

The Filipino Migrant Workers: Partnered By Civil Society¹

Bonifacio S. MACARANAS*

ABSTRACT

Worldwide, Filipino overseas workers (OFWs) number eight million today, a phenomenon not surprising for a developing country like the Philippines. But what is significant is that this type of migration may continue for many more years ahead. This is despite the various difficulties faced by these migrant workers from day one of their attempt in their home country to look for a job abroad, their actual employment in a foreign land and their return home to resettle with their respective families. The overwhelming odds of psychological, social and financial or economic nature that beleaguer these 'adventurers' somehow do not serve as deterrents.

The explanation for this resilience among the OFWs lies in the fact that the country's vibrant civil society groups have among its members self-sacrificing non-government organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) which have volunteered to partner with these disadvantaged migrant workers. These social or cause-oriented groups have willingly taken up the cudgels for the promotion and protection of the human and labor rights of these migrant workers. Such partnership remains strong and continues to effect improvements in the lot of the OFWs not only in their

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* Assistant Professor, UP SOLAIR

home countries but also in all countries of destination where their fellow workers are similarly struggling for a better standard of living.

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the number of jobless people in the world reached 185.9 million, 6.2 percent of the total labor force, according to the International Labor Organization. The developing world, including the Philippines, has a big share in that percentage of unemployed workforce. With the country's unemployment rate of 12.7 percent second half of last year, Filipino labor migration appears unstoppable, and will likely make the Philippines retain its standing in the years ahead as the world's second largest exporter of human capital, next only to Mexico (Arguelles, 2002). Problems abound, however, for the Filipino migrant workers, from the time of planning to work abroad through all the stages of the migration process up to their return home. But the resilience of the Filipino migrant workers has been prevailing over all types of obstacles in their quest for foreign jobs. One explanation for this is the supporting role of civil society in the home country. It is the significant partnership of civil society with the Filipino migrant workers that is the focus of this paper.

Background

The Philippines has close to eight million documented Filipino migrant workers or overseas Filipino workers in more than 180 countries all over the world. As of midyear 2003, the country's Central Bank estimated that the foreign exchange inflows from the OFWs comprised 85 percent of gross earnings; estimated annual remittances amounted to \$7 billion. This impact on the country's economy is indeed significant, especially for a developing nation. The government or society as a whole must look more deeply into this phenomenon, considering that this 'exporting' strategy was supposed to have been a temporary solution to the severe unemployment problems in the early 1970s.

The increase in the number of OFWs has been by leaps and bounds, from only 47,000 in 1976 to the current figure. And this is despite the fact that the process of landing a job outside the country is fraught with overwhelming difficulties. In fact, the

Philippines as the sending country has had its share of high profile cases of its citizens suffering oppression in the receiving country. But these are just instances of what happens in the country of destination while the OFWs are already at work, not to mention the entire process from planning to actual employment, to re-employment at home, if ever.

The uphill trend, however, shows no signs of slowing down, with President Macapagal-Arroyo herself encouraging the deployment of one million OFWs within a year. Countless are the obstacles faced by the OFWs, but they are indeed fortunate to have a hero in civil society partnering with and for them. The civil society's positive influence on the migrant workers all these years should be highlighted, if only to recognize their vital role in society. And this appreciation to be extended in some concrete form of proactive reforms should come especially from government as the dominant actor in the industrial relations system.

Objectives

This paper aims to expound (1) on the difficulties faced by overseas Filipino workers in their quest for a better life through foreign employment, specifically the various problems that beset them at each step of the process from application to arrival home; (2) how civil society has been helping, and partnering with these migrant workers, specifically their concrete programs to overcome the obstacles encountered; and (3) the implications for the key stakeholders especially civil society in terms of future directions, particularly for the improvement of the lot of OFWs.

