

Filipino Workers in Japan : Caught in an Unequal Global Division of Labor*

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In recent years, Japan has become an increasingly prominent destination of Filipino migrant labor, specifically of young women who wind up as entertainers in the bars of Tokyo and other cities and the “invisible” blue collar workers who helped build the Narita airport and who are now manning the low end of the job scale in industry and the service sectors. From a mere 2,275 workers recruited in 1975, the number has swelled and has settled at a yearly recruitment rate of 20,000 a year since 1980⁽¹⁾. The estimate from the Philippine Embassy in Tokyo for the first quarter of 1990 showed that Filipinos in Japan numbered 141,937, almost half of them (70,426) “il-legals.” The bulk of the other half (43 per cent of the total) were entertainers, and the remainder (about seven per cent) were trainees (3.6 per cent), domestic helpers (2.2 per cent) and professionals (1.25 per cent)⁽²⁾.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what factors internal to the Philippines have pushed Filipino workers to migrate to Japan even under the harshest and most demeaning conditions, on one hand, and what factors in Japan have attracted them despite the risks and the sufferings they have to undergo, on the other. Both sets of factors will be placed within a wholistic framework of analysis which will show the dynamic interaction of economic, political and cultural structures and institutions as migration takes place within the new international division of labor and the sexual division of labor. This paper will also briefly present the conditions of Filipino workers in Japan and how these present problems for both the

labor-receiving and labor-sending countries. It will end with policy implications stemming from the need to recognize present realities and which will hopefully lead to the recognition, regulation, and protection of migrant workers in Japan.

Push Factors

In the early 1960s, the Philippines was one of the closest rivals of Japan in industrial growth and development in the region. Today, the Philippines is the sick man of Asia.

The labor-intensive, export-oriented, and debt-dependent Philippine development strategy pursued in the last two decades under the aegis of the IMF, World Bank and other foreign financial and economic interests has failed to sustain the agroindustrial development of the country and meet the basic needs of the people, forcing many Filipinos, conservatively estimated at about two million, to seek greener pastures abroad.

As of April 1991, official unemployment rate was estimated to be 15.1 per cent, which means 4.2 million Filipinos of the total labor force of 27.6 million are absolutely out of work. In Metropolitan Manila, one out of every five able-bodied workers is unemployed. Underemployment, which means working at less than 40 hours a week or accepting highly irregular jobs, has affected over 7 million workers. These statistics do not reflect yet the “invisibly underemployed” those who have “full-time” jobs and are still seeking additional work because their present occupations give them very limited

returns. They also do not include those who lost their jobs due to the Mt. Pinatubo volcanic eruptions and who were originally estimated by the Department of Labor to total to 651,000 workers in all⁽³⁾.

The Philippines is now a severely indebted country, with a foreign debt fluctuating between \$29 and \$30 billion, and placing the country in a state of severe financial haemorrhage. Debt service for 1990 alone totaled \$4.719 billion, more than a billion dollars higher than the \$3.67 billion recorded in 1989. Because more money has gone out of the country as interest and principal payments than has come in as new money, negative net resource outflows or transfers have been building up. In the years 1988-1990 these totaled a negative \$6.893 billion⁽⁴⁾.

Such a debilitating outflow robs the people of resources that could go into economic recovery and development, basic utilities and social services, and structural reforms to empower the poor and spur sustainable development. Debt service as a percentage of the national budget has risen to as high as 44 per cent. What is worse, the people pay for the outflow in terms of new taxes exacted by the government to earn more revenues for debt service. They work harder and longer, but earn less real income, due to devaluation and inflation that stem from policies demanded by the nation's creditors. The people shoulder much of the debt-service burden through the dollars they remit from overseas employment, into which they have been forced by debt-connected structural unemployment and underemployment.

Because of the job shortage and meager incomes in the Philippines, many workers are obliged to go abroad and endure long and lonely separations from their families, just to be able to support their dependents. In the early 1970s,

the Marcos administration encouraged the export of labor as a "temporary" measure to help solve the problem of unemployment and underemployment. With the failure of the economy to take off, the export of labor has not only become permanent, but has also become the country's leading export industry. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) is now processing close to half a million contract workers a year. As one author claimed, migration for employment has been increasingly supervised, monitored or coordinated by the state: "passports have to be secured, contracts have to be authenticated and approved by the corresponding government agencies, the proper documents have to be presented to customs and immigration officials for travel clearance as well as duties and tax exemptions, etc"⁽⁵⁾.

