

## **Raising citizens in ‘mixed’ family setting: mothering techniques of Filipino and Thai migrants in Belgium**

### **Introduction**

Binational marriages, which lead to the formation of ‘mixed families’ composed of individuals of ‘different nationalities and/or ethnicities’ (de Hart, van Rossum, and Sportel 2013, 995), are increasingly subjected to state restrictions in different countries. ‘Doing family’ has therefore become a public domain that states regulate and control (Strasser et al. 2009). This state governmentality engenders a ‘self-positioning’ process characterized by ‘a set of practices, actions and meanings’ (Anthias 2001, 634) during which migrants may adopt certain approaches to family and parenting.

To illuminate this self-positioning of migrants, the present article examines the mothering techniques of Filipino and Thai migrant women in mixed family setting in Belgium and the factors influencing these techniques. Drawing from Foucault’s ‘techniques of the self’ (1979) employed by individuals to transform themselves and to cope with state governmentality, mothering techniques refer here to the decisions, actions and ways of being that mothers consciously enact in response to state policies ‘here’ and/ or ‘there’, and to secure the mother-child bond in space and time. These techniques go beyond the direct care provision for children and the fulfilment of household instrumental tasks to encompass decisions about and attitudes vis-à-vis national belonging and social incorporation. They are usually adopted in reaction to an imagined future that may threaten the well-being of family members or may perturb affective relations. In this case, they reflect the subjectivity and social positioning of migrant women within different power hierarchies shaped by factors such as gender, class and ethnicity. These women are active social actors in the constant definition of citizenship and belonging. As Erel emphasizes, migrant women’s ‘mothering does not simply constitute a reproduction of ethnic groups, but challenges the boundaries of ethnic and national groups and their constitution as bases for citizenly belonging and rights-claiming’ (2011, 697). Building on this, I argue here that to understand migrants’ mothering and its nuances, we need to go beyond its visible interpersonal aspects, thereby grasping what citizenship means for minority groups such as migrant women.

Since the life trajectories and experiences of women who migrate span at least two countries, a transnational perspective appears heuristic to explore their mothering techniques. Such a perspective looks not only at the actual social relations of migrants with their country

of origin, but also considers those relations that exist only in their mind and imagination. I therefore pay attention to what Ghosh and Wang call ‘transnational consciousness’, which is ‘composed of an abstract awareness of one’s self, diaspora and multiple belonging’ (2003, 278). This consciousness feeds from migrants’ ‘pre-migration social identities’, their ‘value systems and “moralities”’, their ‘psyche of departure’, their ‘material circumstances’, their ‘social connections’ with their receiving society, and their ‘perceptions and expectations of the host and the home societies about’ them (279). To this we can add migrants’ awareness of the place they occupy in the power hierarchies within their ‘transnational social spaces’ (Faist 2004), as well as their knowledge and interpretation of the state policies ‘here’ and ‘there’. Considering the transnational social and policy consciousness of migrant women and its influence on their mothering techniques can unveil how mothering is contingent on different ties within family circles, how it is embedded in complex power relations and how it is connected to the notion of citizenship.

This study focuses on Filipino and Thai women because they occupy an important place in the global marriage migration phenomenon (Angeles and Sunanta 2007) and their motherhood in mixed family settings has rarely been studied thus far. Filipino women usually migrate to Europe as workers before meeting their husbands, whereas Thai women generally come as marriage migrants. This difference is linked to the specificities of the international migration from the Philippines and from Thailand. Unlike the Philippines where labour migration has been institutionalised and organised since 1974, Thailand only made explicit its labour export policy in its Fifth National Economic Plan in the early 1980s. The feminisation of migration also started in the Philippines in the 1980s, whereas in Thailand this occurred in the late 1990s (Kang 2012). In both countries, marriage migration started in the 1970s with the development of tourism and of modern means of communication and transportation (Angeles and Sunanta 2007). In Belgium, Filipinos and Thais stand out among migrants by being mostly women: in 2011, there were 3.2 times more Filipino women than Filipino men and 4.2 times more Thai women than Thai men in Belgium (DEMO and CKR 2013). These migrants reside mostly in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of the country) and in Brussels. Filipino migrants concentrate in the domestic work sector, notably in the capital (Pauwels 2015). Thais also find jobs in this sector, but many work in the restaurant and retail industries and a few others in massage parlours.

In the next sections, I review the literature on migrant mothering and describe my methodology and sample. I then explain the mothering techniques of Filipino and Thai respondents: obtaining Belgian nationality to facilitate their mixed and transnational family

lives, prioritizing a single nationality (Belgian) for their children rather than trying to obtain for them dual nationality, and staying at home (in the case of migrant Filipinas) or working (in the case of Thai mothers). I conclude with a discussion of migrant women's self-positioning within their transnational social spaces and with a reflection on the notion of citizenship.