Definition of Civil Society

Civil society in this paper refers to voluntarily formed groups which are autonomous and separate from the government and industry, and carry out plans and programs in line with their advocacy particularly for the upliftment of the poor or marginalized sectors of society. This definition hews closely to what other observers of civil society have expressed as "NGOs + POs" = Civil Society - that is, non-government and people's organizations, "volunteer groups...self-described as working for democracy" (Coronel-Ferrer,1997). "Civil society is that part of social life

which lies beyond the immediate reach of the state and which...must exist for a democratic state to flower. It is the society of households, family networks, civic and religious organizations, and communities that are bound to each other primarily by shared histories, collective memories and cultural norms of reciprocity" (Friedman, 1998). The Vienna Declaration looks at the role of the NGOs as "increasing public awareness of human rights issues, to the conduct of education, training and research ...and to the promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms (Battistella, 1993).

More specifically, we refer to the non-government organizations, people's organizations, "organizations of migrants at the host countries, organization of migrant kin at the home societies, Church-formed migrant groups or associations (e.g. parish groups), unions made up of migrant workers such as seafarers, and other related groupings and formations" (Opiniano, 2002). The more visible NGO/POs working for the OFWs number less than a hundred, but they have been there, struggling side by side with and for the OFWs.

PROBLEMS OF THE OFWs

Overseas Filipino Workers or Filipino migrant workers refer to citizens of the Philippines who have opted to look for and have found employment in foreign lands usually over a fixed period of time, regardless whether officially covered or not covered by a written contract. The United Nations considers a migrant worker as "a person who is to be engaged, or has been engaged in a remunerative activity in a state of which he or she is not a national." The latest statistics from the Department of Labor and Employment show that 80 percent of the migrant workers are domestic workers or entertainers, or those who take on work that are usually considered low and rejected by citizens of the receiving countries. These are the types of work that are characterized as "dirty, dangerous and difficult" (Stalker, 2000). Understandably, the majority of those who accept such work from the sending countries like the Philippines come from the non-urban areas or agriculture-based localities where the poor and less-educated make up the bulk of the population. Predominating among the OFWs are women domestic workers, except in Japan where female entertainers are the majority (Abrera-Mangahas, 1998). The lack of job opportunities in the

countrysides and lack of skills to compete for better employment in the cities push the poor people to apply for jobs abroad through recruitment agencies.

High Costs of Job Search

Searching for a job entails huge expenses which could amount to 3 to 4 months salary as initial payment. Families then have to sacrifice and could mean the sale or mortgage of a poor farmer's only precious possessions, e.g., the house, land or work animals (Stalker, 2000). This is a gamble for the family, and things can get worse, particularly where the dreamed-for employment is not realized for one reason or another. Thus, from the very start, even while still thinking and planning of looking for employment opportunities abroad, the aspiring OFW is burdened with how to raise funds to spend for her job search.

Illegal Recruitment

Still, having found a contact to help the would-be OFW is not a guarantee for success. Migrants face discrimination or some form of exploitation at various stages of the migration process. Particularly vulnerable are the illegal or irregular workers, and more so for the women domestic helpers and entertainers (Abrera-Mangahas, 1998). Illegal recruitment agencies have proliferated along with the legitimate ones, and thousands of the foreign job searchers have become losers. Because of their ignorance or naivete, these work applicants from the rural areas are taken advantaged of by the vultures of the recruitment industry. Despite the publicity of such unfortunate experiences, countless more get fooled and suffer the same fate. Families have to recoup their losses, and how many can do so within a year or two, if at all?

Tedious Bureaucratic Requirements

If not victimized at the outset by scheming recruiters, the OFW has to comply with various government and private agency requirements. More often than not, she incurs expenses amounting to what a family of five or six mouths to feed would need to survive for a year. Outside of transportation expenses, the hopeful

OFW has to pay for application forms, documentary stamps, legal fees, etc. and other necessary 'extra' payments for services, not to mention illegal funding impositions by corrupt government functionaries or agency personnel. Especially for the illiterate applicant, complying with the hundred and one transactional requirements of finding foreign employment can bring only headaches. All this psychological pressure on the individual could be overwhelming. It is not strange that many end up giving up the struggle, if not experiencing a mental breakdown, temporary or otherwise.

