

# Protecting Overseas Filipino Workers in the Context of a Globalized Economy

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## Abstract

*The Philippines is well-known in the area of overseas labor migration as among the largest exporters of labor with 7.4 million stock estimates of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) at the end of December 2001. Faced with difficulties due to the chronic employment and underemployment problems in the country and the prospect of an ever-dimming future that lies ahead, more and more Filipinos are opting to seek employment abroad, hoping to obtain improvements in their economic and social conditions.*

*These exported workers are labeled as the "modern-day heroes of the land" because of the billions they remit each year that helps save the Philippine economy from collapse. However, historical evidences have long indicated the need to examine the phenomenon of labor migration beyond the conventional focus on employment promotion and worker's remittances. The country reduces its unemployment and underemployment rates and improves its balance of payment but do these considerations really outweigh the consequences that the OFWs and the entire nation have to bear? For one, it is well documented that these migrants are exploited and their human rights violated by unscrupulous recruiters, traffickers and employers while nations stand by.*

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*It is true that overseas labor migration is a worldwide phenomenon and that exploitation is not an exclusive experience to OFWs. Migrant workers from other labor sending countries also suffer the brunt of serving others abroad. But this is no palliative. This is alarming especially because exploitative and demeaning treatment continue despite international conventions to protect the rights of migrant workers have long been in place such as the 1990 UN (United Nations) Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and the ILO (International Labor Organization) Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. These global understandings rely mainly on the capacity and sincerity of governments to implement programs envisioned by these international conventions. Many host countries have shown little regard for the rights of migrant workers in the past and seem unenthusiastic about changing this stance in the future not least because a lot of labor-surplus economies are ready to provide cheap labor. Threatened by the glut of own cheaper labor from rival labor-exporting countries, sending countries like the Philippines are hesitant to bargain seriously for the protection of the rights of their workers.*

*This situation calls for a multilateral solution. Without the strong cooperation and joint action of sending and receiving countries, respect for core labor standards will remain an elusive goal. Such multilateral solution could be made possible only if there is an international body vested with the authority to direct the compliance of governments to international labor standards. Given the situation, it is time to consider forming and/or strengthening an international body that can monitor, investigate and take action on the violations of basic labor standards.*

## **Introduction**

Protection of human rights of migrants has become one of the most challenging dilemmas facing our world today. According to ILO estimates, there are around 70 to 85 million international migrant workers worldwide, 30 million of them irregular or undocumented (Harima, 1999). These workers are commonly from developing countries like the Philippines. The very situation of these workers as migrant workers qualifies them as particularly vulnerable group of people in the host society and reports of abuses and exploitation are common not only towards OFWs but to migrants from other labor-sending countries as well.

The acceleration of globalization during the more recent decades is largely to be blamed for this growing vulnerability of foreign labor. As exports, migrant workers become mere commodities in the global market to be exploited in the name of economic progress. Although this kind of situation highlights the urgent need to institute international human rights protection particularly for these foreign workers, the remarkable development of the establishments of international covenants reveal its limitations and insufficiency since power still fully rests within the nation states. As a result, agreements advancing international labor standards stay put as mere rhetoric and the political will to enforce them remains intangible.

How then do we provide protection for migrant workers in the context of a globalized economy? This is the critical question this paper aims to tackle. The first task of this paper is to discuss the general categories of migrant workers and to provide historical and statistical background about labor migration in the Philippines. A thorough discussion about the situation of our overseas workers follows with a focus on the common challenges usually encountered by these OFWs before their departure, during their stay in the host country, and upon their return to the homeland. The third task of the paper is to identify and discuss the social costs of labor migration, introducing one thing that is left untouched by the literatures in the field — the issue on the possible effects of the Philippines' labor export policy to the national sense of "oneness". The fourth provides an overview of the legal protection provided for migrant workers both at the national and international levels, inferring that the problem is not so much legislation to protect migrant workers but in its fair and impartial implementation. More importantly, this part highlights how globalization has paved the way for the "commodification" of migrant workers and how this works in preventing the enforcement of agreements aiming to protect the dignity of foreign labor. The last part contains the concluding notes and recommendations of the author.

## **HISTORICAL AND STATISTICAL DIMENSIONS**

### **Types of Migrant Workers**

Migrant worker pertains to a person who changes residence either permanently or temporarily to seek employment across a geographical or political boundary (Ybañez, 1999). RA 8042, otherwise known as the Migrant Workers and Filipinos Act of 1995, refers to a migrant worker as one "who is to be engaged, is

engaged or has been engaged in remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a legal resident; to be used interchangeably with overseas Filipino workers”.

Migrant workers are more popularly classified as either land-based or sea-based. Occupations in the land-based categories are broader, covering almost all the areas one can think of (Gonzales, 1998) from unskilled and low-skilled foreign workers such as domestic helpers, entertainers and caregivers to those who perform more technical jobs such as managers, educators, and other professionals. Sea-based work, on the other hand, pertains mostly to ship operations like navigation, engineering, fishing, and maintenance although the large passenger vessels also include a variety of occupations from kitchen staff to on-board entertainment (Gonzales, III, 1998). Migrant workers may also be classified according to their motivations for leaving. Experts have come up with terms like economic and political migrants, and recently the term ecological migrant. However, with growing economic and socio-political unrest, as well as ecological crisis in countries around the globe, the difference among economic, ecological, and political migrants has been blurred.

In the case of the Philippines, both political and economic factors play an important role in propelling and sustaining the movement of Filipinos abroad. However, socio-cultural factors that place high regard on working abroad cannot be discounted.

*Economic Factors.* Undoubtedly, one significant determinant of labor migration is the level of economic development of a country (Go in Cariño, 1998). Once the country's economy is unable to grow fast enough to meet the needs of its people and consequently, to create adequate employment opportunities, migration is likely to occur and continue for as long as economic conditions do not improve (Go in Cariño, 1998). This is exactly what the Philippines has been experiencing over the past decades — a poor economic performance that created strong pressures for people to find employment abroad.

