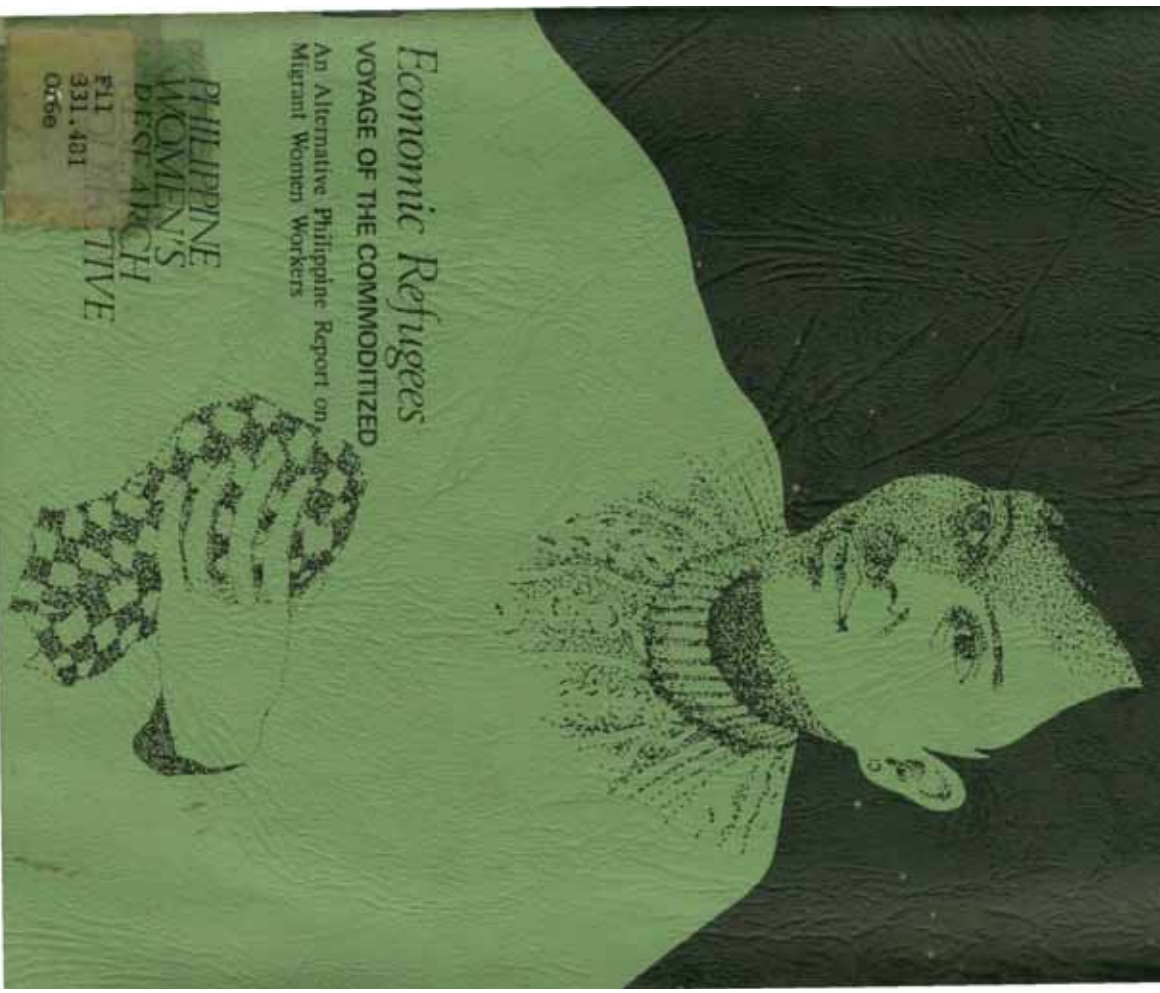


Wilhelmina S. Orozco



Economic Refugees

VOYAGE OF THE COMMODITIZED

An Alternative Philippine Report on
Migrant Women Workers

PHILIPPINE
WOMEN'S
RESEARCH
COLLECTIVE

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The Author

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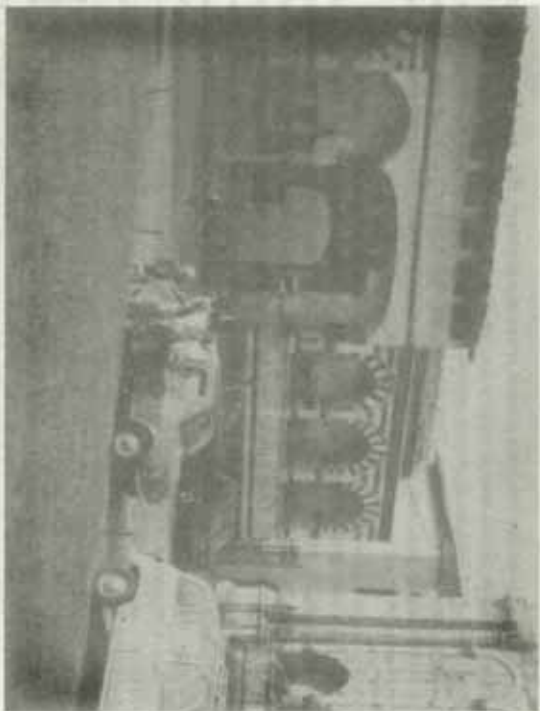
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• 1985 •