Another problematic phase of the application procedure for a job abroad is the physical examination by an accredited medical clinic or institution. Applicants as young as twenty years old, who thought that they were at the pink of health, suddenly find themselves with a suspected tubercular scar in their lungs after an x-ray examination. This is enough to disqualify them until such findings are rectified. Again this could take another six or more months of anxious rehabilitation, and tedious rounds of travel and updating of application requirements.

Contract Violations: Migrant Trafficking

Passing the medical tests as a final step to acceptance does not mean the end of the problems of the aspiring OFW. Working visa, passport, contract documents, plane ticket, and other requirements may appear fully in order, but what could happen is that at the point of destination the contact agency or the employer may change the rules. Contracts are replaced by fake documents, passport confiscated and kept by the employer. The illegal transport of people is regarded as a lucrative global enterprise of \$5 – 7 billion a year as it involves bribery among airline personnel and immigration officers (Stalker, 2000). In the Philippines, of 1,013 recorded cases of human trafficking from 1993 to 2002, 64.5 percent had women victims where 19.1 percent were forced into prostitution (PDI, 11/23/03). Thus, at point of entry where a decent job supposedly awaits the first-time foreign traveler, there is only disappointment and debilitating fear of the unknown future.

Sexual Harassment/Physical Violence

Where the OFW successfully finds herself with the rightful employer at the receiving country, she may later find out that the head of the household has other plans for her. The OFW could turn up to be one of the many victims of sexual harassment by male employers, or verbal and physical abuse by the female head of the household. More difficulties are thrown her path, like being treated like a captive without rights and her dignity as a human being denied. The legality of the work arrangement at the point of origin may thus be thwarted completely at the country of destination. Problems are multiplied for the OFW if not fought off in some way. There are cases, of course, where the OFWs are able to escape, or are able to fight back to win their freedom, and have their employers penalized. What has been a tragic end to some OFWs is their coming home to their loved ones in coffins (Arguelles, 2000). Others had managed to save themselves by sheer individual courage. The case of Sarah Balabagan in the mid-nineties drew international attention. She was tried for killing her employer who attempted to rape her, but worldwide publicity through the efforts of her government and migrant NGOs saved her from the death penalty.

Oppressive Working Conditions

Other adverse experiences of the OFWs, particularly the domestic helpers, caregivers and 'entertainers', have been documented and publicized by the government, NGOs and international institutions like the ILO. Physical beating by the mother of the household for mistakes committed in doing her daily chores may be the least of the worries of the domestic helper. But a common practice among employers is to require the OFW to do housework from early dawn up to the late hours of the evening, leaving her with only less than four to five hours for personal activities, including a basic need — sleep. She would be considered fortunate if as a domestic helper she is obliged only to clean house, cook and do the laundry for the family for a day's work. But what often happens is that she is also made to do other extra chores without additional pay, such as helping out in the family business, or taking care of the household's toddler or senior citizen, or doing other errands clearly not stipulated in her work contract. This could only lead eventually to exhaustion and poor health. Getting sick would spell disaster for the OFW. Time to get medical help,

much less to enjoy a sick leave, is alien to the foreign employer. Illness disables the OFW to work efficiently, and for the family breadwinner there arises the problem of remaining healthy and employed.

Inhumane Household Practices

The household help provided with a room to herself would be considered lucky as this is usually a fair labor standard. But cases abound where she is forced to bear with having her personal quarters in a small corner of the kitchen or in an improvised tiny space in the house. The deprivation of the basic right to privacy is just one among many human rights violations perpetrated by conscienceless employers. Sub-standard wages, if at all, are suffered by the OFW, in clear violation of any worker's right to decent wages. There are instances too where the domestic helper's mobility is severely restricted, confining her only within the house and making no provision for a day-off or chance to leave the premises for a restful break. Humane conditions of work is another fundamental right of any worker. But this has been observed as a breach in many cases.

