharing our dormitories and washing their laundry in a sink for months or years before they have the opportunity to use a washing machine on the same floor where they live. It draws on empathy with those who decide to sit quietly in our schools, not voicing their true thoughts and experiences, because the survival of entire families loosely hangs on the thin thread of their good grades. They kill time in libraries and parks, and they pace on busy street corners, joining the race for the leftover yoghurt in the fast-filling trash cans. The picture has become uglier as new immigrants pour in from the “Two-thirds World.” On Sunday, they get to church earlier than everybody else to say their prayers before the grand ceremonies begin, calling upon the God of love and mercy to do things beyond even our wildest imagination. Dictated by their marginal social, economic, and political positions, they faithfully sit in the back corners of our churches and cathedrals, gravitating towards the margins of these holy spaces to speak to God about their loved ones in faraway places, separated from them by an endless eternity. Scarcely audible murmurs escape their lips as they kneel in shad-

<sup>3</sup>Haleh Afshar and Stephanie Barrientos, eds., *Women, Globalization and Fragmentation in the Developing World*, Women’s Studies at York (London: Macmillan, 1999) 3.

<sup>4</sup>Wichterich, *The Globalized Woman*, ix.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, eds., *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002) 3.

owy locations furthest from the altar, communing with the omnipresent and omnipotent God of love. They have faith in God to show love, mercy, protection, and providence, and to provide a place where they can belong and feel at home, demonstrating a spirituality that contains their hope for a better day.

The church needs now to consider exercising an urgent prophetic role in a world confronted by the unstoppable force of globalization. We are challenged to revisit what it means to be the church in a broken world and how to maintain the church's relevance in a changing world. Globalization raises not only political and economic questions, but serious theological questions, too. This essay aims at creating an awareness of the human face of globalization, thus drawing our attention to the women and children living and working in our communities as cleaners, maids, and sex slaves—sometimes living as undocumented neighbors on the streets and regulars at the soup kitchens we graciously serve.

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Are these not the kind of neighbors whom Jesus called us to love, lest we risk being branded liars? John is right: we cannot love God whom we have not seen if we do not love a brother or sister whom we have seen (1 John 4:20). This question (“Are these not our neighbors?”) is addressed to every Christian leader and to all the people they are called to teach and to whom they preach. Other pragmatic questions in the theological process of seeking understanding from a faith perspective would be: What does it mean for Christians to “love” these neighbors? Is it possible to love the one you do not know?

This essay attempts, first, in a limited way, to help in that process of knowing our neighbor. Second, it clarifies what it takes to love that neighbor beyond personal or individual responses by emphasizing the significance of a systemic response. Finally, this essay proposes theological praxis to the church, asking the prophetic question, “What ought we do about our global neighbors?”

#### THE UNDERSIDE OF GLOBALIZATION

Neither migration nor globalization is an entirely new phenomenon. People have always left their homes in search of better economic opportunities, both within and outside of their own homelands, a process that was only intensified in the colonial period.<sup>6</sup> Economic globalization has put a new spin on global migration, causing global uprootedness and displacement of women on an unprecedented scale. As disparities between the North and the South are fueled by the

<sup>6</sup>Martin Khor, *Globalization and the South: Some Critical Issues* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, 2001) 1.

introduction of market economies and the Economic Structural Adjustment Programs, dictated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, women in the South are affected most.<sup>7</sup> While policies are debated at the top, while political reforms dictated by the North are tried out and fiercely resisted by most African governments (on the basis that they infringe on their national sovereignty), starving women and children plagued with poverty and disease cross multiple borders in desperation, creating a global scandal.

Globalization, defined in economic terms, encourages free-trade agreements among countries and multinational corporations and encourages the free flow of goods across the world; yet, at the same time, a growing global fear of the migrant makes migration risky as tighter anti-immigration laws are effected and borders are viciously patrolled to keep the unwanted “others” outside.<sup>8</sup> As inequalities increase between rich and poor countries, borders become more and more closed to people. Unfortunately, these restrictions run counter to the demands for greater human mobility that come with increased “globalization.” The economic impact of this demographic phenomenon to receiving countries is not always considered. Stephen Castles argues that migration is a social process that could develop its own dynamics, which might confound the expectations of even the most efficient states.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when escapees from torture, hunger, and HIV/AIDS in the South bring new social and public health challenges in the North, migration produces a globalization scandal.