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FILIPINA MIGRANT WORKERS: ECONOMIC REFUGEES.

by Wilfredo G. Orosa

They fled to different corners of the world when life in the Philippines was getting difficult — more so immediately before and after Martial Law was declared. The Filipino women flew by hundreds and thousands to the Middle East, Europe and Canada to escape from the increasing hardships, to help their families earn if not augment their income and sustain their needs, and may be to discover foreign lands, as a last reason, leaving children aged three years old and even much younger, their husbands, their jobs whether as professional or manual workers, their whole roots in fact with heavy hearts. Those who found lenient employers insured their return every year — saving every month to be able to see their families again. Others returned after two, three or even five years steeling their nerves in cold and wintry environments with not so hospitable people just so they could enjoy special holidays like Christmas, New Year or town fiestas with their loved ones, only to go back after a month's stay or so. And then the years of distance were counted again.

The lives of the Filipina migrant workers during the seventies up to the eighties reveal a marked disregard of the government for their plight. In most cases they are only considered as milking cows for taxes — a source of dollars and nothing more. From the time the government set up the Overseas Employment Development Board in 1974, which name was later changed to Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (1982), the government has merely sought to put order in the way of collection of taxes from the recruiting agencies for one and from the migrant workers themselves for another. The most recent debated government decree was Executive Order 857 declaring that 50% — 70% of the earnings of the migrant workers have to be remitted to the Philippines to their families through banks and 30% remain in them in their work destinations, so as to insure the exchange of their dollars in the Philippines thus increasing the monetary reserves here for servicing the heavy debts to the World Bank-IMF. Luckily the ruling was changed to declare that only 25% was needed to be remitted of the salaries of the migrant workers in HongKong only representing a minor victory of the workers over this dictatorial regime. As of 24 January, the latest news is that Minister of Labor and Employment Blas F. Ople has declared the repeal of the decree in a dialogue with the officials of the Pamantasan ng Kalipayan ng mga Manggagawa Laban sa Kalitapan.

According to the POEA, (Annual Report 1984), the total land-

based contract workers processed in 1984 was 371,065 as compared to 12,501 in 1975. This is about 30 times higher than the sea-based workers whose number increased from 23,534 to 54,016 in 1975 and 1984 respectively, or about double the number. Of the total land-based workers, entertainers and service workers to which most women belong, 91,562 contract workers were processed in 1984 as compared to 4,672 in 1975, or an increase of almost 2,000%. In 1975, the highest number of land-based contract workers went to Europe, with 3,160 as aggregate compared to a total of 12,501 CW's during that year. The number of Middle-East-bound CW's in 1975 was only 1,552. In 1984, the highest number of CW's went to the Middle East, numbering 311,157, with Asia, 43,385; the Americas, 5,905; and Europe, 3,724.

How did the migrant workers leave the country? They were either recruited by agencies¹ in the Philippines with connections abroad to other employment agencies; they left the country as tourists then stayed on in the foreign countries as illegal workers or had their status changed to contract workers; or privately, some persons were hired on the basis of recommendations of Filipinos already in those countries. At the beginning of the seventies, the flight to Europe was similar to any of these alternative methods taken by the workers. However, the Filipinos in Saudi Arabia were recruited through some legal means; others through devious ways by Arabians and Filipino recruiters alike who were out to make money out of the cheap labour. In France, most Filipinos came from Iran, fleeing the latter country when Khomeini took over. They stayed as illegal workers in Paris and other provinces of France not wanting to go back anymore to the Philippines unless their work permits were secured.

To get a job abroad, the worker has to shell out a great sum for things like recruitment fees which could run from P4,000 way back in the seventies to P20,000 at present. The fees could include free plane tickets (or not), passport processing, (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs charges P450,000 per), travel taxes, etc. As soon as she is able to pay the amount, all the worker has to do is get her NBI clearance, vaccination if there is need for such as proof of medical clearance, then pack her bags for immediate departure. Plane tickets are issued by their employers, directly at times. Cuts were rife in the seventies though when the worker's salaries in the foreign countries were reduced from the amount stipulated in the contract in order to pay for their own plane tickets. The employers simply deducted from their salaries without so much as telling them. Because they would keep the passports of the workers, then they could arbitrarily control their movements while there.

The nature of jobs open to Filipinas abroad is largely manual — as domestic helpers, hotel chambermaids, auxiliary nurses, or prostitutes

masquerading as dancers at night clubs. They now occupy such positions which have been vacated by the women natives of those countries who are now mostly employed in the industrial sector enjoying higher wages and union benefits. The Filipinas' lack of better employment opportunities and low wages at home have driven them to accept such positions despite their lowly character.