Government Shortcomings

Government assistance at place of work in case of problems is only to be expected by OFWs. However, the bureaucratic, administrative and budget limitations of government have proved inadequate to provide help to those in distress involving contract violations, physical, sexual or psychological assaults, legal counseling, emergency needs, etc. Most Philippine missions are understaffed or under-trained, not to mention overworked, to handle the diversity of problems faced by the OFWs in their places of work (Macaranas, 2002).

Reintegration Pains

Upon return to their home country, even if whole and healthy, they face reintegration difficulties. Unemployment could be their fate for months or years, and if at all, they suffer adjustment problems of lower pay, de-skilling, or even loss of self-esteem. Particularly for the women migrants in vulnerable occupations,

such as cooks, maids, entertainers, they have no value-added experience, and such menial work experience could only result in the deterioration of their performance level. Not a few are cases of great social costs — family bonding suffers. Mothers or fathers can suddenly become strangers to their teenage sons and daughters, whom they left home as toddlers or as pre-teens (Arat-koc, 2001). Damage to the family just cannot be measured, especially where strained relationships end up eventually in broken homes.

MIGRANT CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERSHIP SERVICES

Myriad indeed are the issues and concerns faced by the OFWs — psychological, emotional, familial, social, financial, economic, institutional, etc. — and in the context of the industrial relations system, the Philippine government needs to take on a greater proactive stance in the years ahead. Its regulatory function especially over the concerned industry sector, the private recruitment agencies, need to be strengthened. Confronted likewise by business malpractices and government service inadequacies adversely affecting the OFWs, civil society even as early as the mid-1980s has been working side by side with the OFWs in coping with the problems of pursuing their dream jobs in foreign shores.

As partners of the OFWs, the migrant civil society (MCS) groups are real heroes. Staffed with only six or less or even as skeletal as two full-time personnel, most of these Philippine-based migrant NGO/POs manage to help many OFWs and their families in innumerable ways. Their ingenuity in carrying out their programs with limited funds enable them to be effective nevertheless and maintain their influence in society, for the welfare of the OFWs. Even as they have to put up with the inefficiencies or corruption in government, or the institutional obstacles in the bureaucracy, or in the recruitment industry, these undermanned small organizations carry the torch of empowerment for the migrant workers.

The MCS respects the freedom of individuals to opt for foreign employment, even as they may have certain reservations on its advisability as an employment alternative for citizens. The Philippine NGO/POs, members of the MCS, have always believed in keeping themselves on the ground — the reality of labor migration

in the long-term, and the need for down-to-earth programs that create an impact on all stakeholders, most especially for the welfare of the OFWs. Thus, some from among the many friends, partners or heroes of the OFWs are the Center for Overseas Workers (COW), Scalabrini Migration Center (SMC), Development Action for Women Network (DAWN), Atikha, Inc./Batang Atikha, Apostleship of the Sea (AOS) — Philippines, Associated Marine Officers' and Seamen's Union of the Philippines (AMOSUP), and the Philippine Migrants Rights Watch (PMRW).

Pre-departure Seminars

Given primary emphasis is getting all concerned forewarned about the risks and dangers of foreign job search. Preventive measures are taken to preempt costly mistakes at all stages of the migration process. Orientation-learning activities are meant to ensure that intelligent decisions are made by would-be OFWs. This means that before a problem confronts the OFW from the very first step of the migration process, safeguards are put in place for guidance and protection. For example, the COW, founded in 1982 and currently manned by six full-time staff, conducts daily pre-departure orientations on foreign employment for interested 20 – 30 or as many as 90 individuals. Sessions include modules on values, rights of migrant workers and the realities of migration. As a result, many have gained self-confidence in making decisions for themselves. Some have backed out from their plans after being enlightened on the difficulties, and ending up for the better. Others have saved themselves from a lot of hassles in their successful bids for jobs abroad. Similar results were experienced by the AOS and other NGOs. Knowledge of what is in store for venturing into a foreign country is in fact a very important step in the OFW's quest for a decent job.