*Political Factors.* Political factors remain to be a reinforcing factor why Filipinos continue to seek employment abroad especially that the poor economic performance of the country has been, through the years, largely blamed for the inept capabilities of Philippine political leaders. During the Marcos regime, for instance, a lot of workers sought employment abroad because of political oppression. Also, during the May 2004 national elections, the prospect of having Fernando Poe, Jr. — an insinuatingly

incompetent candidate who is a former movie actor and best friend of ousted president Joseph Estrada — as the next president of the country, predisposed many professionals to reconsider migrating and working abroad, daunted by an increasing hopelessness about the future of the country.

Political factors also include the policies developed and institutional structures and mechanisms set up both by receiving and sending countries as this chart the nature and direction of international labor migration (Go in Cariño, 1998).

*Socio-Cultural Factors.* Social and cultural factors have also played a significant role in sustaining the movement of Filipinos abroad. Through the years, the Philippines has developed a culture that places high regard on living and working abroad. As Go (in Cariño, 1998) explained, dynamic processes set into motion by the outflow of people in the early years have helped to perpetuate the movement and to sustain its momentum. Extensive social networks were built over the years, which provide information, as well as social and psychological support which, in turn, have considerably reduced perceived and actual risks associated with going abroad and up to some extent, have also made overseas employment an attractive, more viable, and a more comfortable life for Filipino workers and their families (Go in Cariño, 1998).

## Historical Account

How has overseas migration become one of the most prominent forms of present-day mass movements in this country? A review of the brief account of Gonzales (1998) regarding the history of migration from the Philippines shows that the movement was already popular even as early as the Spanish colonization of the country. According to Gonzales (1998), the first generation of labor migrants from the Philippines were "natives forced by their Spanish colonizers to leave their families to work in royal dockyards and on board Philippine-made ships that plied the famous galleon trade across the Pacific Ocean to Mexico and the New World from 1565 to 1815". Due mainly to ill-treatment by their Spanish employers, some of them chose to break onerous contracts by leaving their ships and eventually settling down in ports of call such as Apollo, Mexico and Louisiana in USA (Gonzales, 1998).

Gonzales (1998) also narrated that at about the same time as the arrival of the Chinese in the 1850s, Filipinos also went to North America as crew members of Canadian and American

expeditions to the coast of British Columbia and Alaska. Like the earlier group, some of them also abandoned their jobs as crew members to settle down in those foreign lands. After this follows what the same author calls as the three more systematic "waves" of international labor migration: the first wave from the 1900 to the early 1940s, the second wave from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, and the third wave from the mid-1970s to the 1990s.

*First Wave: 1900 to Early 1940s.* News spread throughout various parts of the globe that America was a haven for those seeking refuge; hence, it did not take long before a systematic wave of overseas Filipinos arrived in the United States after the transformation from Spanish colonization to American rule in 1898. Filipinos experienced little difficulty traveling for work to America since the United States formally colonized the Philippines under the Treaty of Paris (Gonzales, 1998).

Gonzales (1998) recounted that as part of their grand plans of "benevolent assimilation", Americans espoused the tactic of granting scholarships for the children of Filipino elites to study in American schools. Because of the rigid selection process, many went to America as self-supporting students. Some of these early overseas Filipinos went back home to the country without finishing their academic pursuits because of severe economic difficulties, hardships in adapting to American culture, and racial discrimination (Gonzales, 1998). Many of them, however, were caught by the Great Depression and could not return to the Philippines and had no choice but to shift from studying to working in vast agricultural businesses of the Pacific Coast and the Midwest (Espiritu, 1995 in Gonzales, III, 1998).

Focusing on contract labor migration, Santos (1984) recounted the exodus of Filipino plantation workers to Guam and Hawaii in the early 1900s as the earliest large-scale type of contract foreign migration. Many of the early Filipino migrant workers were hired due to the increasing demand for American agricultural products and to the inflow restrictions on Chinese and Japanese immigrant workers as a result of the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907. As a colony of the United States and at the same time as a source of cheap labor, the Philippines readily became a major provider of farm labor productivity (Santos, 1984).

Not all US immigration policies were Filipino-friendly. Many Americans objected to the hiring of Filipinos because they had to compete with these new labor migrants especially during periods

of recession, when employment opportunities were scarce (Gonzales, 1998). Several laws were then passed by the US Congress to discourage Filipino workers from thinking about long-term immigration.

*Second Wave: Late 1940s to Early 1970s.* The mounting incidence of discrimination against Filipino workers and the progressive tightening of restrictions on immigration of alien workers to the United States influenced the shifting of Filipino migration pattern in the succeeding years (Santos, 1984). With the opening up of new labor markets, Filipinos trooped to other parts of the world particularly to Asian, European and African countries where their expertise was recognized (Santos, 1984).

The 1950s and 1960s saw the growth of the demand for Filipino non-professional contract workers in some of the neighboring Asian countries. Initially, the migrants who went were artists, barbers, and musicians destined for British North Borneo (Santos, 1984). At the turn of the 1960s, the boom in overseas employment was further stimulated by the demand in Thailand and Malaysia (Santos, 1984). About the same time, Filipino loggers also went to serve in the logging camps of Kalimantan in Indonesia.

While immigration to Hawaii and the US mainland subsided, the American military, as well as independent contractors, hired Filipinos for war reconstruction work in Pacific islands like Wake, Guam and Okinawa. With the outbreak of the Korean War and later the Vietnam War, the American military specifically sought Filipinos for work in construction sites. During these decades, doctors, nurses and other related medical workers also left in increasing numbers - as immigration policies in the western side of the globe, particularly in Canada and Australia, became friendlier.

In September 1972, Martial Law was declared in the Philippines. This led to poor peace and order situation, political uncertainty, and economic instability that expectedly played a big part in the labor oversupply and low domestic demand in the country and contributed to another sudden exodus of Filipino workers to various parts of the globe.

*Third Wave: Mid 1970s onwards.* The third wave of international labor migrants started seeking employment outside the Philippines after the economy was hit with the devastating effects of increases in crude oil price. The crisis affected almost all sectors of the economy resulting in cutbacks, restructuring,

and closure of firms which inevitably led to the loss of thousands of local jobs in the country.

