

REVIEW

BOOK

**Labor pioneers: Economy, labor, and migration in Filipino-Danish relations,  
1950-2015**

By Nina Trige Andersen

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Nina Trige Andersen's *Labor Pioneers* weaves the labor migration history from the Philippines to Denmark by exploring how international institutions, Philippine and Danish policymakers, labor unions, and religious groups have influenced the decisions and actions of Filipino migrant women and, in turn, how Filipino women migrants have shaped the realities of the communities they had and have been living in over time. Notwithstanding the lack of earlier historical records, including Philippine migration data and deployment materials, Andersen managed to put together a compelling narrative of the lived experiences of Filipino migrant women in Denmark through formal interviews, informal conversations, email correspondences, public and private archives, publications, and compilation of government policies. Andersen aims to intervene in the largely unexamined accounts of the labor migration trend from the Philippines to Denmark prior to the boom of the au pair scheme.

At the macroeconomic context, one premise set by the book is the continuous dependence of the Philippines on labor export, which had been initially intended as a temporary solution to the country's economic problems. Upon the enactment of the Labor Code of 1974, the Philippine government under the Marcos administration adopted labor export as state policy that was encouraged and supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO raised concerns regarding labor surplus in developing economies and labor deficit in developed economies. Thus, the ILO recommended the distribution of workers from countries with surpluses to countries with deficiencies to restore balance in the global labor markets and promote global development, especially among low-

income economies. Registering high unemployment rates, the Philippines seemed not to be an exception of the surplus case. Aside from addressing unemployment, labor export was recognized as a substantial source of foreign currency for the country. Blas Ople, then Minister of Labor, acknowledged that the labor export policy of the country also led to exporting discontent from the Philippines abroad.

With the Labor Code of 1974, the Philippines administered state-brokered migration, although Andersen argues that the government had been involved in facilitating labor migration even before the implementation of the Code. Denmark was among the countries formally accommodated by Philippine government officials for these purposes early on. Despite this, the Philippine-Denmark route before the au pair boom was deemed “neglected in history” for several reasons. One, there tends to be a focus on the routes to the United States and, to some degree, the Middle East, and not much to Europe—at least until more recently. Two, documents and data on labor migration were not systematically kept and organized prior to the 1990s. Three, the services sector, where Filipino women migrants were mostly employed, was mostly ignored by labor unions despite the migrants’ poor working conditions and by the Danes despite the increase in Denmark’s unemployment levels. Instead, much attention was concentrated on the manufacturing sector, which men tended to occupy.

According to Andersen, the labor migration to Denmark occurred in three major waves. The first wave happened from 1960 to 1973, which was around the guest worker era in Europe. The last batch of the pioneers was called the 49ers, who are central to the storyline of the book. The 49ers played a huge role in the 1978 national strike in Copenhagen against subcontracting jobs and massive layoffs in the hotel sector, an event often overlooked in migration stories in Denmark. The second wave consisted of the migrants who arrived in Denmark when immigration stops were enforced in Europe. The immigration stop did not deter the arrivals, and the second-wave Filipino migrants still obtained employment in the same sector as the pioneers. The only change was the means to enter Denmark: through marriage. The third wave was associated with the au pair boom wherein temporary residence permits were obtained by migrants as au pairs. Compared to the other generations, the Filipino au pairs are arguably the most vulnerable group. They are not considered workers; hence workers’ rights are not necessarily applicable to them. The paradox of their situation is that, even if they are not classified as workers, they are still expected to send remittances to their families in the Philippines, thus attaching monetary value to the “labor services” they provide.

What differentiates the book is the unfolding of the migration story from the lens of Filipino women migrants, especially the 49ers, while relating the experiences of these migrants to the changing—and even the unchanging—macroeconomic and political landscapes over time. The stories are not representative of the Filipino

migrant experience (and the author does not claim them to be), but the book presents a more personalized understanding of how push and pull factors affect the decision of people to migrate compared to what is typically discussed in economics textbooks. While the massive number of flights leaving the Philippines during the Marcos administration could be partially attributed to the labor export policy, the 49ers and other Filipino migrants interviewed by Andersen pointed to poor economic opportunities, poverty, and political insecurity in the Philippines and the perceived better financial opportunities and safer environment in Denmark as the factors that motivated their migration efforts at the time. It was particularly gripping to read the details of the dangers faced by activists, patrolmen, and their respective families that had made even the highly educated and well-employed women opt to take on unskilled jobs in a completely different environment like Denmark.

Theoretically, people choose to migrate when the expected benefits outweigh the costs of migration, including both pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits and costs. Return migration can thus happen when the expected net benefits are not realized by the worker. Andersen presented that, in practice, return migration may not be a viable option to migrants, even if net loss was perceived at the onset of the move. Incidences of difficulty in adjusting to the new environment, receiving lower compensation than what was expected, and employment insecurity were reported in the book. Instead of returning to the Philippines, many Filipino women migrants, especially among the 49ers, found ways to fight for their rights as workers and to secure their residence in Denmark. Amid the precarious situation of foreign workers in Denmark in the late 1970s, they were able to obtain jobs in the services sector. Also, despite the immigration stop, they were still able to recruit their relatives, friends, and neighbors back in the Philippines to work in Denmark. For those who lost their jobs and were not able to obtain new ones in Denmark, they managed to find employment in other parts of Europe. It seems that what was originally meant to be a temporary move became a permanent choice. For some of these labor migrants, it also seems that anywhere else is better than the Philippines. Although it may sound like these migrants have become less patriotic, the narrative laid out by Andersen makes it easy to empathize, or at least sympathize, with their circumstances.

The situation among Filipino migrants is not the same, however, and Andersen does not mince words on the conflict among generations. For instance, “Filipina” has become synonymous with “au pair” or “domestic worker” because of the au pair boom, and some of the pioneers felt that the more recent migrants damaged the reputation of the Filipino community in Denmark. Another example is the identity crisis among the second-generation Filipinos in Denmark—i.e., the children of the pioneers. They question why they should be proud to be identified as Filipinos,

as they find faults in being Filipino. The difference in socioeconomic situation between the second-generation Filipinos and the au pairs can also be polarizing, thus making it difficult for the former to relate with the latter. Nonetheless, some of the pioneers and the second-generation Filipinos have expressed sympathy towards the au pairs and have been actively helping them in their difficulties.

Labor migration to Denmark may have been relatively small compared to the overall migration that occurred from the Philippines to abroad, but delving into the stories of the Filipino women migrants in this unlikely destination can raise awareness of the experiences faced by migrants that are beyond what reported statistics tell. Andersen also demonstrated that migrants, while they are among minorities, have the capability and determination to adapt and create their own communities in their host countries. Needless to say, the lives of the pioneers and their families have improved and changed for the better but, at the same time, some things remain unchanged even decades after. The families they left in the Philippines continue to depend on the remittances they send. Overall, it is not only the migrants' families that depend on them but also the Philippine government and economy. Andersen's detailed account of the underlying motivations and actors involved behind the labor export policy can lend some degree of appreciation to why the policy's objectives of addressing the domestic issues of the Philippines still have not materialized half a century later.

While the book can be described as a case study, the meticulous research done by Andersen to put together a narrative about the perspectives of migrant workers and document the interaction between individual experiences and the social landscape is a major reason people should read the book. The author's purposeful incorporation of Marcos's authoritarian regime, the motivation behind the labor export policy of the Philippines, the global labor market framework, and the reception of Denmark to foreign workers into her reinterpretation of the migrant experience of the pioneers makes the book a reading of interest not just to the academic field of history but also to economics, political science, and sociology.

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