Public Information and Educational Campaigns

Public awareness campaigns through information dissemination, training and education are among the priority programs, if not the stock-in-trades of the MCS. A deeper and more substantive form of information dissemination by the MCS is the conduct of seminars, national conferences or educational forums. These discussion sessions help to enlighten and educate the migrant workers, their families and relatives, leaders of other NGO/POs, people from the

academe, professionals and the public in general. The OFWs in particular become educators themselves on labor migration issues, that is, after they may have made mature decisions for themselves. More importantly, the general public becomes aware about the problems of OFWs and many people get motivated enough to join the action for reforms.

Networking, Alliance Building and Lobbying Drives

The public gatherings serve another important purpose – providing wider opportunities for networking, resulting in increased alliances in support of the OFWs. A multiplier effect ensues, an educated public becomes a strong hedge against deceit and anomalies in the entire labor migration process. Thus, a public aware of the pitfalls of foreign employment generates another highly effective weapon of the MCS — lobbying for reforms before the appropriate executive and legislative state agencies. Advocacy, the active push for “policy changes, enactment and amendment of laws, jurisprudence, attitudes and practices – before government/s and international bodies” (Sana, 2002) becomes widespread and reinforces the collective power of the MCS as a whole. The ever expanding networks focused on OFW issues then serve as powerful lobbying bodies. Congress itself in particular is usually the key target for such pressure tactic strategies, especially since institutional reforms at the national level have the greatest impact on public policy. New national or international policies serve to strengthen the resolve of the MCS to pressure the appropriate government agencies to perform their role of improving the lot of the OFWs.

National conferences leading to new alliance formations and intensified lobbying by the MCS have in fact led to the passage of important laws. Republic Act 8042 or the “Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995” instituted higher standards of protection and promotion of the welfare of migrant workers and their families, while streamlining the systems and procedures of state agencies for the improved delivery of services. These structural changes have led in turn to a more educated public joining all stakeholders concerned to serve as watchdogs vis-à-vis government and the foreign employment recruitment industry.

Last year also saw a very important development brought about by the MCS’ lobbying efforts, specifically the concerted action by

the ten-member coalition Philippine Migrants' Rights Watch (PMRW) — the passage of Republic Act 9189 or "The Overseas Absentee Voting Act of 2003." After 15 years of struggle through the legislative maze by the MCS, millions of OFWs can now vote during national elections. Thus the right of suffrage of the migrant workers have been upheld with finality, another significant step towards their empowerment.

Worth noting too last year about coalition work, along with other international advocates, was the ratification and entering into force of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. This UN Convention is an instrument to protect the human rights of all migrant workers, irregular ones included, and their families. Essentially covered are the personal rights, labor rights and legal guarantees of the migrants at their places of origin, states in transit and country of destination/employment.

Researches and Publications

Another medium for raising public awareness by the MCS is publications and researches on labor migration. These have long been part of the advocacy programs of almost all the migrant organization partners. One of the most research-prolific members of the MCS is the Scalabrini Migration Center, a Church-related NGO, specializing in migration research in Asia, not to mention its many other OFW-focused initiatives. This non-profit research institute founded in 1987 has cooperative links with research institutions worldwide as well as with other Asian regional and international organizations concerned with migration in general and the promotion of the welfare of migrant workers in particular. Its quarterly Asian and Pacific Migration Journal is a scholarly publication of studies on the "socio-demographic, economic, political, psychological, historical, legislative and religious aspects of human migration and refugee movements from and within Asia." With its past and present research outputs, the Scalabrini Migration Center (SMC) has long served as a reliable documentation center for its partner NGO/POs in the service of the OFWs.

An active member of the broad-based Philippine Migrants Rights Watch (PMRW), the Scalabrini Migration Center has been instrumental in strengthening the MCS linkages in terms not only

of providing comprehensive documentation updates but also of launching concerted activities for continuing structural reforms for the sake of the OFWs. Serving as part of the secretariat, this center helps put out the PMRW's quarterly newsletter 'The Migrant Watch'. This communication tool has been regularly updating all coalition members on the OFW agenda – national conferences, schedules of lobbying, developments of labor migration struggles in the regional and international levels, and other labor migration activities.