On the other side, Middle Eastern countries reaped huge profits from the oil situation and embarked on enormous development programs in the Arab states that eventually required a large supply of manpower. A large number of the construction and engineering companies contracted by the Middle Eastern states turned to labor-rich countries like the Philippines to supply their human resource needs. Accordingly, the Marcos Administration saw this as an opportunity to adopt a labor export policy to help ease the burden caused by the oil crisis, including budget and trade deficits and rising unemployment and underemployment rates.

This stop-gap measure eventually evolved into a permanent government policy. Since its introduction during the Marcos era, the primary thrust of the government's overseas employment program has been the development of the international labor market for Filipinos — lobbying for labor-importing governments to accept and to issue work permits to migrants.

While the Middle East still remains as the primary destination of Filipino migrant workers; its importance has remarkably waned remarkably in more recent decades. More specifically, the 1990s saw the emergence of more and more East and Southeast Asian countries playing host to Filipino workers (Go in Cariño, 1998). The economic boom and an increasingly tight labor situation in the newly industrializing economies in East Asia paved the way for the emergence of Taiwan and to a lesser extent, Malaysia and Korea, as increasingly attractive work destinations (Go in Cariño, 1998). Brunei has also been steadily accommodating Filipino workers in the 1990s (Go in Cariño, 1998). Moreover, in the nineties, the outflow of Filipino workers to Hong Kong and Japan, the top Asian destinations of Filipino workers since the seventies, has considerably increased (Go in Cariño, 1998). This period can also be characterized as the time of massive deployment of Filipino workers, particularly domestic helpers, to Singapore. Today, the Philippines stands out among the countries with the most number of expatriated workers.

### **Statistics on Overseas Filipino Workers**

DOLE reported that stock estimates on Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) at the end of 2001 reached more than 7.4 million Filipino workers abroad. Of these OFWs, 2.7 million are permanent



workers, 3.1 million are temporary, and 1.6 million are irregular. DOLE further reported that the magnitude of Filipinos who sought employment in foreign lands rose tremendously over the years. In the year 1975, some 36,035 Filipinos left the country for work abroad. The number has consistently increased over the following years to reach as many as 372,784 exactly a decade later. The upward trend carried over until today, with the exception of the registered negative growth rates in 1989, 1990, and 1995. The latest figure, for the year 2002, registered 891,908 deployed workers. (See Tables 1 and 2).

Land-based and sea-based workers were deployed in significant figures during the third wave of labor migration but the differences in the increase between the two groups have been significant. Prior to 1977, deployed sea-based workers outnumbered their land-based counterparts. However, the year 1977 saw the beginning of a different trend which has not changed until today: deployed land-based workers significantly outnumbered the sea-based group.

Table 1. Deployment of OFWS: Land-Based /  
Sea-Based 1975 to 1980

| YEAR | LAND-BASED WORKERS | SEA-BASED WORKERS | TOTAL NO. OF DEPLOYED | GROWTH RATE |
|------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| 1975 | 12,501             | 23,534            | 36,035                | --          |
| 1976 | 19,221             | 28,614            | 47,835                | 32.75       |
| 1977 | 36,676             | 33,699            | 70,835                | 48.08       |
| 1978 | 53,080             | 37,280            | 90,360                | 27.56       |
| 1979 | 100,118            | 44,818            | 144,926               | 60.39       |
| 1980 | 171,006            | 57,196            | 228,202               | 57.46       |

Sources of Data:

Bureau of Employment Services, Overseas Employment Development Board, Seamen Board. As reprinted in Santos, A.S., *Working Abroad*.

Table 2 Deployment of OFWS: Land-Based /  
Sea-Based 1985 to 2002

| YEAR | LAND-BASED WORKERS | SEA-BASED WORKERS | TOTAL NO. OF DEPLOYED | GROWTH RATE |
|------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| 1985 | 320,494            | 52,290            | 372,784               | 6.21        |
| 1986 | 323,517            | 54,697            | 378,214               | 1.46        |
| 1987 | 382,229            | 67,042            | 449,271               | 18.79       |
| 1988 | 385,117            | 85,913            | 471,030               | 4.84        |
| 1989 | 355,346            | 103,280           | 458,626               | -2.63       |
| 1990 | 334,883            | 111,212           | 446,095               | -2.73       |
| 1991 | 489,260            | 125,759           | 615,019               | 37.87       |
| 1992 | 549,655            | 136,806           | 686,461               | 11.62       |
| 1993 | 550,872            | 145,758           | 696,630               | 1.48        |
| 1994 | 564,031            | 154,376           | 718,407               | 3.13        |
| 1995 | 488,173            | 165,401           | 653,574               | -9.02       |
| 1996 | 484,653            | 175,469           | 660,122               | 1.00        |
| 1997 | 559,227            | 188,469           | 747,696               | 13.27       |
| 1998 | 638,343            | 193,300           | 831,643               | 11.23       |
| 1999 | 640,331            | 196,689           | 837,020               | 0.65        |
| 2000 | 643,304            | 198,324           | 841,628               | 0.55        |
| 2001 | 662,648            | 204,951           | 867,599               | 3.08        |
| 2002 | 682,315            | 209,593           | 891,908               | 2.80        |

Source of Data: POEA Website

As mentioned earlier, the third wave of labor migration saw Asian countries become the top destinations of overseas Filipino workers. This wave continues today except for the waning interest in Middle Eastern, West Asian countries, to pave the way for East and Southeast Asian countries as the favorite destinations. The latest figures show that five of the top 10 destinations in 2001 were from East and Southeast Asia. This includes Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Brunei. Saudi Arabia, a conservative Muslim country however, is still the top destination with 190,732 Filipino workers deployed in 2001. The other favorite West Asian destinations are UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar (See Table 3).