### **Migrant women, mothering and citizenship**

Since the 1980s, women's migrations have aroused scholarly interest in gender relations and power dynamics within the family. One of the most investigated themes is their mothering, specifically the way they satisfy their reproductive and caring role towards their families, as can be observed in labour and family-related migrations. The literature on 'mixed families' has also explored the way migrants accomplish their reproductive role as mothers. Such scholarly preoccupation brings interesting insights concerning the links between motherhood and citizenship.

In the labour migration phenomenon, the mothering issue has garnered social attention as greater numbers of women leave their children in their countries of origin to work abroad. Early scholarship on this subject has examined the various transnational mothering practices of these women. For example, Tungohan observed a 'transnational hyper-maternalism' among migrant Filipinas in Canada who constantly survey and 'contact their children' using communication technologies (2013, 47). Migrant women's access to citizenship rights in the receiving country often shapes their transnational mothering: irregular migration status makes return visits particularly difficult (Fresnoza-Flot 2009), and even a regular legal status does not always permit family reunion (Pratt 2012). A dismal picture of family separation can be gleaned from many of the early works on migrant women's mothering, which is partly influenced by the 'global care chains' perspective (Hochschild 2000) that 'naturalizes the link between the emotions of love and care and the biological mother' (Brown 2016, 216). Recently, scholars have started to accentuate the reciprocal and multidirectional nature of care within transnational families (Baldassar and Merla 2015; Francisco 2015), which de-essentialises absentee motherhood. Concerning family reunification, some studies have demonstrated how migrant women (notably irregular ones) struggle to reunite with their children and resort to unofficial channels of family reunification (Bonizzoni 2012; Fresnoza-Flot 2017). Their struggle mostly continues during family reunion due to parent-child emotional gap (Fresnoza-Flot 2015), but reconciliation takes place as children come to understand their mothers' situation (De Leon 2009). Sending back children (notably when

they display behaviours considered ‘problematic’) to have them socialized in the values of the country of origin represents another frequent child-raising strategy (Bledsoe and Sow 2011) among migrant parents including mothers. In her study of migrant workers who became pregnant in Hong Kong, however, Constable (2014) found that these women employ ‘legal tactics’ to stay with their children in their receiving state and ensure their well-being. All these studies reveal that mothers who experience labour migration are able to reconfigure their mothering strategies to be ‘good mothers’ according to the gender ideologies and state policies in their countries of origin.

On the contrary, women in binational marriages are expected to be ‘good wives’ and ‘good mothers’ based on the gender norms and the state’s expectations in the receiving countries. Since women in general are socially viewed as ‘bearers of the collective’ (Yuval-Davis 1997), migrant women appear to be more subjected than their male counterparts to the gendered expectations of the state. For example, Filipino wives in Korea and in Japan attend classes directed to marriage migrant women (Kim 2008; Lieba 2009), during which they are supposed ‘to internalize the traditional ideology’ of ‘motherhoods’ of their receiving society (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau 2017, 8). In Taiwan, foreign wives have limited access to social and cultural rights, and become ‘Taiwanized’ through confinement in the family domain (Wang and Bélanger 2008). Migrant women enjoy herein ‘marital citizenship’ (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau 2017), which makes their access to rights and entitlements contingent on their marriage with the insider citizens. In Europe, where state control over binational marriages has increased in recent years, marriage migrants are ‘obliged to conform to the definitions of what a “good” family’ is in their receiving country and expected to become integrated by mastering its language and knowing its culture (Strasser et al. 2009). Despite the state’s interference, many women in mixed families find ways to raise their children according to their ideals of motherhood. Their mothering practices result from their constant negotiations with their partners and with the larger family circles (Singla 2015). This echoes what Choo calls ‘migrant citizenship’, which is not only ‘determined by legal status and political categories’ but also ‘shaped by interactive processes’ (2016, 7). Migrant women are subject to the critical eyes of their receiving state but often find avenues to express their agency within the family sphere. As Barn and Harman remark, ‘although gender roles have changed considerably in western countries, much of the day-to-day parenting work continues to be done by women’ (2013, 1268).