Personal Direct Assistance

Providing direct assistance to OFWs is another highly appreciated program of the MCS. The Center for Overseas Workers (COW) manages a temporary shelter in Manila for migrant workers from the provinces, and for distressed women OFWs who need a period of recovery even as long as three months. Migrant returnees in transit to their homes in the provinces are similarly accommodated in such halfway homes provided by other members of the MCS. Additionally, in such centers other forms of personal help like counseling, assistance in the processing of travel documents, referrals, and legal services are available for OFWs as needed.

Family and Children-focused Initiatives

Other major OFW-MCS partnering initiatives that have been making a long-term impact are the special sector-focused programs centering on family bonding. COW organizes an annual 2 – 3 day summer camp for OFWs' children/dependents aged 9 – 18 years. An average of 40 – 50 kids take part in this activity. Other MCS members carrying out a similar children-friendly type of social action are the DAWN and Atikha, Inc.

DAWN, founded in 1996, aims among others to be a "competent and self-sustaining support institution for distressed Filipino migrant women and their families." While not neglecting its other programs, DAWN has given special focus on helping Japan-deployed migrant workers, especially those with Japanese-Filipino children (JFC). With 201 women members and 243 JFCs, DAWN's special attention is not misplaced considering that (according to records of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration) last 2002 the 77,870 OFWs deployed in Japan made it the third top

destination, next only to Saudi Arabia and Hongkong. Today the great majority of those employed are the "Overseas Performing Artists" (OPA) numbering 68,986 in Japan as of last year. These OPAs are officially classified as choreographers and dancers, circus performers, composers, musicians, singers or performing artists. As OPAs, these women migrant workers had to undergo an intensive skills training for official accreditation by the government's Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). The relevance of these accreditation processes, however, is questionable. What is alarming is that these "professional artists" end up working in bars and clubs engaged in practices like "dohan," the practice of going out on an afternoon date with male customers, or some other illicit sex-related activities, in blatant violation of the women migrant workers' human and labor rights.

It is therefore not surprising that some of these women OFWs find themselves becoming mothers of JFC. And these are the special constituents DAWN has been giving attention to. These children were abandoned by their Japanese fathers. In the hope of arriving at some degree of family reconciliation between child and father, DAWN managed to fulfill the children's deep longing for personally meeting their biological fathers. A number of these JFC have been duly recognized and given continuing support by their respective Japanese fathers. Last year was a particularly memorable one for nine JFC. They went to their fathers' homeland as member-performers of DAWN's theater arm Teatro Akebono which staged a musical "Ang Maskara" (The Mask: A Glimpse of the Joys and Pains of the Japanese-Filipino Children). It was an overwhelming experience for the JFC especially for those who met their fathers. Follow-up efforts of DAWN for the welfare of these children actually include educational support, currently for 96 JFC.

A member of the MCS also focused on children of OFWs is Atikha, Inc. Based in the province of Batangas, 137 kilometers south of Manila, Atikha, Inc. organized Batang Atikha, an alliance of children of OFWs aged 18 years and below. This group of 40 youngsters, whose fathers or mothers, or both parents, are working in Italy as domestic helpers or seafarers, was formed to help the members understand and confront the realities of their parents' migration. Batang Atikha has served as a tightly-knit support group such that their regular interactions led to the organization of a ten-day cultural workshop in 2002 where their creative skills were

tapped. This resulted in the formation of clusters in the performing arts, visual arts and creative writing – giving the children a regular opportunity to socialize, nurture their talents and deepen their understanding of the difficulties of separation from parents (Estopace, 2002). Maintaining family bonding among OFWs may be difficult, but Batang Atikha has shown the way on how MCS can effectively partner with migrants in this regard.