Table 3 Deployment of OFWS:  
Top Ten Destinations 2001

| COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION   | 2001    |
|----------------------------|---------|
| 1. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia | 190,732 |
| 2. Hong Kong               | 113,583 |
| 3. Japan                   | 74,093  |
| 4. United Arab Emirates    | 44,631  |
| 5. Taiwan                  | 38,311  |
| 6. Singapore               | 26,305  |
| 7. Italy                   | 21,956  |
| 8. Kuwait                  | 21,641  |
| 9. Brunei                  | 13,068  |
| 10. Qatar                  | 10,769  |

Source of Data: POEA Website

Recent decades also saw the feminization of the labor force, and along with this, the feminization of the field of overseas labor migration. While males used to make up the greater percentage of deployed OFWs, the gender gap dwindled over the decades. Women now dominate the scene.

Their total remittances amounting to billions of dollars each year continuously help the Philippines surmount the effects of severe economic crisis. Overseas Filipino workers have been labeled as the "modern-day heroes of the land" (*bagong bayani ng bayan*). From an aggregate remittance of 687.2 million dollars in 1985, the growing number of deployed OFWs result in commensurate upsurge in their total remittances by 6.502 billion to reach as much as 7.189 billion dollars in 2002. POEA figures for 2003 show that the amount has reached 7.640 billion dollars. Of the amount, 6.346 billion came from land-based workers and 1.294 billion came from sea-based workers.

### SITUATION OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Despite their economic and social contribution to both the source and destination countries, migrant workers are not getting the protection they deserve. Throughout the migration cycle — pre-departure, on-site, and return home — the situation of Filipino

migrant workers are underscored by an interface of class, gender, and nationality issues.

## **Before Departure**

*Emotional and Financial Stress during Recruitment.* Along with excitement and fears on their fate abroad, each prospective OFW has to battle emotional and financial stress. The investment for overseas employment is certainly not cheap and most prospective OFWs have to go into heavy borrowing or sell valuable family properties just to raise the needed sum to pay for pre-departure and travel expenses. The costs include placement fee, repatriation bond, and medical check-up. Aside from these, there are other costs like processing fees collected from the OFWs by recruitment agencies. The costs are even higher for prospective OFWs who are handled by people engaged in illegal recruitment activities. Ybañez (1999) presupposes that the debts these migrant workers leave behind may be the primary reason why they endure substandard working conditions and sexual abuses abroad.

Apart from the need to raise money for their pre-departure expenses, the prospective OFWs must endure long periods of waiting, written examinations, interviews, special auditions for entertainers, and tedious lines in recruitment agencies, training centers, pre-departure seminars, and various government agencies (Gonzales, 1998). Yet, it seems that nothing can stop them from leaving. Prospective OFWs strongly believe that their future earnings will be worth the inconvenience, patience, and struggle that they invest (Gonzales, 1998).

*Illegal Recruitment.* The Philippine Overseas Employment Agency or POEA is the government agency "responsible for optimizing the benefits of the country's overseas employment program". In 1987, through Executive Order 247, POEA was reorganized to include expanded functions, among which is to strengthen the workers protection and regulatory component of the program. In 1995, the Migrant Workers and Filipinos Act defined specific policies and thrusts for POEA in the light of emerging issues. These include, among others, "stricter rules on illegal recruitment acts and the accompanying penalties". However, despite the POEA's regulatory mechanisms, illegal recruitment still exist — either undertaken by a non-licensed/non-holder of authority contemplated under the Labor Code of the Philippines or licensee/holder of authority but engaged in illegal recruitment activities as specified under the Migrant Workers and Filipinos Act of 1995.

Government's initial measure against illegal recruitment activities was the creation of LOI 324 in 1976. This effected massive information campaigns on illegal recruitment, arrest and prosecution of offenders, effective supervision and regulation of licensed agencies, and assistance to victimized overseas job seekers. Subsequently, LOI 324 paved the way for the creation of the Task Force on Illegal Recruitment (Achacoso, 1987).

Presidential Decree No. 1693 signed into law in May 1980 further strengthened government measures to control illegal recruitment. The National Council on Illegal Recruitment (NIR) was created, thereby institutionalizing the Task Force on Illegal Recruitment (Achacoso, 1987).

P.D. No. 1920, issued in May 1984 and Executive Order 1022 in May 1985 were created to intensify drives against illegal recruitment. P.D. 1920 empowered POEA on a wider scale over illegal recruitment cases (Achacoso, 1987).

To curb illegal recruitment practices, the POEA has likewise undertaken closer inter-agency coordination with various government agencies such as the Department of Foreign Affairs involved in the documentation and extension of services to contract workers. There is also the policy of trimming down the number of agencies, canceling licenses of those who repeatedly violate rules and regulations and those who have little or no development activity to speak of. Inactive participants are struck out and new companies who are able to qualify satisfactorily, are licensed (Achacoso, 1987).

The people engaged in illegal recruitment make prospective OFWs fall to their false information and/or promises. Some of the more common cases involve charging of exorbitant fees and substitution, issuance of fake travel documents, or alteration of employment contracts formerly approved by DOLE to the prejudice of the worker. Worse cases involve recruitment for non-existent jobs. After getting all the money they could get from their victims, they ran away with the cash, never showing up again. Victims of such kinds of scams do not even get to leave the country.

*Illegal Migration.* While many OFWs enter and stay in their host countries legally, it is hypothetically safe to assume that large numbers do not do so. Many workers falsify documents — changing their names and other personal information just to meet the requirements for the positions they apply for. Others enter the host country through the "back doors" mainly to be spared of

the high cost of recruitment. Still others enter legally, as students, tourists or contract workers, but stay even after the expiration of their passports and/or contracts. Without legal papers, undocumented workers easily fall prey to unscrupulous employers who take advantage of their situation by making them work longer hours in poor working conditions and pay them extremely low wages. Undocumented migrants are especially vulnerable to notorious syndicates of human trafficking and prostitution.

### **While Overseas**

*Exploitation.* Appalling firsthand accounts about the working conditions of the early migrant workers from the Philippines are not new but were heard a hundred years ago. Although the destination patterns have changed, working conditions of our migrant workers have not really improved.

Maricris Sioson, a Filipina entertainer in Japan, was found dead and mutilated in September 1991. Her ruthless murderer was never prosecuted.

Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic helper in Singapore, was hanged by the Singaporean government in March 1995 despite appeals for clemency from the Philippines. She was accused of murdering another Filipina maid named Delia Maga, and Maga's young Singaporean ward.