While work visas for the skilled immigrants whose expertise is sought after by the developed countries are expedited, the unskilled majorities are treated suspiciously and often migrate without proper legal documents. Immigrant ethnic women, therefore, do not constitute an homogenous group of “maids” who experience equal forms of alienation, but are stratified in competitive patterns determined by their legal status as either maids or madams. Under globalization, those who were African queens and madams become immigrant maids, servants, and prostitutes in the North, primarily due to their illegal status. Through systematized exclusion, the immigrants become minorities without rights and are often exposed to discrimination. When millions work in countries where they cannot be citizens, there is global chaos and disorder.<sup>10</sup> The dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, or divide and rule, alienates the immigrants from each other and from the receiving communities, making it difficult for migrants to find a voice and effect change. The systematic creation of global ethnic minority groups and their exploitation and increased vulnerability further define the globalization scandal of migration.

<sup>7</sup>In this article, I speak primarily from my own African perspective, but similar conditions pertain in other sectors of the global South.

<sup>8</sup>This section offers some key issues surrounding border control discussed in the *New Internationalist*, October 2002, “The Case for Open Borders.”

<sup>9</sup>Stephen Castles, *Ethnicity and Globalization: From Migrant Worker to Transnational Citizen* (London: SAGE, 2000) 2.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

## DISTORTED IMAGES OF THE IMMIGRANT

Perceived purely in economic terms, the immigrant is a mysterious other, often excluded from meaningful social participation for a variety of reasons, which might include:

- resentment of impoverished “others” encroaching on the private spaces of the receiving communities
- the fear that migrants bring communicable diseases (TB, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and so on)
- the perception that migrants are job snatchers
- the view of the others as “aliens,” with different cultures, languages, and religions
- the assumption that migrants are fugitives.

Emigrants from Africa are predominantly “fugitives from injustice.”<sup>11</sup> But injustice continues to plague them far beyond their borders.

## GENDERED MIGRATION

When inequalities between countries become greater, the desire of citizens of poor nations to leave their own countries also increases. Migration becomes an economic must, and women constitute the overwhelming majority of such migrants. Development draws the less developed countries into the world economic arena and draws women out of their villages, rice and corn fields, and their empty kitchens. This internal disorder, according to Castles, “leads to such severe disruption of existing societal structures that previous ways of living become unviable, and migration appears as the only solution.”<sup>12</sup> Millions of people worldwide, many of them women, leave their homes in search of work in other countries. As Wichterich comments, “So long as women earn more from housecleaning and child-minding overseas than from teaching in their homeland, they will tend to set off and leave their own country and children behind.”<sup>13</sup>

Research into the socioeconomic position of the migrant worker within contemporary societies has led Castles to the rational conclusion that immigration has structural causes inherent in the political economy of capitalism and is likely to have effects that transcend national differences.<sup>14</sup> He argues that the one hundred million people living outside their countries of birth and the rapid growth in international migration are a result of global change and an influential factor in contemporary social transformations.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Paul Tabori, *The Anatomy of Exile: A Semantic and Historical Study* (London: Harrap, 1972) 24.

<sup>12</sup>Castles, *Ethnicity and Globalization*, 83.

<sup>13</sup>Wichterich, *The Globalized Woman*, ix.

<sup>14</sup>Castles, *Ethnicity and Globalization*, 2.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 125.

## GLOBAL MAIDS FOR MADAMS

The horror stories have become all too familiar: grandmothers who snatch away babies from their suckling mothers; grandfathers who walk the toddlers around while tearful mothers vanish into the airport departure lounge with fake documents in hand; women who sneak into the night to brave the harsh deserts or huddle with cargo in ferries from Africa, Latin America, and Asia; children raped and infected with HIV/AIDS left in the care of siblings. Globalization creates pull and push factors that generate the flow of women and girls from their homes in the unstable South to become maids, nannies, and caregivers—“black nightingales”—in the North.<sup>16</sup>

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Gender patterns that emerge from the push factors are often neglected. There is an apparent conspiracy against the woman who challenges the cultural male privileges to explore the world beyond. The woman who dares cross the rivers that divide economies is less respected in both the sending and receiving communities for venturing into the “male” domain, and is often made invisible and silenced.

