

How does the Push and Pull model theory of migration help to explain the significant movement of South Asian females to Hong Kong and Iceland in the 21st century?

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Migration is a perennial feature of human geography, and a divisive one. The ubiquity of human movement throughout history poses the issue tantamount to survival. Movement is an intrinsic part of how humans operate, exaggerated by extrinsic forces. While few societies still embrace nomadic traditions, migration and immigration are re-established norms in a globalized world taut on the strings of some of these external forces, like climate change, political revolution, pandemic recovery, and the like. Before discussing the impact of migration on the target group of South Asian females in this essay, it is important to underscore some of the definitional nuances embedded within theories of migration; notably between ‘migration’ and ‘immigration,’ the two terms differentiated on account of what movement implies.¹ When looking at migration there’s often the misconception that it is an internal-to-external process: individuals leaving one country and moving to another, but migration occurs domestically and internationally. ‘Migration’ changes status when there are intentions for permanent settlement. Immigration posits that people are resettling through official administrative processes.² As a concept, migration’s triggers and consequences have been extensively theorized, with notable approaches reaching into a broad bag of disciplinary knowledge, incorporating epistemologies from mathematics, geography, and anthropology. The discussion on South Asian female migration to Hong Kong and Iceland in the 21st century slots well into Everett Lee's Push and Pull model. With this model, I will argue that while Iceland presents more pull factors, such as better living conditions, it is less attractive on account of certain intervening factors such as geography relative to South Asia, labor and immigration policies, and language when compared to Hong Kong.

Lee’s model was devised with a set of positive and negative traits: the positive traits being those that retain migrants and attach them to a place, and the negative being those that push them away, or preclude their settling in a specific destination. For example, in Bermuda, my country of origin, a positive trait, a pull factor, is the expected salary for workers, while a push trait is the cost of living and harsh immigration policies. Both positive and negative traits are manipulated by other intersectional factors (there are a total of four mentioned by Lee), but this essay will underscore only intervening factors as a way to explain the contradiction between Iceland’s pull factors and relatively smaller South Asian female migration population when compared to Hong Kong. This approach to analysis does not neglect Lee’s remaining theories or others’ theories of migration, however it finds particular suitability in intervening factors given the scope of research. In addition, these so-called intervening factors alter migration patterns significantly between South Asia and Hong Kong and South Asia and Iceland, despite the pull benefits of both destinations.³ This can explain why migration populations in ostensibly attractive countries are low, while in less migrant-friendly places, migration populations can be seen to

¹ South Asian denotes Filipina and Indonesian women exclusively in the scope of this essay.

² McGee, Kimberley. "Migration vs Immigration: What's the Difference?" Investopedia, Investopedia, 25 June 2019, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/migration-vs-immigration.asp>.

³ Lee, Everett S. "A Theory of Migration." *Demography*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1966, pp. 47-57. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2060063.

flourish – the barrier to entry is set in migrants' favor, which does not always translate to agreeable working and living conditions. Scandinavia is widely touted as one of the most liveable places in the world, with social systems to back the claim, but such titles often forget to neglect the conditions of migrants.

Central to Lee's arguments is the notion of migrant agency, understanding that migrants are highly selective and choose to move for positive and negative reasons. Holding up that umbrella of motivations are migrants who are often highly qualified at home and choose to move in order to land professional opportunities that match their qualifications; however on the other side of the scale, migrants leave in response to "minus factors," which on a whole apply to migrants who have struggled socially or financially wherever they call home.⁴ This is a sort of ostracization that migration deceitfully combats, for one barrier is always matched by an equal intervening obstacle in the destination country. Taking this in context, why is the focus of this paper females exclusively? Female migration is a cornerstone of domestic life in Hong Kong's mid-to-upper class and its prevalence, along with the systematic mistreatment it ushers in, creates a social phenomenon that plays out quite visibly in a quasi-multicultural city that mistreats an important mainstay of the labor force.⁵ Moreover, the migration of females from South Asia to Hong Kong is bimodal, meaning that women leave for a variety of reasons that satisfy both these positive and negative factors. The two most significant factors of Hong Kong's South Asian migration are its proximity to South Asia and its migration benefits. The perks of being close are fairly intuitive, it ensures the ease of money transfers, inexpensive back-and-forth travel, communication with family in the same time zone; there is also the advantage of finding community among other foreign workers of similar cultural backgrounds. Geography plays an extremely vital role in creating pull factors for South Asian female migrants. These factors are so overwhelming that now there are approximately 350,000 Filipina and Indonesian women in Hong Kong who work as domestic helpers (evenly split).⁶ To suggest that labor policies for domestic workers in Hong Kong are favorable would be inappropriate in light of the many humanitarian issues faced by South Asian women. A vacuum emerged in the 1970s for domestic workers which coincided with a need across South Asian governments to reduce trade deficits and more generally economic downturn. The solution provided was remittances, and while the legacy of this unofficial policy continues, it resulted in immigration standards that are double-edged: widely accommodating because they allow for many migrant workers to enter, but individually detrimental because of their stringency.⁷ This is Lee's push and pull effect on display, where workers are drawn by the prospect of economic mobility but pushed away by policy

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Ku, Agnes S. "Asian Female Foreign Domestic Workers as Migrants in Hong Kong." ResearchGate, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333056684_Asian_Female_Foreign_Domestic_Workers_as_Migrants_in_Hong_Kong. Accessed 7 May 2023.

