

Filipino migrant domestic workers: Implications on development and migration trends in the Philippines¹

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Introduction

In the last four decades, the Philippines became a leading sender of migrant workers outside its borders to many parts of the world. The Filipino diaspora is approximated at 8 million Filipinos working abroad or 10% of the total population in different status of being a migrant. Every year, around 300,000 newly-hired Filipino workers leave abroad to work. The Philippines has been deploying more than 1 million overseas Filipino workers each year since 2006. In 2010 alone, a total of 1.4 million Filipino workers were deployed as land-based or sea-based workers contributing about 8% of the country's GDP or USD18.7 million (National Statistics Office, Philippine Overseas Employment Statistics 2010). The 10,000 applicants lining up daily at the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration speaks of the volume and enormity of the Filipino diaspora.

It is striking to note that from 2005 onwards the top occupation of newly-hired Filipino land-based workers abroad are classified as 'household workers' reaching as high as 94,000 or almost 1/3 of the 300,000 annually deployed overseas workers in 2010. This trend has shown an occupational shift from the production workers category as top occupations of Filipino workers abroad since the 1970s. The occupational shift of Filipinos working abroad to household workers also shows the increasing number of Filipino women migrants.

The lack of adequate employment in the Philippines and the institutionalization of migration in the country are the main push factors for Filipinos to seek employment abroad. As countries in Asia and outside the region develop, the increasing participation of women in the formal productive sectors of these countries opened up the demand for domestic workers from developing countries. However, domestic work in many countries is excluded from the purview of labor laws governing workers' rights and protection. Whilst the huge contribution of the migrant workers' remittances to the Philippine economy, questions have been raised on how remittances contribute to the country's development.

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This paper examines the motivations, conditions and experiences of Filipino migrant domestic workers who have worked and returned from other parts of the world in the context of the raging debate on migration and development. This paper is also contextualized based on the development trends in select migrant-sending countries in Asia highlighted by debates involving the migration-development nexus. The study interviews three (3) returned migrant domestic workers from the Middle East, Europe and Israel. The research shall probe into the respondents' life as migrant workers abroad and their life today in the Philippines after their return.

Contextualizing migration of domestic workers in Asia and the Philippines

Of the more than 250 million migrants around the world, Asia is ranked second after Europe with the highest number of migrants. It was in the 1970s that international migration substantially began in Asia particularly in the Southeast Asian region. Political developments in the early 1970s such as the migration of refugees at the end of the Vietnam War and the Cambodian crisis in the region as well as the relaxation of immigration laws in Western countries spurred the movement of people encouraging internal and external migration. The demand for labor in oil-rich Gulf States in the middle of the 1970s signifies a different kind of migration flow focused on labor migration. Initial demands for workers in the Gulf countries primarily concentrated on infrastructure projects of these oil-rich countries. Many countries in Asia such as South Korea, Thailand, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan including the Philippines took advantage of this opportunity to send their surplus labor to the Gulf countries. In the 1980s, the demand for workers shifted to female migrant workers to work as "health personnel, clerks, sales workers, professionals, domestic workers, cleaners and service workers" (Asis 2006). Today, labor migration within the Asian region has also increased as the newly-industrializing economies of South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand demand workers from poor neighboring countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia and Laos. Studies have shown that labor migration has escalated along gendered lines with male workers responding to jobs available in the productive sphere such as construction and manufacturing, while women workers are recruited in jobs such as caregiving and domestic work.

Asia employs millions of domestic workers within the region and a major source of migrant domestic workers to the Middle East and Northern countries. An estimated 4 million migrant domestic workers are working within Asia and 1.5 million migrant domestic workers to other destinations come from Asia, majority of whom are women (CMA, 2010). Aside from the Philippines as a major source of migrant domestic workers are countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. The Philippines' unofficial labor-export policy started out as a temporary measure to ease unemployment and

balance-of-payments problems during the Martial Law period. The opening of employment opportunities for migrant labor in the Gulf States became the window for the then dictator to ease social unrest due to high unemployment, and earn foreign currencies at the same time. Today, the Philippines probably have the most sophisticated and institutionalized labor migration policies in the world. All too often considered as a model for institutionalized labor migration for many developing countries aspiring to take advantage of the remittances on the economy; as well as easing unemployment pressures in their local economies. However, there are still debates within the Philippines whether the remittances of migrant workers have contributed in development. A bigger debate centers on the unwritten and unofficial labor export policy of succeeding Philippine governments since the 1970s.