In Hongkong, there are about 26,000 Filipinas; in Singapore 7,000; in Japan, 15,000 hostesses and entertainers; in Europe about 80,500 broken down as follows: England - 10,000 auxiliary nurses; Sweden - 500 domestic helpers; France - 5,000; Italy - 50,000; and Spain - 15,000. Figures are not known in the countries of Germany and Holland but they could run up to thousands also. In Canada, which is the permanent destination of those CW's who cannot get permanent residency status, 5,000 domestic helpers are known to be working for Filipino couples and Canadian employers. The figures may not be so accurate because the government hardly devotes any effort to distinguishing male and female workers in their files. They are more adept at counting remittances. Hence, most of the statistics are based on the calculations of KAIBIGAN, or Friends of Filipino Migrant Workers and their connections abroad through similar agencies, mostly religious. The statistics on Canada were taken from a government authority who served in that country for seven years as consul.

The common problems of workers rest on their being strangers in these lands. Filipinas cannot so easily seek better positions in society - they are always hounded by immigration rules and regulations. As women, their main problem is achieving freedom to choose the job they really want to do in these countries, commensurate to their abilities since a lot of them have been professionalists.

Pre-Departure Problems

Before the Filipina can ever think of leaving for abroad, she has to go through various channels. When she applies at the recruitment agencies for jobs, she must shell out from P4,000 to P20,000 depending upon the scale of the salary of the job abroad. All these are supposed to take care of the fees including her ticket and passport. Sometimes illegal recruiters exist who take advantage of her money and leave her hanging there - all the savings of her family gone and her future full of debts or in dire poverty. If in case she is able to go, possibilities of non-fulfillment of contract or unpaid wages occur in the countries of their destination. There is no guarantee that once she is able to sign a contract then everything will be smoothsailing. Sometimes, also, instead of the job stated in the contract, she gets a different one, say from a cultural dancer to a prostitute.

A better look at the working conditions of the Filipina migrant workers can be done by viewing them geographically:

ASIA: HongKong, Singapore and Japan²

Filipina domestic helpers flocked to HongKong and Singapore starting in the 1970's³. As of 1983, there are 24,000 Filipina domestic helpers in HongKong and about 5-7,000 in Singapore. They possess sturdier characteristics: single, at least high school graduates and aged early 20s to their mid 30s.

Starting from a salary of HK\$300 way back in the 1970s, the Filipina domestic helper's salary has increased to HK\$1650 (about US\$212.68).

Working Conditions:

In HongKong and Singapore, the Filipina domestics suffer from extreme degradation and humiliation. Because they are seen as economic opportunists by their Chinese employers, they are scolded, shouted at, physically mistreated or even sexually harassed. Their working hours are unregulated, lasting usually from 5:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. They are not given rest or holidays, undepaid, or made to do extra chores outside of the hours. Rape cases are plenty in Singapore with a bigger number unreported, or reported by the Filipinas after several attempts, successful or unsuccessful by the employer.

On top of all these, the government policies of the two countries are racist and discriminatory to the Filipinas. The Employment Act of Singapore does not include domestic helpers whose hours of work and type of household chores need to be defined. The effect of this has been to deny the domestic helpers their due share of benefits as workers such as the right to form unions, to have every Sunday off, to work only for 8 hours and overtime be entitled to wages, and others.

In Singapore and HongKong restrictions are instituted to prevent change of employer, change of type of employment, or even the right of the helper to terminate her employment. A release letter is required for a HongKong domestic helper to change employers with the first employer having the right to decide whether helper is allowed or is to be repatriated immediately. Overall the effects of these restrictions are to curtail the integration of the domestic helper into the mainstream of Singapore and HongKong societies. An extreme policy is the requirement in Singapore for a maid to undergo check-up every 6 months in order to insure that she does not get pregnant. A \$35,000 (US\$2,500) Security Bond is put up by the employer before he acquires a foreign servant to make him guard his maid from getting pregnant or married.

The Filipinas have replaced the traditional "Karyukuan" (Japanese women from very poor families sold by their parents to Japanese men during and after the Second World War.) They have become now the "Tapeyukuan" or Southeast Asian women who sell themselves to the Japanese men on a nightly basis. They have come up to 35,000 in number, most of them illegally recruited by the gasiters in Japan, the most prominent of which is the Yakuzza. As illegal workers, they came in under false names, without work permits, and with unknown addresses. Because of these, they have fallen prey and under the control of their recruiters.

The illegal recruitment of the women has allowed the Japanese businessmen to peg their salaries at an amount as low as \$220 or ¥30,000 instead of \$750 which is the legal rate of their Japanese counterparts. Some of the Filipino women "receive their salary only once, before going home to the Philippines, or when they change employers."⁴

The working conditions of these women are so dire that it is unimaginable how they could at all survive. They work at night, are kept in a house to be fetched and accompanied home, allowed only one day off a month; some live with their employers, others in huts; open to abuse of their employers anytime while their passports are kept; and sometimes with the connivance of the authorities, could be deported any time they become recalcitrant or hesitant on their rights. The Japanese officials are no better than the recruiters: they maltreat these women once caught in cases when they do not reveal their Japanese recruiters.