Programs for Sea-based Workers

Filipino sea-based workers estimated at 200,000 make up 20 percent of the world total (Contreras, 2003). This is where the MCS' visibility as a partner has long been recognized. Many Filipino seamen end up aboard "sweatships," receiving pay below the ILO benchmark of \$435, and forced to do extended hours of work, and to bear with other inhumane conditions of work. And a sad fact is that 60 percent of Filipino seafarers are not members of a union (Pabico, 2003). Thus seamen unions and other NGOs have made their presence felt by continuous organizing work, pre-departure seminars, legal services, temporary shelter, health services, etc. for the protection and welfare of seafarers and their families. The Associated Marine Officers' and Seamen's Union of the Philippines (AMOSUP), for example, has since its founding in 1961 carried relevant long-term programs for its currently estimated 75,000 members. It has established a Seamen's Center that functions "to represent the Union in national and international agencies...(to improve the) social, economic and occupational conditions of Filipino seafarers" (SMC, 1997). Its vitality as a partner to the sea-based OFWs is clearly evident in the activities of its other establishments: a Medical Hospital and Dental Clinic, Training Center Sailor's Home (dormitory), and a housing project, the Seamen's Village.

The role of Church-related MCS groups supporting sea-based OFWs is also noteworthy. The AOS is just one of the NGOs under the umbrella of one of the Catholic Church's social action arm the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ECMI). Staffed with only six full-time personnel and operating with nine provincial centers, AOS provides the following services: referral, legal, advocacy, seminars, research and publications, organization of cultural events, and other maritime-related activities, including a radio/TV program. Its network with the Apostleship of the Sea – International concretizes

the worldwide dimension of its work for the protection and promotion of Filipino seamen and other sea-based workers.

Campaigns versus Human Trafficking

Trafficking of women is another prominent area of concern among the Filipino MCS. This is where alliance-building and networking for the protection of migrant women workers have been most effective in fighting this menace of global proportions especially today. From 1992 to March 2001, there were 959 recorded cases of human trafficking in the Philippines, according to the Commission on Filipino Overseas. Many aspiring 'entertainers' or OPAs bound for Japan have been duped and have had to suffer working in brothels, and faced more problems like abortion, psychological disorientation, lost self-esteem, and mental illness. Last year the Philippines became the first country in Southeast Asia to enact a tough law against human trafficking—Republic Act 9208, the "Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003." This piece of legislation protects women and children from being exploited as sex slaves, prostitutes, pornographic objects, forced labor or subjects under debt bondage within the country or overseas. The passage of this measure was realized through the persistent lobbying by the DAWN with its co-advocates from the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific (CATW-AP).

Reintegration and Livelihood Programs

Reintegration at home with family for returning OFWs is of course among the most anticipated conclusions to a foreign sojourn. Getting fully re-employed, or owning a business enterprise, or simply having a viable livelihood soon after coming home is an ultimate dream for any OFW. Such in fact is the most fitting highlight to the migrant worker's career. And in this area, the MCS has not been remiss. Livelihood programs are part and parcel of most migrant NGO/POs' long-term strategies, believing that these have the greatest impact on the OFW's family, community and the country as a whole. DAWN has its SIKHAY, a production and marketing enterprise with three project components: tie-dyeing, sewing and handweaving – decent jobs for the former 'entertainers.' Though limited in terms of direct beneficiaries, SIKHAY is meant to relay the message to returning OFWs that

there are other meaningful ways of making a living in one's own country. Other NGOs with their own social and economic reintegration programs are Unlad Kabayan Migrant Services Foundation and the province-based BaliKaBayani Foundation, Inc. (a coined Filipino phrase meaning "go back home our hero") (Opiniano, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Indeed many more are the various forms of genuine partnership extended by the MCS to the OFWs. Public education campaigns, alliance-building, lobbying, direct personal assistance, children-centered programs, and specific-sector focused or issue-based initiatives – these are just some major means of reaching out and extending a helping hand to the OFWs. All these efforts are commendable and deserve to be continued because they have been effectively benefiting the primary stakeholders, the migrant workers. What should be kept in mind by the MCS is to maintain the industrial relations perspective, that is, the other key stakeholders – government and the recruitment industry in particular – own the greater power and responsibility to change things for the better. This means that the MCS should: firstly, strengthen its watchdog function and lobbying efforts directed at government; and secondly, pursue the effective implementation of laws by seeking justice for the aggrieved OFWs in the face of illegal and exploitative practices of the foreign recruitment industry.