No government official would voluntarily admit the systematic export of Filipino workers around the globe to contribute in the development of other countries. The Philippines began sending workers abroad as a temporary measure to ease unemployment pressure within the domestic labor market and address balance-of-payments deficits. This decision coupled with the demand for migrant labor in oil-rich Gulf States has become, after more than three decades, a billion-dollar industry today. A host of institutions have developed to facilitate the efficient flow of Filipino workers to different parts of the world. In the lead is the quasi-permanent overseas labor and employment agency of the Philippine State called the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA). The POEA regulates as well as perform as a manpower agency for Filipino workers to find work abroad. Aside from the POEA, various national agencies are involved in overseas labor migration including the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). On the side are numerous private recruitment agencies, some legal and some not so legal. To further reduce barriers of migration and extend protection to overseas Filipino workers, the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 was legislated. This law also protects aspiring overseas workers from illegal recruiters. Abroad, the Philippine State tries to reach the workers through the Philippine Overseas Labor Offices attached to Philippine Embassies all over the world. To further pave the way for easier migration of Filipino workers, the Philippines entered into bilateral labour agreements with countries such as the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Spain, Norway, Bahrain, South Korea, United Arab Emirates, the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba. The Philippines would have wanted more bilateral labour agreements especially in the Middle East but this becomes difficult as immigration policies in rich countries gradually becomes restrictive.

Filipino workers abroad are known for their skill, industriousness and command of the English language. This further pushes the demand for skilled Filipino workers around the globe in broad occupation sectors such as in manufacturing, construction, health and domestic services. The drive for Filipino

workers to leave the country coincides with the lack of decent employment available inside the country. The push for more lucrative pay and better working conditions abroad even encouraged certified doctors to train as nurses to be able to work in countries in the north. This becomes ironic considering the Philippines is nursing a deficient and inefficient public health sector. The long-running policy of facilitating labor migration from the Philippine shores both sea-based and land-based workers abroad confronts the development trajectory and strategy, if there is any, of this country. In the last 10 years, the overseas Filipino workers have been hailed as the “new heroes” (*bagong bayani*) due to their tremendous contribution to the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and the impact of remittances in keeping the economy afloat amidst financial crises.

Development and migration nexus

Receiving countries of migrant labor addresses worker shortage to fuel their industrialized and industrializing sectors at the same time confronts the challenges of accommodating migrant workers of different cultures and backgrounds. Sending countries participate in job opportunities from the labor markets of rich countries to benefit from the remittances and ease unemployment pressures by sending migrant labor. On the other hand, these countries are confronted with the challenges of protecting their workers abroad. Given the enormity and vast number of people involved in labor migration, international institutions of governance have developed to precisely tackle the issues surrounding labor migration and development such as the International Organization for Migration, UN-initiated Global Forum on Migration, etc.

The consequence of “brain and brawn drain” for sending countries thereby restricting their development prospects has been the usually cited negative implication of labor migration. As in the case of the Philippine economy, dependence on remittances without viable and potential industrialization strategy characterized the economy as consumer-led focused on services and retail economic sectors with very low industrial base. However, the millions of remittances from these workers help stabilize the investment-starved and low-income economies such as in the Philippines. Furthermore, the remittances of overseas workers to their families generally contribute in uplifting their standards of living and provided education for the next generation.