MIDDLE EAST: Saudi Arabia

Very little information is available about the Filipinas working in Saudi Arabia. A few write-ups about returnees or those spending their vacations here have been made but reveal very little facts about the specific conditions of women in that country. Two interviews by this author of a nurse and a former domestic servant hopefully will fill that gap.

About 252,000 Filipino workers can be found in Saudi Arabia alone.⁵ The women comprise 18.2% or 45,854.

In 1983 alone, of the \$1 billion estimated earnings from the contract workers all over the world, 60% of that amount or P6,000,000 could have come from Saudi Arabia, or P1,092,000 could have also come from the women themselves.

The nurse and the domestic helper that this author interviewed were both economically well-off. They did not complain of any non-fulfillment of contract nor low wages. In fact, both were able to help their families back in the Philippines through the big amount of remittances they sent home. The domestic helper was able to recover the amount of P8,000 she spent for the recruitment after just two months of working. On the other hand, the nurse has been able to save as much as \$1,000 a month ever since she started her contract.

What affects the women though very much is the social status of women there. They complain of too many restrictions put on their movements. They are hardly able to meet other people. They only go out of the hospital, in the case of the nurse, when shopping and then go back again, fetched by a bus. The domestic helper complained that in all of the 18 months of her work, under a Saudi couple, she was not able to go out at all, much less to peep through the window. She was not allowed also to talk with her co-Filipinas.

The social restrictions on the women stem from the religious atmosphere in the country itself. Mecca and Medina, the holiest cities of Islam are located in it; thus it is regarded as the center of the religion. The Saudis regard themselves as watchers of Modern moral precepts as well as of the Holy Qisas. Under this situation, the women occupy a secondary position. They are ordered to wear veils to cover their bodies so as not to tempt the men. The Filipina workers interviewed also do that. The nurse and her co-nurses would cover themselves with long flowing black veils when going shopping while the domestic helper wore that also even while serving inside the house.

The women also suffer from the authoritarian postures of their employers. The domestic helper cannot use the phone, cannot go out to buy even her pantry. The nurse on the other hand narrates how one nurse, due to her language difficulties with a patient, was dismissed outrightly. A mere lack of permission to go out of the hospital from the hospital director could also cause repatriation, even if the contract is still in progress.

A deeper investigation of the conditions of Filipina workers is necessary in order to be able to draw up a program of action that will expose the highly male chauvinistic tendencies in Saudi Arabia and other Middle East countries.

EUROPE

As early as 1970, Filipinas migrant workers have been beating themselves in Europe. Nurses especially have been in demand in Germany and other parts of Europe. They are the earliest migrant workers to

suffer all the problems that a regular and illegal migrant worker experiences today. To date, the Filipinos are scattered all over Europe: in Holland, France, Belgium, Great Britain, Austria, Spain, Greece, and Italy.

For lack of concrete evidence about the plight of nurses that stayed in Europe at that time in the '70s, we can only present two cases this author encountered in the Philippines upon interviewing two nurses, one who came back to the country after 9 years of nursing service, and another who was here on vacation. The first went to Germany leaving her 3 year old son and another much older in order to help support their family income. She lived in a room in the nun's quarters beside the hospital run by a religious group. In her words, to the left and right of her room were those of the nuns'. In that condition, she had very little interaction with her co-Filipino nurses; more so her social life in terms of meeting the opposite sex was curtailed. She narrated that the Filipinas were forbidden to speak Pilipino because to them, the nuns, it would antagonize the patients for their conversion in Pilipino would be mistaken for a comment about their (the patients') condition hence aggravating their wounds. Although qualified to become a head nurse, she was by-passed several times; on some occasions, she was even blamed for acts not of her own doing which were detrimental to the condition of the patient. The treatment of this nurse even was worse than other migrant nurses in the hospital. The hospital director at one instance pointed his finger at her while giving her a sermon for an act not her fault at all. The only consolation that this nurse had was her salary which was high enough for her to be able to visit her family once a year out of her own savings. This she did for 9 years. Seeing no progress in serving further, she resigned and is now managing her own resort in Southern Luzon together with her husband.

The other nurse is single and by her niden, seems to be enjoying her stay in Austria. She claims that they have an Austrian-Filipino Friendship Society which presents Philippine culture now and then in that country. The presentations are not critical but rather were trans-plantation of what is Philippine in a foreign soil like Pilipino traditional dances and songs. About her work, she said that she receives more than \$1,000 a month and enjoys handsome overtime pay at par with the Austrian nurses in the hospital she works in. This nurse seems to have accepted the fact that she can never be a head nurse in the hospital although she is very much qualified to do so. However, there was evident erosion on her part about further exploration of her conditions there, since the encounter of this author with her was only accidental.