Sarah Balabagan, a Filipina domestic helper in the United Arab Emirates, was sentenced to death in 1996 for killing the man who tried to rape her. With the help of various civil society groups here and abroad which pressured the Philippine government to take a more active role in her defense, Sarah was spared from suffering Contemplacion's fate.

The conditions suffered by these migrant workers dramatize the plights of millions of workers worldwide. These highly publicized cases symbolize over a century of exploitation and injustice towards overseas Filipino workers.

Violence can be perpetrated or condoned by governments. Cases of state violence are often clearly demonstrated by acts perpetrated by enforcement and criminal justice officials, especially against women, who are detained or come into conflict with the law. Quite often, Philippine government authorities are informed

of the arrests and detentions of nationals very late, if at all (Abrera-Mangahas in Cariño, 1998).

Through the years, we have seen how migrant workers have helped build and support economies of both the labor-receiving and the labor-sending countries. Many host countries recognize the significant contributions of migrants in their countries and readily acknowledge that without them, their business sectors, infrastructures and services would simply not have functioned effectively to ensure economic growth and social development (ILO, 2003). In the Asia-Pacific region, migrant workers have built vital transport infrastructure, including airports, railways, highways and mass transit systems in lieu of insufficient local labor (ILO-Issues, 2003). In some countries, a steady supply of migrant domestic workers has brought greater gender empowerment for their women, enabling them to enter or re-enter the workplace (ILO, 2003).

Nevertheless, OFWs have not received the corresponding support they deserve. Receiving countries see them only as sources of labor while sending countries see them as mere exports and sources of dollars and refuse to take up genuine involvement in fighting for migrant workers rights lest their actions jeopardize political and economic relations with the more powerful host countries. Labor exporting governments promote the deployment of migrants in order to generate foreign currency earnings and bolster the economy, but they do not ensure the migrant's safety abroad (Parreño, 1999).

As exports, migrant workers suffer what is referred to as "commodification" — they become commodities in the global free market to be exploited and replaced when no longer productive (Parreño, 1999). Migrants are largely marginalized and vulnerable to religious, racial, class, and gender discrimination, exploitation and other violations of their human rights in countries of their deployment. Parreño (1999) explained that this is clearly exemplified in the more restrictive and discriminatory laws and policies against them and confinement to 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs. They have also been unjustly singled out as a cause for social problems, displacement of local workers, depression of wage levels, and rising criminality and diseases (Parreño, 1999).

The idea that responsibility for managing the migration process is a joint undertaking of the sending and receiving countries has deepened through the years. Bilateral and

collaborative agreements between sending and receiving country governments are the main instruments for the exercise of responsibility. Bilateral agreements are useful and practical in the context of sustained manpower arrangements between two countries. These have limited usefulness in the context of multi-country outflow of workers. Receiving countries have also been quite reluctant to conclude agreements that include special or favored treatment of one national group versus others. This is an important reason why bilateral agreements are quite difficult to negotiate and conclude (Abrera-Mangahas in Cariño, 1998).

These agreements could be strengthened significantly by incorporating clauses recognizing the human rights of migrant workers, especially those that refer to the basic international labor standards. These should also provide for the more humane treatment of migrant workers, especially those with irregular status, as well as identify the mechanisms in the receiving countries which could respond to the special needs of workers in distress and victimized by violence. Another matter for bilateral action would be arrangements for extension of legal stay and alternative employment for workers victimized by violence and exploitation so that they would be free to pursue legal action against abusers. Given the difficult experiences in negotiating bilateral agreements, the prospect is not promising without sufficient international pressure (Abrera-Mangahas in Cariño, 1998).

Villalba (1999) emphasized a particular discriminatory policy on the part of the host country: Although most countries impose harsh and restrictive immigration policies on foreigners who join their labor force, they usually distinguish between two types of foreigners who intend to work. The first type are those who seek jobs with high social status, which the local labor pool cannot provide for the time being (Villalba, 1999). Governments put businessmen and entrepreneurs, scholars, medical professionals, technical staff, etc. in this category. Host countries are usually friendly with these types of foreign workers and states usually accord them with some citizenship rights and even offer them permanent residency and political rights (Villalba, 1999).

The second type are foreigners who perform low-status work which societies also need — jobs that usually require little skill or knowledge (Villalba, 1999). Examples are entertainers, sex workers, domestic helpers, and workers in the service sector, construction, manufacturing and plantation sites. Foreigners in these jobs are usually more numerous, and are viewed as competitors of local workers for jobs. Host policies with regard to



these workers are highly restrictive, partly to pacify local workers and partly to prevent foreign workers from demanding more benefits (Villalba, 1999). In some states, particularly Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan, foreign workers of this category are not allowed to have romantic relationships with local citizens because these could open up the possibility of marriage and permanent residency in the host country (Villalba, 1999).

It is in this sense that NGOs refer to host government's dualistic policy with regard to foreign workers — a policy regime that violates basic and internationally-recognized human and labor rights (Villalba, 1999).

*Vulnerability to Sexually Transmitted Diseases.* The emergence and high incidence of STDs are likewise closely linked to migration, especially in Southeast Asia (Ybañez, 1999). Ybañez (1999) explained that the acceptance of mobility as an independent risk factor and the prevalent view that HIV/AIDS is a foreign disease have put migrant workers at the center of blame for the introduction of HIV/AIDS and/or the cause of their spread. As a consequence, many sending countries require medical examination including HIV testing of migrant workers prior to their entry or prior to the issuance or renewal of their work permits (Ybañez, 1999). Detection of HIV infection results in the denial of entry or summary deportation of the worker (Ybañez, 1999).

The Inter Press Service (IPS) reported that such practice — forcing migrant workers to face mandatory tests — is bound to hasten the spread of the disease rather than curb it because migrant workers may hide, not seek treatment and avoid going for required testing in order to keep their jobs. Such policies also perpetuate discrimination; Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan in particular sent back HIV-positive migrant workers (Macan-Marcar[a], IPS website).