The debate on development and migration came to the fore during the 2008 Global Forum on Migration and Development in Manila. The GFMD is a process involving governments, civil society groups and migrants themselves to dialogue on the implications of migration on development. Migrant labor are people caught in between the policies of sending and receiving countries. Sending countries unable to provide adequate employment encourages and facilitates their workers abroad while receiving countries tighten immigration policies especially for irregular migrant workers. Non-state actors on the other hand, deplored the unwritten labor-exporting policies of many developing

countries which commodifies workers as well as the human rights violations of migrant labor in receiving countries.

Domestic work in the Philippines

The Philippines is a country that sends and employs thousands of domestic or household workers within the country and abroad. Of the 33.8 million employed in 2006, 1.8% are engaged in domestic work (2006 Labor Force Survey). Majority are concentrated in the capital city, Metro Manila and mostly coming from the provinces to be employed in the big cities. Most domestic workers in the country live inside the household and work more than 8 hours a day. The Filipino domestic worker or called "*Kasambahay*"³ in the vernacular have a separate provision in the Labor Code of the country excluding them from the laws and provisions covering the employed. For example, Filipino domestic workers have a vastly lower minimum wage (Php800 or USD\$20/ month) which is in the process of being revised because in practice salaries amount to USD\$62/month. The explanation for the low wage rates points to the board and lodging costs provided for the household worker. It is only recently that the country includes them in the regulations covering workers on social protection and health insurance. With the adoption of ILO Convention 189 relating to Decent Work for Domestic Workers is perceived to provide impetus for the improvement of employment conditions through a national law specifically for Filipino domestic workers.

Returned domestic workers: their stories

Elena: the irregular migrant in Italy

'Elena', not her real name, worked as a migrant domestic helper for 13 straight years since 1986 when she was just 24 years old. It's the first job she entered into even before she got married. She decided to cross borders at a young age to help out in the expenses of her family and since many of her friends also went abroad to work as domestic workers. 'Elena' first worked in Kuwait as a domestic helper for eight years and worked in Hong Kong in 1994 for the next 10 years. In between these migrations, she got married to a former Filipino migrant worker. But she had to continue working abroad to sustain her own family when her husband couldn't find work in the Philippines. She said her work in Hong Kong was quite fine considering she can earn HK\$600/month (USD\$76) compared to the salary of a domestic worker in the Philippines. Elena also have one day-off every week, a contract and enough money to send to her family abroad. While in Hong Kong, she maintained good relations with her children and husband in the Philippines. A situation that turned sour when she decided to work in Europe in 2004, specifically in Italy in the next three years.

³ 'Kasambahay' is a combination of two words: "kasama" which means "companion" and "bahay" which means "house".

'Elena' used the "backdoor" entry to Europe which means entering the country without a working contract or employer in Italy. Through her savings, Elena paid a huge amount to a fake employer in Hong Kong to obtain a Schengen visa to Europe. Her papers identified her as traveling with an employer on a holiday in Europe. Elena boarded a plane from Hong Kong to Moscow, took a connecting flight to Paris and from there traveled by train to Milano, Italy. Upon arriving in Italy, Elena applied for a tourist visa that will allow her to stay in the country as a freelance domestic worker. As a live-out domestic worker, Elena stayed at first in a flat with her sister-in-law together with other Filipinos. But after a few months, she has to move to a dormitory when her relations with her husband and sister-in-law began to deteriorate. Elena worked for many households and got paid on an hourly basis. While her work time was flexible, to earn more she has to work for more houses even on weekends and nights. She could clean as many as three houses per day. She worked so much that she admits missing some meals and just subsisted on energy drinks to clean as many house as she could. Elena earned about 600-800 euros a month for her hard work, more than 100% increase from her previous salary. However, her employment status deprived her of any other benefits (i.e. rest/holidays, health insurance) except for the hourly salary that she received in cleaning houses.