In other migration streams, women also actively design the future of their children. For example, Korean mothers of ‘parachute children’ (i.e. children who migrate abroad to study)

either visit their offspring regularly in their receiving country or rely on domestic workers or relatives there to look after them (Orellana et al. 2001). The role of migrant and/or mobile mothers in the cultural capital acquisition of their offspring can also be observed in the case of European migrants. In her study in London, Erel (2012) observes that women from other European countries are ‘cultural currency speculators’, converting their transnational cultural resources into strong ‘educational credentials’ for their children and choosing for that a country where these credentials can yield the ‘highest returns’. These women take into account the situation in their countries of origin and of migration when choosing the best educational strategy for their children.

In summary, the mothering practices of migrant women result from the intersecting gendered expectations ‘here’ and/or ‘there’ as well as from the relational dynamics within their family circles, which makes them care providers and receivers at the same time. Based on this observation, we can hypothesize that migrant women’s awareness of the socio-legal specificities ‘here’ and ‘there’ is a powerful force shaping their mothering techniques and attitudes towards their receiving country. Although most of the studies mentioned above focused on the obvious interpersonal aspects of mothering, the maternal dimension of migrant women’s decisions and actions over issues related to citizenship and national belonging remains largely overlooked, which the present article addresses via a comparative case study of migrant women in international marriage. This analytical choice is due to the complication(s) of citizenship allocation to these women’s children, who ‘may have an ambiguous status in the public sphere’ ‘if citizenship’ in their country of residence ‘has a strong ethnic definition’ (Turner 2008, 45). In addition, studies on migrant motherhood mostly focus on one particular group of women and rarely adopt a comparative approach. By departing from this tendency, the present article uncovers the diversity and subtleties of migrant women’s mothering, notably its connection to the notion of citizenship.

### **Methodology and sample**

This article originates from a project on children of Filipino-Belgian and Thai-Belgian families in Belgium aimed at analysing the dynamics of childhood and the process of intergenerational transmission within those families. For this purpose, I interviewed 52 young people, 33 migrant mothers and 21 Belgian fathers. In this paper, I mainly draw from my interviews with mothers (16 migrant Filipinas and 17 Thais) to highlight their perspectives and agency. I also use a few data from my interviews with Belgian fathers to illuminate marital power relations. Due to space limitations, most of my data from interviews with

Belgian fathers and migrant women's children will be analysed in a separate paper. However, excluding their perspectives from the present article may overlook the fact that motherhood is relational and that care is multi-faceted.

To access the target group, I used a snowball approach and carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the French, Dutch and German-speaking regions of Belgium from 2012 to 2014. This ethnographic approach was mainly based on semi-structured interviews, (non-) participant observations, informal conversations, and documentary analyses. To analyse my empirical data, I adopted interpretivist methodology (notably constructivism and phenomenology) to comprehend the way individuals make sense of their situation and how their life world is connected to that of others and to larger structuring factors around them.

During my fieldwork, my 'insider status' as a Southeast Asian mother of ethnically mixed children facilitated my interviews. Study respondents shared with me their pleasant and unpleasant experiences of migration, marriage and ensuing 'mixed family' lives. However, before each interview, I also explained to them my research and interest in finding out their role in the process of intergenerational transmission within their family. As a result, I was simultaneously an 'insider' and an 'outsider' to them, and the distance introduced by my identity as a researcher interviewing them probably also influenced their self-presentation in subtle ways. In fact, my 'researcher' identity made some of them initially hesitant to talk about their family lives. It is by emphasising my identity as a migrant 'mother' that the respondents started to entrust me with their personal stories. To protect the privacy of the women interviewed, I have modified here their names and other identifiable information.

Most of my Thai and Filipino respondents were in their forties and fifties, respectively. They had resided in Belgium for an average of 19.7 years and most had two children that were on average 17 years old. Most respondents (14 Filipinos and 10 Thais) had tertiary-level education. Many migrant Filipinas interviewed met their husbands in Belgium, whereas most Thai respondents met theirs in Thailand. Filipino respondents generally had the same tertiary education level as their Belgian husbands, but most Thai respondents had lower educational levels than their partners.

### **Becoming Belgian: towards a mobile family life and a stable motherhood**

Marriage with a Belgian entitles one to acquire Belgian nationality. Aware of the disadvantage of their nationality from the Global South and of being a foreigner in Belgium, most Filipino and Thai respondents chose to acquire Belgian nationality to facilitate their family life and motherhood.

Nin cohabited with her Belgian partner for almost six years before getting married. This happened when her partner invited her to visit him in Belgium with a tourist visa. Nin did not have any plan to marry or stay in Belgium at that time. However, when her visa was about to expire, her partner impeded her to go: ‘he kept me, and applied for a visa for me. I told him “I’m not here for getting married”, (but) then this one (her daughter) came. I had to marry (him)’. Nin also applied for Belgian nationality, and when I met her she possessed both Thai and Belgian nationalities.