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Nurses in Other Parts of the Globe

The plight of nurses to Europe and other parts of the world is understandable. Here in the country, they are paid only "wages where between P600 to P900 per month." In the Middle East, they could get something like \$1,000 to \$1,500 excluding other benefits like being paid overtime plus additional pay for working during Ramadhan. When the King was assassinated, a Filipina nurse and her co-workers were "given one month salary bonus for their services apart from that year's salary."⁶

The records of the Ministry of Labor and Employment show that a total of 21,948 nurses left the country as overseas contract workers, mostly to the Middle East from 1975 to 1981. This increased the yearly average of nurses migration to 3,135 or up by 23% from the 1971 average.⁷ In the United States, some 30,000 Filipina nurses are working in various hospitals all throughout. "In New York alone, an estimated 7,000 Filipinas earn about P20,000 a month excluding overtime pay. In a meeting with New York City Health Hospital directors and American recruiters of nurses, MOLE Minister Miss F. Ople was told that U.S. employers prefer Filipina nurses because of their early disposition and ability to speak English.⁸ Thus, the colonization and neo-colonization of the Americans of the Philippines have prepared the Filipina nurses for serving the interests of the former's constituents in their own country, thereby depleting our country of an effective medical pool of health servants.

When this author went to Europe in 1981-1982, there was lacking a comprehensive assessment of conditions of Pilipino migrant workers in Europe. Pilipino groups were scattered all around the continent giving social services to Pilipino workers but there was no unity strong enough to serve research needs. The findings of this author on the plight of the Filipina workers are more or less enough to say that at present they continue to be occupying one of the lowest positions in the European social hierarchy, that their problems are attended to on an individual basis, and that unity is absent which could be a strong force for making the societies, the whole continent itself more responsive to their needs, as workers, and as Pilipino women, simultaneously.

Pilipino women suffer from a clash of cultural values in Europe - between that of a conservative and a highly permissive one; between a pseudo-capitalist and a purely capitalist; between a low- and a highly materialistic one. The Filipinas brought with them all the value systems they were brought up in the Philippines to the highly industrialized countries which then wielded power to domesticate, subordinate and influence on these young women. In terms of economic, political-cultural aspects, the women suffered greatly before finally adjust-

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ing to the place and some are still continuing to suffer miserably if not have broken down internally due to the disparities in lifestyles and legal sections imposed by most of the European governments on migrant workers.

Economic discrimination

The Filipino women suffer from being cooped up in menial jobs traditionally held onto by European women. They work as housemaids or domestic helpers; as hotel chambermaids, as auxiliary nurses or stewardesses meaning cleaners of urinals, toilets and hospital floors, and as waitresses. Although they have credentials worthy of being office employees in Philippine companies, they can only occupy these menial jobs in Europe because of the discriminatory and racist policies of most European governments. Like their Asian counterparts, they cannot easily transfer jobs without being declared illegal. They cannot easily transfer employers as well without the permission of proper authorities. They are continually hounded - having to register every change of address, or even of employer. Taking on 2-3 jobs a day cleaning homes and/or working in hospitals, the women develop appendicitis and ulcers brought about by being too much under pressure, at work or by the authorities.

Because they need to earn in order to help their families back home, they suffer miserably from low wages, or even from lack of union benefits regularly enjoyed by the natives of those countries. Very few unions in Europe promote the welfare of Filipinas (also Filipinos) workers. The Filipinas themselves are hesitant to join such unions for fear that being active and political in would brand them as communists as such kind of activism is deemed so in the Philippines by the government authorities. Thus the exploitation of the Filipinas workers becomes very easily facilitated since dominant socio-political forces are not acting in concert for the alleviation of their problems. As of 1982, the menial worker can only fetch as much as \$4-5 per hour for cleaning a house, or \$300-\$400 a month as a live-in domestic worker. To maximize their output, these helpers (the live-out) take on two to three cleaning jobs a day to be able to send back money to the Philippines for their families for as much as \$200 a month.

"Some employers provide them free tickets, from the country and back. Others give one month additional bonus. Some allow their maids or helpers to use their cars on days off. In the case of hospital nurses, they only work for five days, a week and earn \$400 a month. They can also have their days off on bank holidays depending on their own choice so long as the days fall within the allotted number of leave credits."⁹

Cultural Alienation

The migrant workers also suffer from language problems except in Great Britain, the mother country of the United States, which also colonized the tongues of the Filipino people. The Filipinas in France are the ones most hard put because the pronunciation is difficult very much unlike Italian or Spanish which are related in some ways to Filipino, the Philippine national language. However, the Filipinas have a way of alleviating their lack of language facility: they ridicule the languages by punning when they are among their compatriots.

This language problem has also brought about the political isolation of the migrant workers. They cannot read newspapers written in French, Italian or any other language, like Dutch. They also cannot listen to radio nor television programs. This causes their lack of knowledge of the political events in the country and prevent their understanding of the socio-political and economic processes, especially their relationships to the Third World. What could have been an ideal chance to be attuned to international events has been foregone by this lack of fluency in the language.