There are now more than two million land-based and sea-based Filipino contract workers all over the world, performing varied jobs from entertainment to hospital management. Roughly, at least one-fifth of the population are directly dependent on their remittances. Overseas contract employment, in effect, is the safety valve of the economy as well as of the cash-strapped Filipino family whose members bear the travails of working abroad to support their loved ones.

Filipino migrant workers are also the leading dollar earners. Through the formal banking system, they remit roughly \$1 billion a year; however, remittances through the informal channels are estimated to be at least two times this figure. In a very real sense, they are the ones paying for the country's debt.

Pull Factors

Japan is now an economic colossus in the

world.

It has achieved a steady and sustained success in restructuring its economy towards industries which are capital-, knowledge-, and skills-intensive. It has relocated many of its labor-intensive and low-technology industries to less developed, low-wage countries. It has also set up production facilities in North America and Europe to skirt trade barriers and have direct access to the huge markets in these continents.

At home, the contribution of manufacturing to the gross domestic product has remained steady, while the service sector has continued to develop, keeping pace with the steady increase in the standard of living⁽⁶⁾. With the growing sophistication of her industry and with a very low rate of unemployment, Japan has been experiencing labor shortages in certain industry and service sector lines, specifically those employing low technology and intensive forms of labor utilization.

Because of such developments, Japan, which has a highly protected labor market, has been forced, gradually and grudgingly, to admit more and more foreign workers needed to occupy the labor-intensive and 3-D (demanding, dirty and dangerous) jobs which cannot be transferred overseas, including those in the domestic entertainment industry and the construction industry.

In 1989, according to the Japanese Ministry of Labor, scarcity is felt most among skilled labor and production line workers, specifically in the construction and service industries and in small business establishments with 5 to 29 workers. According to the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry in the same year, foreign workers were needed to be hired by one-fourth of the small and medium-scale enterprises. In 1990, a Ministry of Labor survey showed that

the shortage of labor, particularly in sales and transports, would reach almost two million workers⁽⁷⁾.

The great demand for foreign labor, especially for lower-end jobs which the Japanese themselves find unattractive, is made attractive to foreign workers by the relatively high wage levels enhanced by the appreciation of the yen vis-a-vis other currencies. The presence of syndicates, brokers, promoters, operators and fixers, best exemplified by the Yakuza, who facilitate labor recruitment is likewise considered a pull factor. Japan's relative geographical proximity also makes it a more convenient destination⁽⁸⁾.

Labor Circulation and Mobility within the NIDL and the SDL

Both push and pull factors can best be understood within the framework of the evolving New International Division of Labor (NIDL). Under the NIDL, the role of less developed countries is to supply the advanced industrial countries with cheap labor not only for the low-technology and labor-intensive industries they have been phasing out at home and relocating, through overseas investments, in the labor-surplus underdeveloped countries, but also in the form of "international labor circulants"⁽⁹⁾ needed by home industry and service sector lines offering low-paying, labor-intensive, dirty, hazardous, low-technology and generally unattractive jobs.

The "international labor circulants" are not permanent migrant workers, but highly mobile ones who can work in one country for a few months or years, repatriate themselves, and then work again in the same country or some other country where labor is scarce and wages are high. Filipino workers in Japan, who seldom stay for good, can best be described in this

manner.

It is fairly obvious that under the NIDL, both capital in the developed industrial countries and labor in the developing nations have become very mobile. Such mobility suits Japan quite well in the light of what economic observers see as Japan's conscious policy of promoting some kind of a Japanese-led division of labor in the Asia-Pacific region. This division of labor, which underpins the so-called "flying geese" formation of countries in the region (with Japan at the lead of the pack followed by the "four little tigers" (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong), the emerging Newly-Industrializing Countries (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia) and so on), dictates that the Philippines, which is near the lower end of the geese formation, would get a preponderance of investments on labor-intensive, low-technology and energy-intensive types of corporate undertakings.

Labor circulation, however, also needs to be looked at from a gender perspective. At least in the Philippines, there is a trend towards feminization of migration, as more and more women are working abroad mostly as domestic helpers, chambermaids, nurses, hospital attendants, teachers, waitresses and entertainers. In the case of Filipino women workers in Japan, the last category are the overwhelming majority.