While female laborers ease the care deficit in rich countries, their absence, especially in the glare of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, creates horrendous care deficits at home:

In the absence of help from male partners, many women have succeeded in tough “male world” careers only by turning over the care of their children, elderly parents, and homes to women from the Third World. This is the female underside of globalization, whereby millions of “Josephines” from poor countries in the south migrate to do the “women’s work” of the north—work that affluent women are no longer able or willing to do. These migrant workers often leave their own children in the care of grandmothers, sisters, and sisters-in-law. Sometimes a young daughter is drawn out of school to care for her younger sibling.<sup>17</sup>

In the North, these migrant women join the invisible pool of the silenced. The absence of serious documentation on the migration of women from the Third World to do “women’s work” in the North is because they are often hidden away in private homes as maids or sex workers. These new female migrant workers, generally women of color, are often subjected to racial “discounting.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the nameless immigrant tea girl working in an elite English nursing home, who was once a

<sup>16</sup>Dalva K. Stasiulis, and Abigail Bakan, *Negotiating Citizenship: Migrant Women in Canada and the Global System* (New York: Macmillan, 2003) 109.

<sup>17</sup>Ehrenreich and Hochschild, *Global Woman*, 3.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 3–4.

graduate teacher at an African University in Zimbabwe, hears, “Darling, it’s the tea girl; she is here, wake up.” The woman from Zimbabwe becomes a generic “Mary,” a discounted cliché who glides with a tea trolley from room to room. Sometimes, in thoughtless reflex, words in her native language slip through her tight lips, “I am not a tea girl, Mrs. Smith. I am a seasoned, certified graduate teacher.”

Thus, women from the South form the cheapest pool of labor in the North. They take up jobs that neither their brothers from the South nor sisters in the North would consider, jobs that keep them invisible, voiceless, and vulnerable. This calls for a theological reflection on globalization within a feminist and/or womanist framework that critiques the hegemonic structures of alienation and exploitation.

### CHURCH WITHOUT BORDERS

Relevant theology asks the questions that people ask in particular contexts. Immigration theology, therefore, derives from immigrant experiences and stories. It draws from the wilderness journeys, from the great search for the promised land, from the impending dangers and uncertainties of exile, and from the hope generated by the insight that God has a preferential option for the weak. In every time and culture, Christians are faced with how to make the message of the gospel relevant. When a people migrate, this becomes an even more pressing task for the church, and that work becomes part of how people begin to form a worldview in their new environment.<sup>19</sup>

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The borderless church has a mandate to protect and care for the fugitives in our backyards and to sing the song of exile until its echoes sharpen sensibilities.<sup>20</sup> These fugitives challenge all those attuned to social justice to reflect on what it means to be human. “Being is relation” sums up the African definition of *ubuntu* (being human). As Christians we are beings in relation to God and to our fellow humans. Part of being human, therefore, involves caring for displaced strangers, affirming their full humanity as images of God (Gen 1:26–27), and entering into dialogue and engagement to help dismantle the ominous myths that surround the ethnic other. Clements Sedmark is convinced that theology is an expression of the hope that a few people can make a difference.<sup>21</sup> This hope stems from a church that

<sup>19</sup>Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Hispanic Bible Institutes: A Community of Theological Construction* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2005) 192.

<sup>20</sup>Tabori, *The Anatomy of Exile*, 11.

<sup>21</sup>Clements Sedmark, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005) 50.

adopts a culture of dialogue with the other in order to build bridges among the people of God. Without dialogue, communities remain worlds apart, and the very mission of the church is undermined.

Scholars have unpacked the exilic stories of Moses, the stories of Daniel, Nehemiah, Esther, and Job to show alienation and hope, disconnections and connections, otherness and engagement in the immigrant journeys of suffering. Diaspora theology is, therefore, a theology of comfort and hope.<sup>22</sup>

The hermeneutic of otherness offers a critical starting point for theology of the diaspora. The task of that theology will be to promote and support a sense of positive otherness, to encourage engagement with the invisible immigrant other. Fernando Segovia contends that such otherness embraces biculturalism as its very home, voice, and face.<sup>23</sup> It allows “Josephine” to come out and be the teacher, the lawyer, the accountant, and the person that she really is. It unmask the maid and discovers the madam. It restores human dignity and creates more positive metaphors of globalization. It creates positive relations in a globally diverse world whose subtle beauty unfolds like the coat of many colors that Jacob made for his beloved son Joseph after he had settled in Canaan, where his own father had been a stranger. Joseph survives exile and emerges stronger among strangers. Joseph’s story celebrates diversity and unmask the dark possibility of migrant slavery. Joseph’s story can also be linked to the contemporary American political reality of Barack Obama’s presidency, which was made possible by an African immigrant from the Luo tribe of Kenya who journeyed to these shores and lived as a stranger in a foreign land. The challenge weighs heavily on the borderless church to awake, arise, and shine. ☩

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Fernando Segovia, “Toward Intercultural Criticism: A Reading Strategy from the Diaspora,” in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, vol. 2, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Talbot (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 322.