Nin’s pregnancy changed her plans to return to Thailand and to stay in a live-in relationship without marriage. Like her, the motherhood of 20 other women among the 33 respondents was behind their decision to acquire Belgian nationality: twelve acquired it two to three years after giving birth to a child, five obtained it the year they got pregnant or delivered their child, and four (Thais) applied for it to facilitate the immigration of their Thai children of previous relationship. Among the remaining 12 mothers, three acquired Belgian nationality automatically upon getting married, three acquired it before getting pregnant, one obtained it nine years after childbirth, and the last five had not acquired it yet but hoped to get it.

Becoming Belgian meant gaining access to mobility. It simplified the respondents’ family travels, which generally took place during the Belgian summer vacations. It also prevented them from being separated from their family because of failing to get a visa to enter a country that their family wanted to visit. For instance, Linda explained what pushed her to apply for Belgian nationality: ‘I decided [it] for the travel, for the facility of travelling. When your nationality is Filipino, there are so many hassles, but when your nationality is European, it is easy to cross countries’. Like the Filipino women interviewed, Thai respondents were aware that their Thai passport would not allow them to visit many countries without visa, unlike a Belgian passport. In fact, a Belgian passport can be used to enter 174 countries without visa, which ranks Belgium as the country with the fourth ‘best passport’ in the world<sup>1</sup>. The respondents’ consciousness of the unprivileged place of their respective societies of origin within the global power hierarchy among countries was a strong driving force for them to acquire Belgian nationality. This impetus intersected with their desire to expose their children to different socio-cultural contexts. For example, Lisa emphasized the importance of travelling with their daughter: ‘we [she and her husband] brought her because we wanted her to be with us. That's it. And of course we also knew as travel reporters that travel is one of the best schools’.

Acquiring Belgian nationality also allowed some women to be ‘good’ mothers to their children from previous relationships, who were initially left in their countries of origin. This could be particularly observed in the Thai case: four of the six women with children ‘left-behind’ reunited later on with their offspring in Belgium. This opened not only educational and professional possibilities to their children, but offered them access to Belgian nationality. Ruang entered Belgium through her mother, who had acquired Belgian nationality by marriage and later on sponsored her. Eight years after her arrival, she became Belgian too: ‘I got it directly from her. Yes, I got [it] from my mom, because my [Belgian] stepfather had married her and they changed the nationality of my mom’. Among the Filipino respondents, only Anita had a child from a previous relationship in the Philippines. Having a renewable residence permit and not being fluent yet in French, she relied on the help of her Belgian husband who adopted her daughter and made her come to Belgium. To avoid being separated from her child in the future, Anita expressed her intention to acquire Belgian nationality as soon as she would meet the requirement of five-year uninterrupted residence in the country.

One respondent emphasized the importance of obtaining Belgian nationality for ‘finding work’ in Belgium. Having a permanent legal status and their own salary reduced the women’s financial dependency on their Belgian (ex-)husbands. Piti was able to get the custody of her son after her divorce, partly thanks to her stable job in a nursing home and to her Belgian nationality. Acquiring Belgian nationality also put an end to the repeated process of renewing their residence permit, which required their husband’s assistance. In fact, at the beginning of their immigration when they were not yet proficient in the local language, they relied a lot on their husband to process their application documents. For instance, Victoria sought her husband’s help to renew four times her one-year residence card until she obtained Belgian nationality.

Since the respondents knew that their children would live in Belgium, many expressed their desire to spend their old age partly in their host country and partly in their natal country so that they could stay close to their children, a transnational way of life requiring Belgian citizenship. Other respondents chose Belgium to be their country of retirement, considering their social situation in their country of origin and the fact that their children were likely to spend their lives there:

In Thailand, I have nothing there. I told to myself, ‘it’s not worth it. It’s not worth it for me’. There, I have nothing. I have no house, I own no land, I don’t have enough to pay for a house, no, it’s expensive [...]. I got married. I came here.

What I thought is that my children will get married and have children, and my family, they are here now. (Siri)

Given the advantages of obtaining Belgian nationality, it is not surprising that twenty-eight of the thirty-three respondents had become Belgian at the time of their interviews: of the remaining five, two had recently arrived in Belgium and three had separated from their husband before they were able to apply for Belgian nationality. This suggests the effectiveness of the Belgian state's governmentality, which provides 'compensations' (Foucault 1997) to migrant spouses of insider citizens by facilitating their access to citizenship rights and other entitlements. In case a binational couple ends in divorce, obtaining the nationality of the receiving country can guarantee a stable motherhood through time. As Siri's remarks above suggest, this stable motherhood means a continued physical presence and proximity with one's children.