Ybañez (1999) explained that migrant workers and their families are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. According to him, the causes could be two-way. For one, while a migrant worker may engage in risky sexual behavior due to the interplay of different factors including loneliness and lack of social ties and therefore may contract STDs abroad, s/he may likely pass on the disease to his or her spouse through sexual contact (Ybañez, 1999). In the same way, the absence of the migrant worker may lead his /her spouse to engage in extra-marital relationships (Ybañez, 1999).

These situations are complicated by various factors such as low incidence of condom use in sending countries, women's lack of power to negotiate for safer sex, tendency of spouses to conceal sexual infidelities and lack of knowledge regarding HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (Ybañez, 1999).

## Upon Return

*Non-Productive Use of Remittances.* The Inter Press Service (2001) retold the sad story of a former Filipino seaman: A product of a chaotic household with 15 children, Jonathan endured all the hardships of being an overseas worker "for the sake of my family". He deprived himself of any luxuries and took on many odd jobs apart from his regular one because his dream was to unite his family, provide them with a decent home and start his own business in the Philippines. Soon, however, he found out that the money he had sent home for the purchase of a house and lot were appropriated by his siblings and relatives. "My co-workers were envious of me because I always received tons of letters. They didn't know they were always asking for money", he said. "I wanted to commit suicide. I wanted to jump to the Atlantic Ocean, if only I wasn't afraid of sharks", he confessed, after coming home empty-handed and having to leave the country again when he already had his eyes set on retirement. Frustrated, he chose the path of self-destruction and soon acquired HIV.

This is a clear example of how remittances are usually utilized for private consumption by families and relatives and to some extent by even the migrant workers themselves. This is a very important issue because these are not the long-term and productive investments that will allow them to break out of their dependence on overseas employment.

*Problems Relating to Return Migration.* Return migration refers to the process by which migrants go back to their home community from where they moved. In the context of international diaspora, return migration entails a movement from the country of destination back to the country of origin (Opiniano, 2002). Opiniano (2002) further explained that the main problem behind return migration is "reintegration". Migrant returnees must reintegrate themselves to the community of origin that has undergone various changes — economic, social, and environmental — during the migrant's absence (Opiniano, 2002).

Opiniano (2002) mentioned three aspects of reintegration that must be looked into: the economic, social, and political dimensions. If earning more is a primary reason for migration, then the sending of remittances and the bringing home of savings from abroad, are closely linked to return and the migrants' intention of returning. However, as mentioned earlier, in terms of utilization of remittances, many studies point to the overwhelming use for private consumption and persistent debates on the "productive" and "unproductive" uses of remittances (Opiniano, 2002). The issue of savings and productive investments are very important because unless migrant workers are empowered at least economically upon their return home, the vicious cycle of overseas labor migration will continue (Opiniano, 2002).

On the other hand, Opiniano (2002) explained that the social reintegration calls for understanding of the cultural environments of the migrants' home base and of their work situations abroad because migrants have had to adjust to living conditions in their overseas employment, their return and reintegration to their community, which has more likely undergone various changes since they left, will require a similar readjustment. Opiniano (2002) particularly pointed out that the changes in the migrant's cultural values may make reintegration very challenging for everyone concerned. For instance, women who worked as entertainers abroad are more likely to suffer the label attached to them by fellow villagers as sex workers or prostitutes (Opiniano, 2002). Other serious problems are the social adjustment of return migrants who had fateful experiences such as contracting HIV/AIDS, those who became disabled while working overseas, those who suffered severe forms of abuse and maltreatment, and other traumatic experiences (Opiniano, 2002).

The role of the government is critical in the political aspect of return migration. Here it is logical to argue that if the government does not welcome return migrants in terms of local and national level programs, or at least in terms of legislation, then it can be said that the political factor is unfavorable to return migration and reintegration (Opiniano, 2002).

## **FILIPINO WORKERS IN JAPAN**

### **Japan's Labor Policy**

Japan's policy of accepting foreign workers is based on two assumptions: Firstly – Japan's promotion of technical exchange

with foreign countries will help revitalize and internationalize its economy and society; secondly - the local economy, particularly as it affects Japanese workers, will not be adversely affected (Cabilao, 1998).

Japan's Immigration Control Law, which took effect on 01 June 1990, is generally considered to be restrictive. The law bars the entry and residence of foreign unskilled workers. The Ministry of Justice only recognizes workers who fall into official categories of residency status. Workers who are not included in the government categories are considered illegal or unskilled. No category covers women employed as factory workers, household helpers of non-diplomats, and "hostesses" (Cabilao, 1998).

Moreover, Japan encourages the entry of foreign female migrants under the category "entertainers" while rejecting other unskilled foreign workers. Entertainers are those engaged in theatrical, entertainment, singing, dance, or musical performance activities, subject to certain conditions with regard to career, remuneration, and type of entertainment (Cabilao, 1998).

### **The Japanese Entertainment Industry**

The entertainment industry in Japan is a large business which dates back to the Tokugawa Era (1603-1867). Its system of legal prostitution during the period was linked to the Japanese government's commandeering of women, mostly Korean, to be prostitutes for the Japanese military. However, it was in the Meiji Era (1868-1912) when the entertainment industry expanded into the enormous business that it is today based on the cooperation of both the Japanese government and the business sector (Cabilao, 1998).

Japan generally prohibits prostitution, as embodied in the Anti-Prostitution Law of 1957. However, the law allows prostitution in certain areas. This "prostitution culture" is tied to the Japanese belief that there are two kinds of women: the bad (or the prostitutes) and the good (or the housewives). Housewives normally do not condemn their hardworking husbands for soliciting the services of the "bad women" for rest and recreation (Cabilao, 1998).

## **The Filipina Entertainer**

Japan has hosted the third largest contingent of Filipino labor since 1984. The majority of them take on the 3D jobs, the jobs that are too dirty, difficult and dangerous for the ordinary Japanese to accept (Cabilao, 1998).

Dubbed as "performing artists" by labor officials or "Japayukis" by tabloids, entertainers are mostly young women with little or no formal education, and who come from the rural areas. It is problematic to distinguish legitimate performing artists from the commercial sex workers in Japan because many commercial sex workers find their way to Japan disguised as entertainers (Cabilao, 1998).