As more time she spent cleaning different households with no permanent residence of her own, her relations with her family weakened and soured. As she cannot stay in one place for long, her communication with her children became irregular that added to her mental worries and later affecting her physical wellbeing. After three years, she had a medical breakdown due to exhaustion, stress and was later on diagnosed with anemia. She said that when she got sick in Italy, she couldn't go to a hospital for fear of being arrested by immigration officers. "I don't have a health card because I only have a tourist visa. I don't have what they call there: 'permiso de soggiorno'. I just drink there energy drinks to energize," Elena said. As an irregular migrant worker in Europe, Elena even couldn't call emergency health care due to her dubious traveling papers. Elena separated from her husband and was prevented in contacting her children while in Europe. This added to her stress and her ailment worsened in 2007 forcing her to return to the Philippines and was immediately hospitalized. She underwent therapy for almost two years after she arrived.

Paz: the domestic worker in the Middle East

Paz is now 53 years old but she still recalls vividly her experiences as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. She first started working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong and after two years decided to venture to the Middle East for better pay. Also married a former migrant worker, her husband couldn't find work upon his return to the Philippines. She and her husband eventually separated and she was left with no choice but to work abroad in order for their

four children not to stop going to school. Her work before as a vendor and cook in the informal sector could not sustain the needs of her children.

Paz was hired by a French-Lebanese doctor living in Saudi Arabia. She had a contract and was promised a wage of approximately USD\$250 a month. Her task was to cook for the family and take care of their three (3) children. Paz recounted that her first year in Saudi was very difficult due to her employer's violations of her labor rights. At first, she was not given 3 months salary and her employer lent her to his friend's household as a domestic worker. She is also being sent to her employer's extended family (brother and/or mother) and did their household work without clear compensation.

Her employer wanted to transfer her to another employer before six months of working without giving her salary for the last 3 months. She complained about this and her original employer took her back, gave her pending wages and facilitated her employment contract. Since her complaint and subsequent refusal to be silenced earned her the respect of her employer and she finished her 2-year contract with this family. Paz is now engaged in informal work such as food vending and cooking for the community school in her district.

Neneth: a former domestic worker in Israel

Neneth Fontecilla is now 56 years old. She was a part-time teacher in Mindoro⁴ before she decided to work abroad as a domestic helper. She has seven children and for them to finish their education so they could land in decent jobs was her primary reason in embarking on becoming a domestic worker outside her country. Neneth worked as a domestic helper in Tel Aviv, Israel for almost one year from November 1998 to October the next year. She was 45 years old then. Her income as a teacher and from her husband also a part-time worker was not enough to send her seven children to school. As a part-time elementary school teacher then, she only received Php300 a month (USD\$8.5).

When she began working in Israel, her family's average monthly income was augmented by more than a hundred percent. She was receiving an equivalent of five hundred (500) U.S. dollars per month, which was valued at around two thousand (2,000) Israeli Shekel in 1998. This increase in the household income due to her remittances was more than enough to send her children to school and spend for their basic necessities. She was also able to buy a number of household appliances and renovate their house.

Based on her accounts, Neneth's journey to Israel did not involve her appearing before an embassy to procure her visa. Her traveling documents were processed by her sister, who is also a migrant worker in Canada, through a friend in Manila. This person arranged everything including her travel papers, visa and in finding an employer for her in Israel. It was unclear if she was issued a working visa or not. From the Philippines she traveled alone to Israel after

⁴ Mindoro is an island located south of Metro Manila.

taking a short stopover in Germany. The trip took more than twenty-four hours. She said that one thousand dollars was given to someone who fetched Neneth at the Tel Aviv airport. Neneth recounted that she lived with her employers as an in-house domestic helper or housemaid having flexible working hours. Her employers were an elderly couple, who has two children, one being a doctor and the other, a professor, both of whom had their own individual houses and merely paid their parents regular visits. The employers often speak in Hebrew or perhaps to her Arabic and communicate with Neneth using the English language. She described them as “very kind.” According to Neneth, there were plenty of Filipinos in Israel who work as caregivers and domestic helpers especially in the financial district of Tel Aviv.