### **Opting for a single nationality: a means to protect one's child**

When their binational marriage results in the birth of a child, one of the important questions that migrant Filipinas and Thais are confronted with is whether or not to transmit to their child the nationality of their natal country. Both groups of women have the possibility to pass on their nationality to their children born in Belgium, as both their countries of origin and settlement allow 'relational nationality' (Knop 2001). However, these mothers generally refrain to do so and opt instead for the sole Belgian nationality for their children.

The Belgian mothering is, they let the children do what they want. Yes, independence, they [children] can do what they want. If they do something wrong, their mother comes and says 'oh not too bad', and they already can go. But Thai [mothering] is more about protection. (Ruang)

The comparison between Belgian and Thai mothers in the vignette above can be explained by the respondent's attempt to justify her mothering approach that she described as 'very Thai'. This justification aimed to portray her as a 'good mother' to counter the negative stereotypes about Thai migrant women, which are often suspected of marrying Belgian men 'for money'. This stereotype was frequently mentioned during my interviews with these women and their family members. This emphasis on mothering as protecting one's child was not exclusive to Thai respondents: the Filipino women interviewed also followed the same line of thinking. During an informal conversation, Ava expressed her intention to spare her

children the problems they could encounter as Filipino nationals in the Philippines. Her reasoning reverberated during my separate interview with her son: ‘she doesn’t want me to be imprisoned there, because if I have the Filipino nationality, Belgium can’t retrieve me’. Filipino and Thai respondents tended to homogenize the nationalities within their respective families by acquiring Belgian nationality for themselves and by choosing it for their children. Although most Thai respondents favoured dual nationality, they usually chose for their children a single nationality: the Belgian one. In fact, only seven of the seventeen Thai respondents applied for dual nationality for their children. As I observed during my ethnographic fieldwork in Belgium, this tendency concerns not only the study respondents. Other Thai migrant women I informally talked to who had children from their Belgian partners were also inclined to pass a single (Belgian) nationality to their offspring. This may be due to the Thai nationality act of 1991 (section 14) and 2008 (section 13) stipulating that children who acquired Thai nationality by birth and who also have the nationality of their foreign parent must choose only one at the age of twenty years. Since the Thai respondents preferred that their children maintain their Belgian nationality, the prospect of having them hold Thai nationality for only a short period of time did not appear very attractive to them. Moreover, the Belgian state only allowed double nationality in 2008, which paradoxically impeded some migrant Thais who acquired Belgian nationality to transmit their Thai nationality to their child(ren).

[It has been] just a few years ago that you are allowed to have two nationalities. Amm... but then I have a problem, I have two boys. They have the, they have to do the [Thai military] service. That’s why there are not so many Thai boys, ah mixed boys, Thai and foreigner, registered [at the Thai embassy], mostly girls. (Pim)

Pim’s remarks suggest how the Belgian law intersects with that in Thailand, and unveils another specificity of the Thai case: mothers are more likely to register at the Thai embassy the birth of a daughter than that of a son, as the latter would be forced to complete their Thai military service (which is compulsory for young men at the age of twenty-one). Although there are ways to escape this state-imposed obligation<sup>2</sup>, many Thai mothers such as Pim are hesitant to take the risk of being separated from their sons during a two-year army service in Thailand. From 2000 to 2014, the Thai embassy in Belgium registered a total of 1,201 births, a majority of which were girls (56.2 per cent versus 43.8 per cent boys). Only two of the seven Thai respondents who had sons decided to pass on Thai nationality to them. One mother did so after finding out possibilities for her son to postpone or escape military service,

whereas the other mother interviewed wanted to simplify their entry into Thailand during vacations:

Two years ago, we had to wait for so long at the custom, because he had only a Belgian passport, and if you have a Thai passport, you can walk through the machine, just pass. Then at that time, we had to wait for so long. So when I went back to Belgium, I decided to [apply for Thai nationality for him]. (Farung)

For Farung and other Thai respondents, having the ‘best’ passport is very important to facilitate their visits to Thailand, thereby allowing their children to be regularly exposed to their society of origin.