## **SOCIAL COSTS OF LABOR MIGRATION**

### **Breakdown of the Filipino family**

Labor migration seriously affects not just those who have gone abroad but also those whom they leave behind. Single parenthood is common where one spouse works overseas but when both parents go abroad, the children are left in the care of relatives. Infidelity and juvenile delinquency have become associated with the non-traditional family arrangement spurred by labor migration. Hence, considering the volume of deployed individuals who are married and have families, it is important to reiterate that labor migration undermines the basic foundation of society – the family.

### **Brain Drain**

Little attention has been given to the fact that the overall brain gain from labor migration is questionable. There are those who leave the country to assume technical, managerial, and professional positions in respectable institutions overseas – this is a brain drain for the Philippines (Gonzales, 1998). On the other hand, there are also those who return and bring back with them experiences and new skills they have learned from the countries where they were deployed and which could benefit the home country (Gonzales, 1998). However, an increasing number of these types of OFWs with technical, managerial, and professional expertise seek long-term contracts and extensions, returning to

the Philippines permanently only for retirement if at all (Gonzales, 1998). Those given the opportunity leave the Philippines permanently (Gonzales, 1998). This disposes us to the conclusion that the effect of overseas labor migration in the Philippines favors brain drain rather than brain gain.

### **De-Skilling of Workers**

A large majority of OFWs who are high school or college educated go abroad as cooks, maids, entertainers, and maintenance workers — a concrete evidence of how they suffer from underemployment. After successive turns as overseas workers confined to 3D jobs, their ability to contribute to the Philippine labor market as future entrepreneurs and educators declines dramatically, thus creating more long-term social costs for the country to tackle (Gonzales, 1998).

Emerging trends in the health service sector of countries in Europe, North America, and Asia provide a concrete example of how Filipino workers are being de-skilled. The shortage of nurses and caregivers abroad paved the way for an upsurge in the demand of these professionals coming from labor sending countries like the Philippines. While Filipino students and nurses are quick to respond to these increasing demands, the competitive and creative compensation packages being offered by labor-importing countries to nurses have attracted a lot of practicing physicians and other specialists to make a major career shift. As a result, these doctors have decided to take up nursing and are now preparing for their eventual migration. The main point now is that from being in medical profession which has been for a long time considered as one of the most prestigious and lucrative professions, especially here in the Philippines, these doctors now have to shift into a significantly humbling profession which is nursing.

The adverse ill effect on the health of the Filipinos is manifested in the caregiver migration. Hospitals have closed for lack of doctors and nurses; those that remain open are plagued by inadequate labor supply and the incompetent who cannot qualify for export.

### **Issue on National Loyalty**

The possible effects of the country's labor export policy on our sense of "one-ness" as a nation is another significant

point that must not be overlooked. What will happen to a country which has had a strong tradition of colonial mentality, and has long embarked on a labor export policy that made it possible for the exodus of a significant number of its citizens with more and more wanting to leave primarily because of economic difficulties and negative prospects in their homeland? After finding employment abroad and making it possible to improve their quality of living based on their own standards, to which country do OFWs render their allegiance?

### **PROTECTION OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE CONTEXT OF A GLOBALIZED ECONOMY**

The social losses and impact of labor exportation have not been really looked into until the fateful death of Flor Contemplacion in Singapore in 1995. This became the turning point for serious migration policy review. Safety nets for and protection against the dysfunctions associated with labor outflow thus became the main agenda of policy revision. RA 8042 otherwise known as the Migrant Workers and Filipinos Act of 1995, institutes state policies on overseas employment and establishes a higher standard of protection and promotion of the welfare of the migrant workers, their families, and overseas Filipino in distress.

But even before coming up with this law, the Philippines has had, for a long time, acceded to several international conventions relevant to the protection of the basic rights of migrant workers. In fact, the Philippines is among the countries with the most number of ratified conventions based on the ILO-compiled "List of Ratification by Convention and by Country" reprinted by the Asian Migrant Centre.

More specifically, the Philippines is among the signatories to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which advocates "the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation" as among the fundamental rights of workers. ILO further declares that all of its members, regardless if they have not ratified the said convention, "have an obligation, arising from the very fact of membership... to promote and to realize, in good faith and in accordance with the Constitution".

The Philippines is also among the first to ratify the 1990 UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, which, establishes a

higher standard of migrants' rights. The convention gives migrant workers and their families the same protection as nationals of the countries where they work (Deen, 2002). Gabriela Rodriguez Pizarro, special rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights, considers the treaty to be "a fundamental element for the protection of the human rights of migrants since it contains a broad vision that includes the migrant's family and the situation of women and children, and explicitly recognizes the rights of undocumented migrants" (Deen, 2002) — unlike the ILO conventions that covered only documented workers. It also identifies necessary mechanisms to investigate violations and "promotes interstate cooperation in addressing workers' rights issues in particular to combat trafficking and smuggling of human beings", according to the International Organization of Migration (Macan-Marcar[b], IPS website).

But, as earlier mentioned in this paper, it is widely recognized that the problem is not so much about the existence of legislation aiming to protect migrant workers but in its fair and impartial enforcement. This is the reason why while many welcome the 1990 UN Convention as a major step, not least because it took 12 years — long opposed by labor-receiving countries — to acquire the 20 ratification it needed to come into force. It is safe to assume that this relatively new legal instrument is no magic formula for the difficulty of getting receiving and even sending nations to adhere to their obligations to protect the rights of migrant workers (Macan-Marcar[b], IPS website).

In the same way, although the 1990 convention will come into force, those that did not ratify it — including some of the largest labor-receiving countries — cannot be forced to follow it or adopt national laws after it (Macan-Marcar[b], IPS website). Most of the nations that agreed to ratify the convention are the labor-sending and smaller ones (Macan-Marcar[b], IPS website).

Many have argued on the basis on non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign country. Another thing that purportedly undermines hopes for those on the migration trail is the reluctance of countries supplying the labor — and hence the most victimized — to agree even among themselves on common standards of labor rights and protection they want the importing countries to uphold (Macan-Marcar[b], IPS website).