Neneth believed that working abroad for her resulted in the improvement of her family’s economic and social well-being. The income she received as a migrant domestic worker has opened opportunities for her children to get better jobs by finishing school. Although she recalled moments of sadness while working far from home, those times were compensated by the goodwill shown to her by her employers. After returning to the Philippines, she allowed one of her children to work abroad but was victimized by an illegal recruiter. She is now widowed since 2009 and living with one of her children’s family.

Some lessons from the stories

The three stories narrated provided a glimpse into the different experiences and paths of Filipino migrant domestic workers to different countries. However, their motivations are common: to attain a better life for their families especially for the education and well-being of their children. Their stints abroad have partly fulfilled this aspiration but with certain costs. The remittances from the migrant domestic workers substantially alleviate economic hardships for their families in the Philippines. They were also able to provide hope for a decent life for their children by putting them to better education. However, as domestic workers abroad who cared for other people’s children, they have left behind their own children. The strain from the physical distance with their families most often contributes in the deterioration of family relations.

Domestic work for a long time has been beyond the purview of existing labor laws, being the private household challenging the intrusion of laws. Originating from the practices of slavery and indentured labor, domestic work is broadly unrecognized, invisible and undervalued. Thus, regulations and legislations protecting domestic workers remain challenged at the national levels as well as internationally. This vulnerability is doubly intensified for irregular migrant domestic workers with no legal guarantees and work benefits such as health insurance. Despite the sophisticated structure and processes of the Philippines in facilitating migrant workers, cracks in the system remain for them to fall on as they become victims of human rights abuses and illegal recruitment.

Philippine policies towards domestic workers

The Philippines has facilitated the steady pace of labor migration of its workers through institutional and legislative support. In 1995, the Republic Act 8042 also known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act established a higher standard of protection and rights promotion of migrant workers and their families. The law also provides for other services for migrants such as legal and financial assistance and information dissemination. Whilst the law supposedly diminishes the role of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) for eventual reduction of government role in migration, this was contested given the spate of problems concerning the Filipino migrants from illegal recruitment to human rights violations. A complementary law was signed in 2007 re-affirming the regulatory role of the POEA.

At present, a national law for domestic workers called “Kasambahay Bill” is in the pipeline and is strongly believed to be enacted specially after the adoption of the ILO Convention 189. The bill seeks to ensure the rights and protection of local domestic workers including a revision of the minimum wage of domestic workers specified in the Labor Code. It is also expected that this law in time will recognize domestic work as work and uphold the rights and dignity of domestic workers in the country.

Prospects

The recent political turmoil in the Middle East and the continuing recession in the United States affect the prospects for migration of Filipino workers in the coming years. The ensuing civilian unrest and armed confrontations in countries such as Libya and Syria where Filipino domestic workers are present bring to the fore emerging issues for the Philippines need to address. The Philippine governments to date has inadequate or lack of institutional support for returning migrant workers. Most often than not, migrant workers need to go back and work abroad due to the absence of employment opportunities in the Philippines. The Philippine institutions tremendously missed the opportunity to design re-integration programs for the returned migrant workers which needs to include employment programs, skills re-trainings and financial support while transitioning in the country. This lack of programmatic support for the returned creates a disincentive for migrant workers to find employment in the country. At present, circumstances have pushed the migrant workers, many of who are domestic workers, to flee the war-torn countries in the Middle East. However, their prospects are quite bleak upon their return in the country.

In terms of policy implications, the Philippine governments needs to formulate a strategy to re-integrate the returned migrant workers into the local political-economy and take advantage of the skills of this new human resource. The returned migrant workers are already skilled and have improved their skills while working abroad. This is important to recognize in order to craft the

appropriate re-integration program for the returned migrant workers. In terms of policy specifically for the Filipino domestic workers, the ILO Convention 189 should serve as a catalyst for the Philippine government to push for more protection for these types of workers through bilateral labor agreements with the receiving countries. The local domestic workers in turn can greatly benefit once the national law on domestic workers is enacted. This ensures the wages, benefits and social protection of domestic workers nationwide. The laws and policies that are established to protect domestic workers are forms of recognizing that domestic work is work.

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