On the other hand, those who have learned the languages exhibit a certain kind of confidence somewhat feeling equal to the European natives. This in turn has made a large number feel superior to other Filipinos and Filipinas who could not learn the languages nor "acculturate" themselves to the foreign cultures. The adverse effect of this has been to uproot the Filipinas and make them adopt the foreign countries as their own, now feeling a part of their societies. As a result, some have the tendency to look down to anything Filipino and to criticize heavily those "backward and conservative" values that bring about a "buddy" or provincial demeanor. These same workers inherit the materialistic outlook, developing the acquisitive hankering for television sets, stereo phonos, and all other industrial products produced in the continent. Some of these appliances find their way to the Philippines to the families of the migrant workers which in turn create the materialistic outlook of the Filipino families.

A very glaring phenomenon among Filipina migrant workers is their single-mindedness or separatist outlook. In the big cities of Europe they cluster among themselves or only with Filipino men. Some manage to develop relationships among their compatriots; among other women; but very few integrate themselves among the natives of those countries. They consider European men as being only after sexual encounters and never serious enough to marry them. In cases of marriage with them the Filipinas again exhibit the same kind of self-confidence among those who acquire the language. On the other hand, marriage does not be-

come a passport for them to assume an equal status with the women nurses of those countries. They still maintain a low economic status serving as cleaners, domestic helpers or auxiliary nurses. To marry a European does not equalize the status of the Filipina as the by reason of gender according to conservative European views is always and will be subordinate to the man, and this time to his society. Socialization results from this and eventually, privatization of the Filipina.

Privatization is a consequent result of the Filipina worker's adjustment to the European societies, adjustment here is meant to be legalization of her stay, by marriage or any other legal means like fulfilling the requirement of five years of residence. She considers her long hard climb up the ladder of European social hierarchy an individual achievement and hence her own entitlement to individual fruits of her labour. The next aspirations for the worker becomes the settlement of her own family in the European countries, or if this is not possible in any other western country like the United States and Canada which allow Filipinos to become permanent residents. Another grave consequence of this privatization or acquisition of permanent residency status is their changing citizenships from Philippine to Dutch, British or German nationality. This is the ultimate adverse effect of Philippine migration abroad.

Effects of labour migration

The migrant worker develops a kind of self-confidence due to handling a foreign job. She now exudes a certain aura of being at home with herself, and not being ashamed of narrating her experiences abroad to others no matter how dire they are. It is still a status symbol in the country to be able to go abroad even as a domestic helper, compared with being one in the Philippines. She also becomes more analytical and sharp in her discussions. Because of the regulated working hours and efficiency for profits in western capitalist countries, she has imbibed the systematic methods of dealing with her problems and chores. She is capable of managing concerns, like the worker who now owns a beach resort in southern Luzon. The migrant worker also develops a western taste for clothes, especially those coming from Paris, France. The color combinations of her clothes are influenced by the latest fashions in the west. Gucci and Pierre Cardin are well-known brands among them. The migrant worker also becomes conscious or may be more conscious of her physical appearance, as her make-up table is now cluttered with various lotions, creams, foundations for facial beautification. She now becomes conscious of the wrinkles in her face, trying hard to hide them with the use of lotions. This looking

inward, a physical consciousness is also healthy for the Filipino woman who has been reared in a country steeped in religious teachings that the human body is evil, more so a woman's body is a source of temptation.

In Asia, the Filipina domestic helper's plight is graver than those in western capitalist countries. Migration has made them feel inferior because they now have to serve Chinese employers whom they consider lower in status among Filipinos in the Philippines. Now the Chinese employers have them under their thumb economically.

The effect of migration among Filipinas in Asia are twofold: for one, they learn to organize as in the case of those in HongKong; they have learned to group together under the United Filipinos organization (UNIFIL) to protest against a "1982 decree issued by President Ferdinand Marcos requiring overseas Filipino workers to remit 50% of their monthly salaries through government authorized channels . . . It is unfair, unreasonable and violates our rights . . . provided under the Philippine Constitution." "10 Another is for the Filipinas to march in an individualistic manner to their oppression. Because most of their employers are prone to abuse them sexually, or make them work beyond the normal or legal number of hours, apart from robbing them - the Filipinas have learned to fight back. They charge employers vicariously use knowledge of the former, complain to Philippine authorities, or take the law into their own hands as in one case of a Filipina who killed her Chinese employer after the latter scolded her about the method of cleaning a frying pan. She killed herself afterwards by drinking bleaching solution, probably due to extreme guilt. The point being made here is that the Filipina migrant workers, although alienated in a foreign country, also seek justice instead of meekly submitting to oppression and exploitation as they are wont to do in the Philippines. The migrant workers in Europe are better off relatively because their employers are aware of the rights of workers and their entitlement to proper compensation of regulated working hours.