Like their Thai counterparts, the decisions of Filipino mothers concerning their offspring are guided by the intention of sparing them future difficulties. Twelve of the sixteen respondents decided not to transmit their Filipino nationality to their children. As mentioned above, this was the case of Ava, who wanted her children to be defended by the Belgian government as Belgian nationals if something ‘bad’ happened to them in the Philippines. Other respondents did not see the point of passing their nationality to their children, emphasising that the Belgian passport can ‘pass anywhere’ unlike the Filipino one. This reasoning of insuring a hassle-free mobility for their children interacts with other factors. Given that dual nationality has only been allowed in the Philippines since 2003 and in Belgium since 2008, the eight Filipino respondents who gave birth to their children prior to these dates were discouraged by the demanding application processes (personal appearance, documents to provide, fees to pay...) for late birth registration at the Philippine embassy and for Philippine passport renewal after five years. These factors also repelled other women who gave birth after dual nationality became a possibility for their children. Besides, Filipino migrants’ children of foreign nationality can easily enter the Philippines and stay there for up to one year without visa. The four Filipino respondents who passed their nationality to their children had strong ties with the Philippines: three held Filipino nationality, whereas the one who had acquired Belgian nationality had an upper-class background and wished her child to inherit some properties there.

It is interesting to note how the respondents’ children have become the object of the competing ‘bio-politics’ (Foucault 1997) of two states. Each bio-politics sets up a ‘regulatory mechanism’ in the Foucauldian sense, which provides its migrant population the possibility to maintain their nationality, to pass it to their children or to acquire another one. It is through this mechanism that each state reinforces its population over time. With the possibility of

formally belonging 'here' and 'there', migrant Filipinas and Thais in the present study rely on their transnational consciousness to weigh the relative pros and cons of each nationality for their children. It is surprising that conjugal conflict over nationality issues was absent from the narratives of the respondents. Since the main nationality in the family is Belgian, the husbands of the respondents let them decide whether to pass or not an 'additional' nationality to their children. This coincides with what de Hart observes in her study of mixed families in the Dutch context: the 'meaning of children's citizenship is not only determined by the power relations between spouses', but also 'by the power exerted by the state and society' (2010, 114). The awareness of this power is the driving force behind the respondents' decision not to pass their nationality of origin to their children. The governing principle and the guiding light for their mothering practices was to protect as much as possible their children from experiencing the social insecurities they knew were present in their countries of origin.

### **Stay at home or work: becoming a 'good' family member**

Another mothering technique of Filipino and Thai respondents can be gleaned from their attitudes towards labour market participation. This technique is shaped by their position in the marital power relations, their transnational consciousness about the Belgian welfare regime and the social policies in their countries of origin as well as by their intention to be a 'good' family member 'here' and 'there'.

Before, I had no job and my husband was the one working. His salary increased, because he was supporting me. I have no [declared] job. But once I work and it is declared, his salary will decrease, it will be deducted. (Anita)

Anita's narrative sheds light on the reason why most Filipino respondents preferred to be full-time housewives rather than to work. The nine respondents who declared themselves unemployed explained that their husbands encouraged them not to work to avoid paying high income tax. Indeed, the Belgian 'dependent spouse allowance' scheme authorizes earning partners to allocate 30 per cent of the total annual income of their family to their unemployed or part-time worker spouse (COE 2008), provided that the latter earns less than a maximal allowed amount (10,200 euros in 2015). This social policy influenced the Belgian husbands' discourse about minimizing their taxes by having their wives stay out of the labour market. One Belgian man interviewed did not see the point of earning less so that his wife might 'work for a month but make only a little bit of money'. The high educational attainment and highly paid jobs (engineer, physician, businessman, and so on) of their husbands limited the

negotiating power of many Filipino respondents, who despite of their university education decided not to work. These women's decisions appear rooted in the 'latent power' (Lukes 1974) relations in their couple. This power can be identified 'when the reasons for not desiring or attempting change or refraining from conflict produce resignation in anticipation of a negative reaction or fear of jeopardizing the marital relationship' (Komter 1989, 192). Making reference to their husband's discourse to explain their decision to be full-time housewives attests to the subtle working of such hidden power. By heeding their husband's wish, Filipino women not only avoid marital discords, but also ensure a stable family environment for their children. Staying at home, in this case, can be considered an indirect mothering technique that incorporates migrant mothers in the nation-building process of their receiving country as 'biological' and 'cultural reproducers of "the nation"' (Yuval-Davis 1997, 37). Filipino women whose husbands were earning the minimum wage engaged in part-time but undeclared jobs so that their declared income would not exceed the policy-stipulated threshold. These women intended to supplement their partners' income and attend to other household needs. They satisfied their personal desire to work and at the same time met their husband's expectation.