Varona (1999) claims that the logical explanation behind this is the overriding desire, on the one hand, of sending countries



to compete with other supplying countries in terms of getting as many of their citizens employed abroad and on top of this maximize dollar earnings from such mass export, and on the other, of receiving countries to employ cheap, unprotected labor as both groups see this as a competitive advantage that will help them boost their economies and push neo-liberal agenda—an attempt to modify the principles of classical liberalism that emphasize individual freedom from restraint especially from government regulation in all economic activity.

From here, we can see how increasing globalization has become a fundamental cause of the exploitation of migrant labor. Asian Migrant Centre (AMC) describes the effect of globalization on labor markets as follows:

“Capital, factories and production technology have increasingly been globalized. Governments and businesses now want to achieve global human resource development. This entails the creation of a global workforce that is readily available, of international quality but cheap and with a high factor mobility. The system has to provide maximum flexibility so that companies can hire, dump, shuffle and station workers at will. This requires the institutionalization of contract and casual labor. The system also has to shield corporations from responsibility (for job security, social benefits) and allow them to move from one country to another to optimize profits. Obviously, a major source of such a mobile and obligations-free global workforce is labor migration” (cited by Harima, 1999).

So far, globalization has worked to benefit from and reinforce development gaps among nations. While it benefits states with developed economies and advantageous positions, globalization represents great wealth disparities, poverty, and unemployment on the part of developing countries due to indebtedness and economic crises brought by structural adjustment programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Harima, 1999). As a result, labor migration has become a means of survival rather than an option for people in the developing world (Harima, 1999). Worse, globalization further works to their disadvantage as migrant workers because of the resulting commodification of labor which is in turn due to the

overriding desire of countries to "progress" even at the expense of workers' basic rights to decent work.

In the words of Varona (1999):

"We have to recognize the basis of labor migration — the use of cheap migrant labor as part of neo-liberal capitalist exploitation. The increased attacks against migrants are not only problems about bad working conditions or contract violations. Migrants are vulnerable precisely because they are hired to be exploited. If they are not more exploitable than local workers, companies will not hire them and receiving countries will not accept them".

The most important thing here is the will of the governments — both receiving and sending — to ensure that fundamental rights of migrant workers are protected. Apparently, laws must be accompanied by effective enforcement and this is what countries really lack.

What should happen after an international legal instrument comes into force is that the governments concerned must be pressured to make and implement policies that are consistent with the contents of the instrument. True enough, countries have the right to control their borders, but they do not have any rights to do this on racist or xenophobic ground. In the first place, migrant rights are human rights and human rights are birth rights of the people (Battistella, 1993). In the words of Battistella (1993), "they are not derived from incorporation in a particular state; countries only have the rights responsibility to protect and promote them" and "therefore, respect for human rights can not be considered a matter of internal affairs of a particular country".

This brings us to a very important point: Migration has become linked to global issues and therefore must be addressed collectively by the global community. Such could be made possible only if there is an international body vested with the authority to direct the compliance of governments to international labor standards. If we do not want respect for core labor standards to remain as elusive goals for migrant workers worldwide, it is time to consider forming and/or strengthening an international body that can monitor, investigate and take action on the violations of basic labor standards in place. In this regard, the International

Labor Organization and the United Nations provide a wealth of potentials.

Under its mandate, the ILO is the principal institution responsible for the establishment of a regulatory regime for migratory employment (Penna in Battistella, 1993). Membership in ILO is voluntary and it does not really have binding authority over its members.

On the other hand, questions relating to migrant workers are of interest to various organizations within the United Nations system. The UN itself is concerned with the political, economic, and legal aspects of migration; the United Nations Educational and Scientific Cooperation or UNESCO is concerned with the educational and cultural issues affecting migrant workers; and the World Health Organization (WHO) is interested in health concerns relating to migrants. The UN has been involved with the human rights of migrant workers since the July 1972 sessions of the Economic and Social Council or ECOSOC, during which there were press reports of illegal trafficking of African workers by criminal groups for employment in Western Europe (Penna in Battistella, 1993).

These institutions need more clout than the states have so far decided to give them. The big question now is how to empower these international bodies to do the greater tasks involved in furthering the cause of workers' protection. Perhaps, we should start exercising political persuasion with government officials, diplomats, statesmen, civil society groups, and the public-at-large both at the national and international levels.

## **Conclusion**

The failure to address the root causes of the problems behind labor migration perpetuates the exodus of Filipino workers abroad amidst all the social costs associated with this phenomenon.

Migration has become a global phenomenon involving peoples of different nationalities, races, languages, and religious beliefs. The safeguard of the rights of migrants is a cause of great concern because of the uncertainties involved in their living and working conditions and the welfare of their families. This discussion shows that several factors conspire to provide an

environment which is heedless of the human dignity of migrant workers. First is the desire of the migrants to obtain a better future; second, the quest for profit by employers and countries through the employment of cheap, migrant labor; and third, the unconfessed interest of the country of origin (as in the exact case of the Philippines) for the benefits derived from the labor exportation industry. The Philippine government has created a whole exporting industry based on the exploitation of cheap labor as the country's supposed competitive advantage in this globalized world. Therefore, instead of solving the root causes of the problem, the government has resigned to the realities of violations of workers' rights and adopted a policy of managing overseas migration — to respond towards violations of Filipino workers rights while ensuring that the "business" remains unperturbed, the labor market for OFWs continues to expand, and dollar remittances continue to flow into the country.

International migration is in dire need of cooperation par excellence among labor-importing and labor-exporting countries. However, the extraordinary development of international consensus presents one great limitation: power and authority still rests within the nation states. Yes, amidst all the appalling reasons why migration can be viewed as the crisis of present times, nation-states prefer to maintain a negative stance in their treatment of foreign workers, sending the alarming signal that the political will to ensure their protection is not really there and will never really be actualized so long as we rest our hope on a sense of voluntary commitment from these countries.

There is one suggested solution to this predicament: an international body vested with the clout to take action against the violations of international labor standards by the more exploitative nation-states.

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