The government stands to be the most benefited from this contract migration. In 1984, an estimated US\$421.96 Millions were remitted by landbased, contract workers, half of which amount could have come from the women workers themselves. In 1983, the Ministry of Labor and Employment claimed that \$1 billion estimated earnings from the workers in "Middle East and Africa helped ease the country's balance-of-payment difficulties." "11 Actually, \$935M salary remittances were recorded in 1983, "equalled only by the dollar earnings of the export-manufacturing sector." "12

The government has also used this labour power export as a stop gap measure to prevent disenchantment among laid off workers, retrenched or suspended due to slowed down operations of capitalist companies, multinationals or entities. When the coconut industry was in a slump sometime in 1983, the government provided training skills to laid off workers of several dedicated coconut factories and coconut oil mills in Southern Tagalog in order to prepare them for jobs overseas.¹³ This year, the complete breakdown of sugar production in Negros Occidental has elicited the same moves from the government.¹⁴ Once again it is providing skills training for work abroad to sugar workers who cannot afford to find another job in the island itself, much more so to transfer to a better one since the whole province is bedlegged by the effects of the breakdown. The government seems to have a penchant pattern for solving economic ills — export of labour unrest while making untouchable MNC's which continue to enjoy lucrative businesses by underpaying workers over here.

Filipino Migrant Workers' Groups

Many Filipino migrant workers organizations have been created in Europe answering the empirical needs of the Filipino workers, in general, without specific attention to the problems of Filipino women workers. In England, there are *Pagkakataon*, and the Commission of Filipino Migrant Workers. *Pagkakataon* was originally created sometime in the early '80s to help prevent the deportation of some Filipino workers from Great Britain. It was composed of several organizations working individually for migrant workers' problems with British and Filipino composition. However, sometime in 1981 or 1982, the religious sector broke away and formed the second group. The initial campaigns of the CFMW centered on making the Filipino migrant workers feel guilty by exhibiting to them pictures and talking to them about the ills on the Philippines. This tactic was identified with radical campaign at that time before the country fell under martial law. The workers reacted by refusing to fall under such an organization that makes them recall the very same reasons for their migration to England.

Sometime in December, 1982, a move was made to make the women workers aware of their being Filipinas and women by introducing books written about Latin American, African and other Third World women. The response of the organizers to this proposal was to claim that the women workers are not interested in such books. A nun who gave that response could not perceive the long range effect of just even exhibiting such books and other similar materials to the Filipino women workers. Another move was to show a film about a Filipina nurse to the workers

during their Christmas party. Quite dramatically, the only Filipina in that CFMW organization dismissed the film as not depicting the plight of the nurse since she was smiling in the movie most of the time. How could a nurse present a gloomy outlook to patients who are recuperating from a disease? Even the suggestion of letting the workers decide for themselves whether they wanted to watch the film or not was dismissed by this Filipina who was married to a British anthropologist.

This high-handed manner of organizers if not curbed ultimately develops into a dogmatic posture that most Filipinos shun and hence makes them apolitical, private and isolated from the social processes of any society. Philippine or foreign. Unfortunately, such methods are characteristic of organizations with dogmatic leaders refusing to be criticized or may be afraid of criticisms for fear of losing their power on the commitments if there are any.

Such an example of an organization may not be representative of all Filipino migrant workers' associations in Europe. However, lessons can be drawn from their methods of work which other groups can make use of. The present status of Filipinos in Great Britain is more ideal than before: all deportation proceedings have been stopped through the efforts and solidarity of Britishers and some committed Filipino women and men identified with other groups than the one described above.

In Belgium, the workers are grouped under the *Sarnahan ng mga Managagawang Pilipino* (publishing a newsletter called *Kaparinig*) which recently held their elections last November 1984. Again the objectives of the association are to help them along their work problems and provide them Philippine cultural presentations through songs and dances. Issues of women's liberation are not tackled within because it is considered not important enough or untimely to be broached the group compared to their present problems. However, due to lack of possibilities for their becoming permanent residents in Belgium, the workers are eyeing chances of transferring to Canada or the United States where they can settle more peacefully, never mind if it is as domestic helpers or any such work. However, some claim that they can land jobs as nurses in hospitals there through the help of their relatives, jobs that are certainly more socially rewarding than the former. Again, a priest adds the mostly-women composed group by providing them a place for contacting each other and for meetings.

In France, a united Filipino workers' group split into two in 1982. These are: *Sandigan* and *Kasamawa* which was formed on January 24, 1982 in Paris.¹⁵ (*Sandigan* stands for *Kapansamin ng mga Managagawang Pilipino*.)

The rumored cause of the split is the radicalism of the original group which some members did not favour. Although most of the members came to France from Iran during that country's transfer of powers from the Shah to Khomeini, the Filipinas are not so keen about cooperating with each other. These two groups however enjoy the support of the Confederation Française Travail (CFTD) which has helped them secure their carte de travail or work permits after several months of being illegal. Under President Mitterand's socialist government, the workers gained more legal concessions.

