Temporary Labour Migration in Asia: the Precarity-Transnationality Nexus

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• **migrant precarity** constitutes an important element of migrant transnationality
• combined with **temporality**, migrant precarity renders agentic transnationalism “thin”
• ”thick” agentic transnationalism is to be found elsewhere.

**Context:**

• applied to key migration corridors in Asia (“South South migration”)

• labour migration in Asia mostly involves low-wage work classified as low-/unskilled

• formal regulatory frameworks of international labour migration in Asia on the basis of bilateral agreements (MoUs, BLAs),
  • in the form of strictly temporary employer-tied contract migration
  • facilitated by migration industry, contested by rising migrant rights activism
  • highly gendered (size of care & domestic work)
Transnationalism ✓

• transnationalism literature’s important contributions by shifting empirical attention beyond national boundaries
• ‘First Wave’ TN emerged as optimistic rejection of state power and assimilationist policies
Transnationalism

- It overstates migrant agency…..
  - Emphasis on migrant transnationalism, individual and diasporic agency
  - Repeat migration seen as agentic
    - *but*: More diverse experiences, such as highly rigid temporary labour migration schemes well established in Asia

- ....while downplaying the relevance of state power
  - "Whoever claimed that the state is ‘retreating’ has obviously never studied migration policy" (Menz 2011:257)
• Temporary-Permanent Divide
  – this divide today most evident axis through which rights and opportunities are differentiated
  – pathways to permanency are narrowing
  – resurgence of TLM schemes

governing logic of temporality justified by linking it to development
Migration-Development Nexus

• Proponents of positive link between migration and development:
  • TL migrants depicted as “agents “of (their own) development
  • emphasis on empowering effects
  • agenda by global policymaking institutions and processes cementing narratives of migrant agency as integral to transnationalism
Consequences for Study of TN

- web of restrictions to rights and conditions of migrants
- temporality intertwined with structural vulnerabilities
  - = migrant transnationalism not (always) an alternative strategy to assimilation
  - = instead, a signifier of absence of choice
- overlapping forms of discrimination amplify disempowering effects of temporality
  - = multiple forms of precarity
Precarity

• Migrant precarity under TLM schemes in Asia extends beyond the world of work
  • costs of migration, transnationally split families ("left behind", displaced care)

• Restrictive migration governance frameworks sustained by an array of institutions that facilitate the labour supply process
  • hence, migration governance inseparable from economic governance
    » steady supply of ’cheap, docile, disposable labour’
Temporality-Precarity Nexus

• TLM as an extreme form of labour market segmentation
• explored/analysed in this paper via
  – (1) migrant ambitions and
  – (2) institutional networks of two types:
    – Deepening
    – Countering, resisting
Migrant Ambitions

• Earning a wage is key for most migrants
• Access to wage earning opportunities and retaining those for as long as possible
• This necessitates a state of “permanent temporariness”
  • scope of migrant ambition reduced
  • as a result, cross-border activities collapse into a “thin” transnationalism
  • location of a “thicker” transnational activity: among institutional actors......
Transnational institutions

• Thicker transnational activity by:
  – 1. *reinforcing* institutional actors
  – 2. *contesting* institutional actors

– 1) “migration systems” (Goss/Lindquist), “migration intermediaries” (Xiang/Lindquist)
  • meso level capacity and dynamism
  • networked recruitment agents, brokers, middlemen
– 2) political networks, tn advocacy networks
Reinforcing Institutions

- Bilateral intergovernmental mechanisms (BLA, MoUs) provide formal framework that institutional actors operate within
  - key aspect of “managed migration” policies that promote TLM
    - accord. to research: implementation failure, no rights base, gender-insensitive/non-responsive
  - “buyer’s market” characterised by lopsided bargaining power
  - lower rungs of international supply, labour and care chains located in countries with weak institutions and large, unprotected workforce
Contesting Institutions

• Efforts to organise marginal workers from the ‘bottom up’ via new methods of labour activism

• Expressions of political agency via transnational advocacy networks in attempt to address structural constraints, lack of individual capacity and institutional failure
Contesting Institutions

• Significant role of grassroots organisations (in light of limited space for and capacity of unions)
  – political empowerment through self-organising
• Asian leadership in regional networking with global reach
• message from these networks: TLM is a livelihood strategy in which choice and agency are often absent starting from pre-departure, through foreign employment to return (“protracted precarity”)
• yet, absence of sustained or frequent militancy or radicalism (Briones 2009)
Conclusion

• Asia’s major sub-regional migration corridors an empirical context in which virtues of migrant agency are less readily extolled

• Yet, this “thin” agentic transnationalism supplemented by “thick” institutional, collective transnationalism

• **Policy message:**
  – greater focus on ‘decent work’ rather than ‘regular’ migration
    • fair wages and working conditions; gender responsiveness
    • greater freedom of mobility to be supplemented by freedom of association