The decision of Filipino respondents to stay at home was also rooted in their concern over the quality of care for their children. If they could not find somebody to trust for the care of their young children, they decided not to work. Abby shared her experience of being alone to take care of her three young children while her husband was working: 'nobody was helping me. My family was not here. I did everything'. Although she and her husband could have afforded childcare services, she preferred to look after her children herself. As Anita remarked, 'many [migrant Filipinas] do not work because they have children and their husbands do not like them to work, particularly if it is declared'. Indeed, only one of the five Filipino respondents who received the agreement of their husbands to work full-time had young children. Taking all these into account, it appears that the Filipino respondents approach the family in a collectivist manner, making consensual decisions shaped by the latent power relations in their couple to avoid conflicts and promote cohesion in the family. This attitude probably stems from the respondents' Catholic religion, which restricts women to the domestic sphere and emphasizes the sanctity of the family. As a result, their mixed families display a gendered division of labour similar to the one prevalent in their country of origin: the caregiving role goes to the Filipino mothers, and the breadwinning role to their husbands. As they were the ones dealing most with the moral education of their children, it

was easy for the women interviewed to cultivate their emotional relations with their children and to transmit their values and beliefs to them.

In contrast to most migrant Filipinas interviewed, Thai respondents generally worked outside of their home: six worked full time, six worked part time, and one was retired. What may explain this difference is that many Thai respondents faced economic challenges: four were separated or divorced and the husbands of seven earned the minimum wage. Despite this, they did not want to depend on their husband's support (if still married) or on assistance from the Belgian government, such as family allowance. Som, a leader of a migrant association, shared with me her observation about her women compatriots: 'they don't feel secure about their relationships, so they like to work'. This remark can be attributed to the fact that many Thai women had already experienced break-ups prior to their marriage with their Belgian husbands and often had children from their previous relationships in Thailand. These experiences probably made them strongly aware of the socio-economic risks that failed relationships entail, making them wary of becoming financially dependent on their present partner. All Thai respondents who were separated from their Belgian husbands worked to support their children and their basic needs, a mothering technique that ensured the well-being of their children. Other Thai respondents worked to redefine their place in their family: as Pim explained, 'he [her husband] was here, and he was there, and my children, they are all growing up, and I say "I need to do something, I can't just [be] sitting here inside between four walls"'. Paid employment allowed respondents such as Pim to contribute to their receiving country's economy by providing them 'self-esteem, which [...] is important for the fulfilment of [...] (their) potential as citizens' (Lister 2003, 138) as it involves 'self-assessment' to balance 'personal "empowerment"' and 'the political goals of the state' (Lemke 2001, 202). Hence, deciding to engage in paid work was one 'technique of the self' (Foucault 1979) used by the respondents to realign their objective of family making with the state's nation-building project.

Another drive for Thai women to work is their desire to help their natal family. For example, Malisa was sending regularly remittance to Thailand for five years: 'my father is sick. I have to support him with 200 euros per month'. Supporting one's parents is part of paying one's moral debt (*bun khun*) to them, and many Thai respondents explained this to their children:

I teach my daughter a lot of respect to the elders, and I also tell her why I send money [to Thailand]. Why? What is the reason? Because my parents don't have

pension, they don't have it, yeah. So that's why I have [to send them money], and she understands. (Nom)

Like most migrant Filipinas interviewed, four Thai respondents decided to stay at home because of their husband's good economic status, because of his wish for a housewife and/or because they had young children.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

For the Filipino and Thai migrants interviewed, fulfilling their mother role meant making the right decisions about what nationality to adopt for themselves and/or to pass to their children, as well as whether to work or stay at home. Their decisions reflect their reactions to the situations they found themselves in and to the state policies concerning them – a social positioning shaped by their transnational consciousness, by the power dynamics within their mixed families and by larger socio-legal forces around them.

Filipino and Thai respondents shared two mothering techniques: they acquired Belgian nationality and preferred this single nationality for their children. Their preference for Belgian nationality was shaped by their transnational policy awareness, notably about state restrictions on migration in Belgium and in other countries. They were aware that a Belgian passport would not only increase their geographic mobility but also prevent mother-child separation if their binational union fell apart. Choosing one nationality for themselves and for their children appears challenging for these women, as nationality opens the door to certain rights and privileges 'here' and 'there' but also entails obligations to fulfil. Nationality and citizenship are hereby interlinked and difficult to separate in the case of women who inhabit transnational social spaces. By enforcing a common nationality within their mixed families, Filipino and Thai migrants facilitate their families' incorporation into the mainstream Belgian society. This attitude can be explained by the social ambiance in Belgium, where the question of migrants' integration has occupied a central place in public and political discourses since the 1990s. As Rea observes, one of the 'three scenarios' that 'organize the Belgian public policies of integration' is the 'naturalization of foreigners to enable them to acquire complete citizenship and to become "fellows"'<sup>3</sup> (2007, 126). The migrant Filipinas and Thais in this study obviously strived to align themselves with their receiving population, at least in terms of citizenship rights.

