

BOOK REVIEW

Remaking Masculinities: Identity, Power, and Gender Dynamics in Families with Migrant Wives and Househusbands

By Alicia T. Pingol. Quezon City: UP Center for Women's Studies, 2001

Reviewed by: Zoe Campbell Cleary

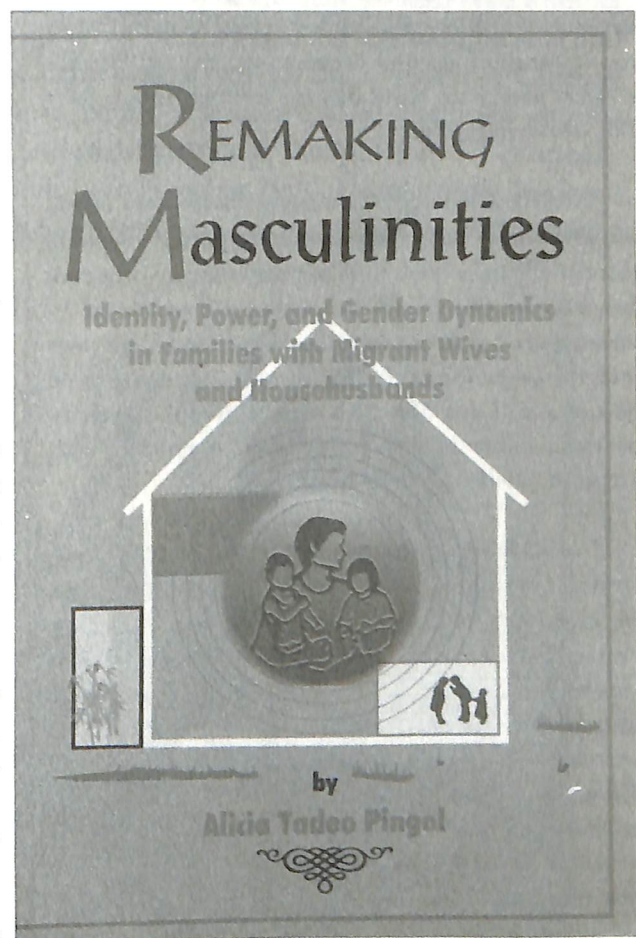
For over a century, the Ilocos region in the Philippines has experienced waves of migration. In the past, it was the men who left the region for employment overseas that would provide a better future for their families. Today, it is the women from Ilocos who are making up the present wave of migration. The services of nurses, health workers, domestic helpers and other occupations traditionally dominated by women are in brisk demand in foreign economies.

Considerable attention has been paid to the impact on Ilocano communities of earlier waves of migration, yet it is only recently that researchers are beginning to evaluate the enduring social effects of the migratory phenomenon that favours the employment of women over men.

The recipient of the Atty. Lourdes Lontok-Cruz award for Best Dissertation in the Gender Study Category for the year 2000 from the University of the Philippines, Alicia Pingol, contributes to this growing area of interest by extending her dissertation to produce *Remaking Masculinities: Identity, Power, and Gender Dynamics in Families with Migrant Wives and Househusbands*.

Pingol focuses on the sixth-class municipality of Paduros, 17.5km east of Laoag, Ilocos Norte, and provides insight into the lives of the "men left behind" as the result of shifting global labour forces.

"While migration in the early twentieth century," Pingol writes, "served to reinforce traditional gender roles of men as the provider, and women as the primary caregiver



of the children, the present wave of migration presents a challenge to traditional Ilocano norms." Central to Pingol's study is her consideration of how men deal with and re-conceptualise traditional norms of masculinity as they raise their families in the absence of their wives.

In Ilocos, where masculinity is defined along rigid lines of a man's ability to provide for his family, his success in the workplace and his demonstration of good leadership skills, physical strength and virility, Pingol questions what happens to men if they cannot live up to these ideals. Do they feel threatened and less "manly"? Are they able to enjoy their new status in the domestic sphere?

Taking a hermeneutic approach, Pingol details the personal life histories of a number of Ilocano men. Drawn from a range of age and occupational groups, Pingol's subjects articulate their diverse feelings about their "househusband" roles.

Less a detailed study of the social effects of the migratory phenomenon than a presentation of individual life histories, Pingol's book does not arrive at any firm conclusions. Her emotionally laden approach makes for interesting reading about individual experiences, yet does not lend weight to her attempt to analyse changing social dynamics in Ilocos. She often departs from the given information of her subjects in her analysis, paying too much attention to what they may think.

Conversely, Pingol pays only cursory attention to the wives of her subjects. To support her argument that it is the wives who hold the position of power within their marriages, she turns to the argument of Hutheesing that whoever gains access to the symbols of modernity acquires the more dominant position. Regrettably, Pingol takes her consideration of the issue no further, begging the question whether the "dominance" of the wife lasts when she returns home and re-enters the domestic sphere. How real is the power of the women? Although some clearly relish their new roles as househusbands, the men continue to define themselves along traditional lines.

Pingol relies for the most part on the personal accounts of her male subjects, but her analysis of changing social dynamics in Ilocos would have been enriched by widening the scope to include the perspectives of returned wives and the men's immediate and/or extended families, and a more thorough examination of the wider social


implications of the migratory phenomenon on local communities.

In one instance, for example, Pingol refers to the rise in reported rape in Ilocos Norte, implying the increase in female overseas contract workers as the cause. But she does not expand on this, and so the cause-effect relationship she suggests is tenuous.

Pingol admits that her study is perhaps premature, the increase in female overseas contract workers from Ilocos being a relatively recent phenomenon. In any case, a more systematic treatment of the issues is necessary to assess the extent to which current economic realities are affecting traditional social structures.

As an analysis of changing gender relations and shifting power dynamics, *Remaking Masculinities* leaves a number of important questions unanswered. As an intimate look into the lives of the men "left behind," however, Pingol's book makes for compelling reading, providing unique insights into the emotional lives of men in a culture where the definition of masculine identity remains cast in the traditional mould.

Pingol reveals some humorous and sometimes moving moments in the lives of the men as they demonstrate their resilience in searching for ways of establishing self-respect and moulding their newfound identities into their notions of what it means to be a man.

In the absence of a more substantial analysis of changing dynamics of gender, power, and identity, *Remaking Masculinities* is worthy of note, and provides a good starting point for future studies on migrant women from Ilocos and the men they leave behind. 

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