Lobbying efforts presupposes a united and collective stand by the widest coalition of MCS forces regarding issues on labor migration, be they local or national in scope. A divided MCS, carrying contradictory causes and proposals, utilizing different tactics and strategies, and unwilling to listen and communicate openly with other MCS groups is a surefire way of weakening current efforts to improve the situation of OFWs. The ten-member working coalition Philippine Migrant Rights Watch (PMRW), for example, has been successful in pushing for its wide-ranging agenda in the national legislative front. Laudable too are its collective drives for causes with international dimension. One was the establishment of a yearly International Migrants Day on December 18 where co-advocates come together for updates on labor migration reforms. Another was its strong call for peace and anti-war stand, siding in effect with the United Nations, against the "coalition of the willing" led by the US, UK and Spain versus

the Iraqis. These efforts are especially relevant today in a globalized environment, where international causes create impact across borders worldwide.

The dynamics of the industrial relations system at the international level cannot be ignored by the Filipino MCS. The political, social and economic institutions of the countries of destination have to be studied closely for the MCS to intelligently determine the appropriate approaches to resolve issues that dog the OFWs. And if its lobbying activities are meant to achieve maximum long-term impact, the MCS should concentrate on pressuring the government to establish with host governments the necessary technical, legal and co-operative linkages or agreements that can protect and promote the interests of the OFWs. In this endeavor, the MCS should call on the government to exercise strong political will in the diplomatic front. Aggressive international diplomacy by the Philippine government can address the need for stable mutual gains labor migration arrangements with the host countries. The MCS as a united credible force should continue to call the government into account as to the implementation of national as well as international policies and laws that protect and promote the welfare of the OFWs.

Laws are meant to preserve order in any society. Their enforcement are thus of equal importance. This is again the responsibility of the government, that is, its executive and judicial branches. Of course, the industry players involved in labor migration are also expected at least to perform their role with the highest standards of business ethics. But the MCS has also to carry out its role in this area. It may have to expand and strengthen its capacity to extend legal services to the OFWs. Taking on its role as a close ally of labor considering that majority of its members are migrant workers, the MCS should relentlessly pursue the prosecution of offenders and to obtain justice for the victims. The long-term objective in this endeavor is to effectively prevent anomalies in the labor migration process, so that workers' rights to decent jobs are protected all the way.

The most important program that the MCS should never neglect is strengthening and building its network of alliances locally, nationally and internationally. In solidarity with other civil societies worldwide, the Philippine MCS can sustain the increasing empowerment of the OFWs. In any society, numbers count. As an interest group in a democratic society, the MCS can only be

as effective and powerful if it continues to grow in the number and the quality of its members. The government will have no choice but to continue to respond to the powerful lobbying efforts of the MCS. Good government begets a better government through the honest exercise of its political will for the welfare and improvement of the lives of its constituents. The OFWs and their partners in the MCS have to play their part in bringing about a better world. This is their exercise of true empowerment. This important thrust should be taken in the context of the proliferation and increasing influence of NGO/POs and their networks in Asia today, making them the real driving force of social change through its periodic conferences at the national, regional and global levels (Piper, 2003).

A very important point: the MCS in the midst of its social activism prefers that the Philippine government and the industry players, being the dominant actors in the industrial relations system, should help generate jobs at home. Employment opportunities especially for the poor will minimize if not eliminate the need for foreign employment and its attendant problems. But the exodus of workers appears to have no end. Given the fact that societies, at both sending and receiving countries, have their own peculiar restrictive institutions and anti-migrant dynamics, the MCS has to remain committed to partnering with the OFWs with more creativity, more innovation and 'transnational activism', to be truly domestically and globally effective in its advocacy for a better life for the OFWs and their families.

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