In contrast to the similarities above, these women adopted different mothering techniques regarding social incorporation. Filipino respondents tended to stay at home and not to work, a

decision stemming from their desire to accomplish their caregiving responsibilities in their family and from the latent unequal power relations in their households. On the contrary, Thai respondents chose to fulfil a productive role alongside their caregiving role in their family because of their desire to ensure the well-being of their children, of their quest for financial autonomy, of their obligations towards their parents or of the break-up of their binational relationships. Despite their differing behaviours regarding paid work, both groups of women satisfied their various family obligations. On the one hand, the cooperative attitude of Filipino respondents towards their husbands reinforced the gendered division of labour at home, allowing them to fit to the traditional ideals of motherhood of their country of origin. On the other hand, Thai respondents succeeded to do 'global householding' (Douglass 2010) by fulfilling simultaneously their caregiving roles as wives and mothers in Belgium and as daughters in Thailand.

This article illuminates the social function of migrant women's mothering as a vehicle to reproduce the nation, prompting us to rethink citizenship and the place of migrant women in its conceptualisation. Feminist scholars have long pointed out the exclusion of women from citizenship, an exclusion that is 'associated with, and confined to, the private sphere, where they are deemed unfit for the responsibilities of active political citizenship' (Leung 2004, 160). In addition to this, when women are migrants, they are also more often excluded from citizenship rights in their receiving countries due to their 'otherness' in terms of ethnicity, class and nationality. In this article, I unveil that migrant women who often inhabit the so-called 'private realm' are also capable (like many of their non-migrant and male counterparts) to actively engage politically with the state. Their political citizenship does not involve marching or protesting on the streets but rather mothering techniques, which set their own path and prepare their children's route towards full, active membership to the nation. Indeed, citizenship should be conceptualised in a multi-layered fashion considering diversity (Lister 2003). Mothering is a fertile site of citizenship, which from afar echoes the public-private divide but in close-up reveals the porosity of this dichotomy.

In addition, the case study in this article demonstrates the way migrant women's 'techniques of the self' in Foucault's term (1979; 1997) interact with the state's 'techniques of domination' (Foucault 1997), that is, the policies it adopts towards its migrant subjects and the institutional mechanisms it uses to govern them. Mothering techniques are herein 'techniques of the self' to counter state's governmentality. They are also migrant women's response to the gendered expectations and social insecurities in their countries of origin, which brings us back to Ghosh and Wang's (2003) 'transnational consciousness' in which 'an

individual negotiates her/his 'desire' to engage in [...] the 'reality' of the situation' (279). This confirms the paper's initial hypothesis that migrant women's awareness of the socio-legal specificities 'here' and 'there' is a powerful force shaping their mothering techniques and attitudes towards their receiving country. Taking all these into account, the case of migrant Filipinas and Thai therefore contributes to furthering our understanding of what 'techniques of the self' mean in the context of migration: they go beyond the political and are shaped by forces that transcend geo-political frontiers of nation-state. Their gendered and social dimensions most often intersect with the political in the cross-border social spaces of migrants. Hence, seizing migrants' 'techniques of the self' requires grasping the structures of domination in which migrants are incorporated at familial, societal and global levels.

Furthermore, the present article points to the centrality of care and its multidirectionality (Francisco 2015) in migrant women's participation in the reproduction of their receiving nation. The respondents' mothering techniques are the by-products of their navigation of the laws 'here' and 'there' to secure the mother-child bond and the well-being of their offspring. These techniques go beyond the visible practices of motherhood, which sets apart the present study from previous works on transnational mothering focusing on interpersonal, direct care provision as well as from studies on mixed families centred on intergenerational transmission. The way mothering techniques are fashioned by the transnational socio-legal consciousness of migrants indicates how global power discrepancies between states interact with the intimate, and vice versa. Hence, future studies on mixed families should take into account the transnational consciousness of family members, a useful avenue to further explore the cross-border dimensions of their conjugal and parental lives. Ideally, such an approach should consider not only the perspectives of migrant spouses but also those of their children and their partners.

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## Notes

1. Thailand and the Philippines were respectively 67th and 75th in this ranking. For details, see Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index for 2017: <http://visaindex.com/#>
2. There is an annual lottery during which young boys who draw a black card (instead of a red one) are exempted from military service. Besides, one Thai study participant said that some parents pay a bribe amounting to 1,000 or 1,500 euros so that their son avoids military service (23 June 2014 interview).
3. 'la naturalisation des étrangers pour leur permettre d'acquérir la citoyenneté complète et de devenir des « semblables »' (English translation by the author).

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