The changing international division of labor, therefore, interacts with the sexual division of labor (SDL), wherein women occupy low-skilled, low-paying, and low-status jobs in a gender-segregated labor market. They are therefore disadvantaged in relation not only to workers in advanced countries but also to men in both the receiving and sending countries. It is perhaps important to mention here that migration of Filipino women entertainers to Japan grew by leaps and bounds after massive protests staged by religious and women's groups

had stopped the "sex tours" which had allowed hordes of Japanese men to have sex while on tour. Today, Japanese men do not need to go to Manila to enjoy the sexual services of Filipino women. "Cultural entertainers" (meaning hostesses, bar and massage girls and strip tease dancers) from the Philippines are already in Japan to provide entertainment plus. Filipino "mail-order brides" are performing the same functions, plus domestic service, for Japanese farmers in the farflung countryside⁽¹⁰⁾.

Problems on Both Ends

The problems confronted by Filipino workers in Japan are well known and are sometimes heartbreaking, but their entry to this country continues unabated. Their working and living conditions are captured by one researcher in one phrase: extreme vulnerability. Filipino workers in Japan are extremely vulnerable because they are mostly young, inexperienced, female, working in a sex-related industry dominated by criminal syndicates (principally the dreaded Yakuza), prone to oppression and manipulation by their employers because of their illegal status, and faced with the isolation and loneliness of a foreigner in a closed society⁽¹¹⁾. They have suffered many abuses, including gross underpayment, racial discrimination, sexual molestation, rape and battering, virtual imprisonment, white slavery, even unexplained death. The suffering is mostly in silence because in many cases, assistance is not accessible. Economic desperation is likewise a factor, especially during the first few months of stay, because the workers cannot afford to be deported or to lose their jobs because for many of them, huge debts have been incurred to enable them to travel and work in Japan.

In general, however, the perceived benefits of

employment in Japan still outweigh the cost in terms of human dignity and suffering. The contrast in terms of wages alone can be startling, which is why Filipino workers are willing to endure the harshest conditions just to work in Japan. "For example, a Japanese construction worker makes as much as 23.7 times the amount a Filipino construction worker earns in the Philippines"⁽¹²⁾. Entertainers in Japan can earn \$1500-2000⁽¹³⁾, which is about 12-15 times the prevailing rates in the Philippines. Even if Filipinos earn only a fraction of what their Japanese counterparts do in Japan, it is considered well worth the effort.

Of course, the plight of Filipino workers in Japan poses problems for both the Philippine and Japanese governments. On the part of the Philippine government, its credibility as a protector of its own nationals is at stake. It knows that almost half of the Filipinos in Japan are "illegals" and yet it seems that it cannot do anything concrete about this situation. The commodification and abuse of Filipino women as prostitutes and "mail-order brides" in Japan are an affront to national dignity but they are allowed to continue.

The Japanese government also faces a dilemma. It appears to be tolerating the massive hiring of foreign workers without the proper work visas but places these workers in an extremely vulnerable position by continually treating them as deportable aliens. The New Immigration Law approved in June 1990 has the effect of restricting the legal entry of foreign workers even more while the influx of the latter through alternative modes of entry (as tourists, students, as relatives of Japanese citizens by marriage) continues unabated. In the words of one researcher, "The ones who are allowed to come in with work contracts continue to be treated as guest workers, and therefore not

entitled to equal protection as Japanese workers. But the countless others without work permits must suffer the double tribulation of being subject to manipulation, abuse, and super-exploitation by virtue of their illegal status⁽¹⁴⁾. Such treatment of people who are undoubtedly contributing to the maintenance and expansion of the Japanese economy smacks of injustice, if not of racism.

Some Policy Implications

The migration of Filipino workers to Japan will remain a trend for the next five to ten years, given the complex interaction of "push" and "pull" factors in the context of the evolving NIDL and SDL. It will stop only when the Philippine economy has recovered from its chronic crises and has been sufficiently reoriented to serve the needs of its people first, specifically the need for remunerative employment, which can only be fulfilled by solid institutional reforms (e.g., comprehensive land reform, efficient and dynamic civil service, etc.) and balanced, real and accelerated agro-industrial development.

Meanwhile, protection of migrant workers is an urgent necessity. This, however, cannot be done unilaterally, although the Philippine government can certainly improve the efficiency and effectivity of its programs and services for overseas workers. Those focused on workers and information welfare, e.g., pre-departure orientation, insurance coverage, legal assistance, burial assistance, disability assistance, lending, training and economic enhancement programs may be given more resources and allowed more coverage, while red tape is cut all around⁽¹⁵⁾.

