

Random Thoughts on Mothers and Migration

"The loveliest masterpiece of the heart of God is the heart of a mother."

- St. Therese of Lisieux

This simple yet profound quote from a popular Catholic saint and Doctor of the Church, published in our parish church bulletin on mother's day weekend, brought back touching images of how this was manifested in my life, as well as in the lives of so many migrants everywhere.

Personally, I feel very blessed to have a mother who is the most generous, selfless, loving and fiercest advocate for, and defender of, her children. Not only has she literally given life to us her children, but she is also ever ready and willing to sacrifice her own welfare and happiness for our sake. The heart of my own mother is truly God's greatest gift and a masterpiece of His own. For this, I am extremely and eternally grateful.

On a professional level, my frequent dealings with migrants, have also allowed me to witness the "heart of a mother" in many touching and inspiring ways. Listening to the stories of caregiver migrants, their reasons for choosing to live and work overseas, their endless challenges and sacrifices, often boil down to the children that they love and care for more than themselves. These children could be their own whom they left behind, with a heavy heart, in their home countries, nieces and nephews whom they are sending to school, or even the children of their employers whom they have learned to love and treat as their own.

The migrant caregivers' lives in Canada are filled with heart-wrenching stories of being forced to leave their own children behind to care for other people's children. One consequence of this situation is that the caregiver mothers end up becoming estranged to their biological children and/or become extremely attached to their employers' children whom they have learned to love like their own progeny. Although these migrant caregiver mothers continue to love their children left behind and ardently long for the day when they can be reunited, the economic need for survival often trumps the emotional anguish arising from physical separation. They then turn their nurturing care and affection to their employers' children to somehow fill their longing for the physical presence of their own children. This is the bittersweet reality of countless migrant caregivers in Canada and elsewhere.

The hearts of mothers can also be seen in the parents and grandparents who are being sponsored by their family members to become permanent residents of Canada. Stricter rules in the ever-changing world of Canadian immigration law have made it increasingly difficult to sponsor parents and grandparents to become permanent residents of Canada. Aside from the substantial increase in the minimum necessary income for sponsors, annual quotas that get filled in a few days, and processing times that have become impossibly long - now taking anywhere from 6 to 10 years - impose great barriers to the simple goal of family reunification.

The stricter rules in sponsoring parents and grandparents impact families greatly in that they are being deprived of the opportunity to benefit from the physical presence of mothers and grandmothers in their lives. While the government may view older migrants (parents and grandparents) as potential liabilities because they have very few years left before retiring from the work force and are thus perceived as unable to directly contribute to the economy, they are also viewed as potentially causing an excessive demand on social services and the healthcare system.

The perceived economic liability of parents and grandparents are of course mainly generalized conclusions based on the stereotypical view of the elderly. Often overlooked in these stereotypes are the enormous contributions that the elderly make to the family - largely due to the nurturing roles of mothers and grandmothers in the lives of their respective families. When I ask for reasons that Canadian sponsors want to bring their parents and grandparents, they often include the need for parental help with caring for children and their household, or assistance with caring for an ailing family member. Even their mere presence and ability to impart wisdom gained through their breadth and depth of experience can be a valuable teaching tool for everyone else around them. Thus, contrary to the simplistic notions of their worth, the intangible contributions of our elderly mothers and grandmothers (as well as fathers and grandfathers) towards improving the quality of life of their younger family members are truly priceless and should never be discounted.

Other categories of migrants such as sponsored spouses, refugees, protected persons and independent skilled workers, all include mothers whose primary reason for migrating is often their family's welfare more than, and not just their own.

These are but a few of the reasons that I strongly believe that migration policies should not only be about quantitative data and analysis. Migration involves individual human lives whose worth cannot be simply reduced to heartless statistics, monetary budgets or financial targets. Reflecting on the role of mothers in migration, to their families in particular and towards nation-building in general, requires a holistic, humanitarian and heartfelt approach.

While it is understood that criteria have to be laid, standards have to be set and realistic targets put in place to avoid utter chaos, these have to be balanced with addressing emotional and social concerns which directly affect the lives of the diaspora.

No doubt, we can learn so much from the hearts of mothers, whether they are our own or of those who come from distant lands.

Thanks for reading and belated happy mother's day to my dearest Mommy, to all mothers and mothers at heart!

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