Many other service-oriented groups exist composed of natives of European countries and Filipinos who have acquired permanent residency. Sadly lacking in their programs is a thrust towards education of Filipino women workers along feminist objectives within a Third World context. This area of political work among them seems to be a green pasture which the members also fear to tread, or which they may consider insignificant or of low priority. To raise the consciousness of women as women is not considered a political undertaking when this in itself is already a political act. The lack of understanding of the objectives, the theories and knowledge of the experiences of Third World women as women have brought about a program action for migrant women that makes them only economic in outlook, if not political in the left male chauvinistic sense. The character of the Filipino women, their consciousness brought about by colonization of various foreign powers in the past and at present, obviously has not been studied by these groups resulting in the shorchanging of the migrant workers themselves.

Most of the institutions working for the plight of the Filipino migrant workers are religious. In Germany, the Caritas takes care of cases referred to them such as prostitution and non-fulfillment of contracts. In Belgium, a priest has offered his office as haven for meetings of the workers. In England, a nun is directly involved in the running of the Commission on Filipino Migrant Workers. In Italy, a former priest is involved also. What is significant about this is that the religious fails to take into account the sex differentiation character of the problems of migrant workers. In the end, the Filipinas' problems are reduced to economic reasons, which at first glance they are, and the solutions parake also of a similar nature. Thus instead of grabbing the chance to make the women recognize their oppression and exploitation as gender-oriented also and that there is a need to be aware of this in order to achieve a full liberation, the women become mere pawns in the power game to control political leadership. More often than not, as soon as Filipinas secure their positions in those foreign countries, they begin to rest in the comforts of their homes and not bother anymore about the plight of other workers.

Among these Filipino workers' groups, the presence of the religious people is quite obvious who may in one way or another be influencing the political programs of action. The Catholic religion, embraced by the religious, especially has had a strong part in the subordination of Filipino women. Brought by the Spaniards to the Philippines, the Catholic religion taught Filipinas how to pray and look for strength in heavenly beings. They learned to attribute any achievement to the Lord Almighty denying themselves any capacity or power for doing anything without this recourse to a God. Thus in Europe, many Filipina migrant workers can be seen congregating in the churches which provide English services every Sunday. These are the gathering points for all of them - where they chat with co-Filipinos afterwards, hold tele-ettes about their employers, or about their families back home. It becomes a source of strength for them to be able to pray and seek solace from the problems they suffer from abroad. The inward looking into instead of outward by the Filipinas has made them blame themselves more for their lot than the outside forces. A great number of them are suffering from nervous breakdowns. In England alone, it was reported that 15,000 are suffering from heavy depressions.¹⁶

A nun, whom, this author met in London provides psychological treatment to a Filipina confined in a hospital. She has been declared unfit to work by British doctors, and has been recommended to be returned to the Philippines. She was found mute and lacking any kind of vitality, not even the strength to take care of herself. The doctors also diagnosed their illness as brain damage. However, when the nun persisted in looking after the Filipina, talking to her in Filipino, holding her hand and combing her hair, she later began to respond. The nun found out later that her illness was more of homesickness than any brain damage. However, the organizers were reluctant to let her go home yet because she would lose the opportunity to be a permanent resident if she did as she had not yet completed a five-year residence in Britain.

There may be sincere efforts on the part of organizers or organizations to look after the needs of workers - but how much of their solutions really redound to their benefits? How much of these solutions are adversely opposite to the cultural consciousness of the Filipinas? Pragmatic approaches may be helpful but if they distort the sense of values, or undermine feelings of Philippine rootedness then the sacrifices may be costlier than the material gains.

Solving the problems of the Filipina workers abroad require short- and long-term approaches. The ultimate solution of course is the phase out of this outward migration which has become a neurosis more than a cure to the economic problems of the country. The problem is still rooted in the lack of decent, beneficial jobs for women in the Philippines traceable to the export-oriented thrusts of the economic plans of the government and its subservience to foreign multinational which hardly provide gainful employment to women.

Nevertheless, solutions are suggested along the following lines:

- 1) Make the government include in the work contracts the return trip every 6 months free to be shouldered by the employer. The reason behind this is to make the worker herself maintain her ties with and sustain the emotional needs of her family symbolically.
- 2) Provide counselling care to the Filipinas abroad and her family here in the Philippines. The opportunity of the Filipinas to know that other people care for her family as well can boost her sagging physical strength and ego even if her job is menial.
- 3) Include feminist issues in the discussions of problems of migrant workers at educational seminars. Corollary to this, inculcate a historical outlook in the courses for them to see their problems as brought about primarily by outside forces and also to make them feel equal to the western women (if these are their employers), or feel dignified as Filipinas.
- 4) Western feminist women have to initiate projects with Filipino women instead of waiting for them to reach out to them. However, such projects have to consider their level of understanding of feminist principles and cultural level as well.
- 5) Alliances with progressive women from Third World countries should be encouraged by organizers of Filipino migrant workers. This should be dealt with to make the Filipinas see their problems also from a Third World context. Hopefully, it will make them feel proud of being a Filipino and stop trying to be westerners or shed off their colonial mentality, to those who are afflicted with it.
- 6) In the case of Executive Order 857, the government must remove the dictation of the amount of remittance that migrant workers must make to their families. The provision of remittance

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