Also urgently needed is a bilateral cooperation program between the Philippine and

Japanese governments for the protection of Filipino workers in Japan. Such an agreement must deal squarely with the realities of their conditions and establish regulatory as well as protective mechanisms for them. Filipino workers in Japan themselves suggest “legalizing” the “illegals” through amnesty, allowing those with sponsors to stay, and opening the doors to unskilled workers⁽¹⁶⁾. These suggestions, however, would mean changes in the Japanese Immigration Law, and in other official policies and procedures having to do with all foreign workers in Japan.

Unfortunately, governments generally respond only to pressures from below, specifically when the issue is workers’ rights and social protection. This is where academics, non-governmental and people’s organizations in both the Philippines and Japan can play a crucial role and affirm the humanity of the two nations.

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FOOTNOTES

- (1) Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, Briefing Paper on Japan, January 1990, cited in Elena L. Samonte, *Filipino Migrant Workers in Japan: In Search of a Better Life—The Price of a Dream* (a study funded by the Esso Sekiyu-Kabushiki Kaisha, Tokyo, Japan), p. 1.
- (2) Cited in Randolph S. David, “Filipino Workers in Japan: Vulnerability and Survival,” paper presented at the “Workshop on International Labor Migration Between Japan and the Rest of Asia,” Kyoto, Japan, March 16, 1991, under the sponsorship of the Research Institute for Social Science of Ryukoku University.
- (3) Statistics are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor and Employment, Manila.
- (4) Actual figures for 1988, 1989, and 1990 are - 2.785 billion, - 1.929 billion, and - 2.179 billion, respectively. See “Progress Report on the Philippine Agenda for Sustained Growth and Development, Program for the Multilateral Aid Initiative (MAD)/Philippine Assistance Program (PAP), January 1991.

- (5) Jorge V. Tigno, “International Migration as State Policy: The Philippine Experience as Model and Myth,” in *Kasarinlan*, 3rd and 4th quarters, 1990.
- (6) Peter Limquenco, “From Co-Prosperity to Pax Nipponica,” paper soon to be published in a coming anthology on Japan-Southeast Asian relations in Japanese, p. 31.
- (7) Hirohisa Nagai and Maragtas S.V. Amante, *Foreign Workers in the Japanese Labor Market: Case Study of the Filipino “Dekasegi Rodosha”*, Keio University, Tokyo, October, 1990, pp. 13-14.
- (8) Samonte, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.
- (9) Guy Standing, ed., *Labor Circulation and the Labour Process* (London: Croom Helm, 1985) p. 34, cited in Nagai and Amante, p. 40.
- (10) The sexual division of labor and the gender perspective on migration are the major theses of both de Dios and Anonuevo cited above.
- (11) The vulnerability of Filipino workers and how they survive in Japan is the whole thrust of David’s paper cited above.
- (12) Samonte, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- (13) Aurora Javate de Dios, “The Case of the Japayuki-San and the Hanayome-San”, in Marjorie M. Evasco, Aurora Javate de Dios and Flor Caagusan, eds., *Women’s Springbook—Readings on Women and Society* (Quezon City: Women’s Resource and Research Center, and Kalayaan, 1990) p. 36. See also Carolyn Anonuevo, *Towards an Understanding of the International Migration of Women: the Philippine Case*, a study done for Center for Integrative and Development Studies, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, p. 17 of the Executive Summary.
- (14) David, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- (15) Arnel de Guzman, “Critical Assessment of the Government’s Welfare Program for Filipino Overseas Workers,” paper for the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrant Filipinos, n.d., c1991, p. 31. See also Jenina Joy A. Chavez, “The Real Issue,” in *Ibon Facts & Figures* (Filipino Overseas Contract Workers: Clipped Wings, Sore Feet), 14, 10 (31 May 1991).
- (16) Samonte, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

〈質問〉 中野宏一氏

外国人労働者問題を解決するために、日本政府に対して要望することを具体的にお聞かせ願いたい。

〈答〉

第一に、雇用契約を明確にし、様々な問題が生じた場合の問題解決の手続を整えること、第二に、外国人労働者に対する健康保険の適用を制度化すること、第三に、エンターテイメントの分野や建設業に従事している外国人労働者は弱い立場にあり、ヤクザがその弱味につけこみ介入しているので、それを徹底的に取り締まること、以上のことを要求したい。