⁶ "Your Voice: Hong Kong Must Respect Its Ethnic Minority Groups." South China Morning Post, 18 October 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/your-voice/letters-editors/article/3196010/your-voice-hong-kong-must-respect-its>. Accessed 7 May 2023.

⁷ Asian Female Foreign Domestic Workers, 135

rules and intervening factors like six day working weeks, being forced to reside with one's employer, and the inability to invite family members to Hong Kong.⁸ The push-pull combination of incentives and disadvantages of work in Hong Kong benefit the female migrant worker financially, sometimes culturally, and to a large extent geographically, but these suggestions do not imply that Hong Kong is a universally attractive place for migrant workers; rather that intervening obstacles are outcompeted by other benefits, making it relatively more convenient to live and work here.

The migration phenomenon in Iceland is not altogether unique, especially not when compared to Hong Kong. At the end of the 1990s, Iceland found itself with a labor shortage due to deregulation and privatization and, struggling to cope with the subsequent economic boom, sought to employ foreign workers to bolster the workforce in a country with a small population (281,205 in the year 2000).⁹ Again, like in Hong Kong, a vacuum emerged and female South Asian workers were up to the task of filling it. This does not tell the entire story, however. The initial migration movement of specifically Filipina women to Iceland began in the 1980s after a number of women moved to marry Icelandic men. Marriage opportunities are a contestable pull factor because it is only a relevant incentive for a very small number of the female migrant population. Notwithstanding this negligibility of Filipina-Icelandic marriages, these first marriages set a migration pattern into motion that would come into fuller effect a decade later. Iceland's small population renders it susceptible to drastic migration-influenced changes. Filipinas mostly find themselves working in care and service roles, but in these roles they are provided with essential social services; they are also entitled to labor unions and various social welfare programs quickly after finding jobs, which statistically happens almost immediately upon moving. All of these factors contribute to Iceland's desirability as a landing spot for South Asian female migrants, because in many ways it is, but Lee's notion of intervening factors disrupt intuitive assumptions about Iceland being an automatic first choice for migration. Language and geography are two intervening factors that diminish Iceland's attractiveness for South Asian females. Iceland's geographic isolation makes it difficult for the country to recruit any sort of substantive cultural diversity. This push factor, along with Iceland's high cost of living, number 24 in the world, makes it hard for the country to boast geography as an incentive with South Asian migrants.¹⁰ In comparison to Hong Kong, too, there aren't nearly as many cultural affinity spaces around Iceland—Hong Kong has well-established and large communities of South Asian female migrants that are able to help newcomers navigate life in a sprawling city. Features of the city's makeup like local South Asian languages and cuisine play an understated role in accommodating migrants. But it's not just that Iceland is devoid of South Asian influence in seeable ways, the sparse population of South Asian females engenders a dynamic incompatible with linguistic

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Skaptadóttir, Unnur Dís. "Integration and Transnational Practices of Filipinos in Iceland." *e-migrinter*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2019, pp. 89-110. DOI: 10.4000/e-migrinter.1743. Accessed 7 May 2023.

¹⁰ Numbeo. "Cost of Living Rankings." Numbeo, <https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings.jsp>. Accessed 7 May 2023.

assimilation. According to Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, while most Filipina migrants speak English, their inability to speak Icelandic precludes them from true integration into Icelandic society.¹¹ This is a major push factor, because if there's already a relatively small number of South Asian female migrants and they feel that they cannot integrate, sentiments of rejection and alienation surface.¹² So despite Iceland's ostensibly attractive qualities, the intervening factors of geography and language prove too significant to surmount.

South Asian migrants represent 14% of Iceland's migrant population, compared to Hong Kong's 57%. Everett Lee's Push and Pull model helps to explain why this might be. His model frames Hong Kong, according to these interpretations, as a place only slightly less attractive as a landing spot, whose shortcomings outweigh those of Iceland. And this fact makes it a more possible, so as to say realistic, destination for South Asian female migrants. This isn't all of the answer, Lee's model is by no means exhaustive. However, it does give insight into how migrants evaluate the decision of leaving home in search of better opportunities. While this only alluded to in the essay, Iceland is mostly homogenous, so many migrants refrain from putting it on their considerations for places to migrate. Still, life for most migrants is rarely a matter of endless and unabated choice, there are concrete matters that constrain the decisions of these people-on-the-move; whether it's attaining a visa, learning a local language, being far away from home, all of these intervening factors complicate the allure of a destination. Lee's model is helpful insofar as it situates interested parties at a key entry point of migrant discourses. This essay is not an appraisal on which country is better for South Asian female migrants, which would be entirely subjective, rather it intends to move us further along with how we think about the difficulties faced by one of the most important demographics in our society, no matter where we are. So whether in Iceland or Hong Kong, expressing gratitude for how migrants shape daily life should be as routine as a morning coffee.

¹¹ Integration and Transnational Practices, 1

¹² *ibid.*

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