



DESPITE GULF CRISIS Migrant Filipinas still pin hopes on

By BARBARA GOLDOFTAS

In 1988, Maria Vinarao, 38, went to work as a domestic helper in the Middle East, leaving her family behind in the Philippines. Her husband was out of work, and they saw no other way to support their two children. For the next two years — “two years and two months,” she says grimly — she kept house for a journalist and an employee of the Iraq embassy, travelling with them constantly and sending home each month every dollar of the \$126 she earned. She worked, she says, without rest.

“I did all of the work in the house,” says Maria. “I worked from about five o’clock in the morning until eleven at night and only slept four hours a night. I cooked, took care of five children, and washed all the clothes and sheets by hand. I cleaned the house — including five bedrooms and four bathrooms — every day.” When she fell down a flight of stairs and dislocated her shoulder, she was back at her usual routine after just two days in the hospital, washing and ironing with the other arm.

Three days after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, although she was still owed five months back pay, Maria flew home to the Philippines. Her contract had ended and so had her stamina: “It was hard to work there. I never walked; I had to run in order to finish my work. It was too much. I couldn’t take it.”

She returned “thin and weak and sickly. I never had one

day off, not even an hour set aside each day for rest,” she says. “But if my employers saw me crying, they still told me not to rest. They would say, ‘Have we beaten you? Have we mistreated you?’ They didn’t, but they treated me like a machine, and even machines break down if they’re overworked.”

Today, Maria remains frail, and both she and her husband are unemployed. She sells vegetables and fruits in the market sometimes, but she has few other prospects for work. Still, she says, “It’s better here. I don’t have money, but at least I can see my family.”

Maria is one of about 30,000 migrant workers from the Philippines who fled Kuwait last year. Most of them are women, most of them worked as domestic helpers, and like Maria, most are still unemployed. Many are also suffering from the shock of war and direct abuse by Iraqi soldiers, says Berna Mabunga, deputy director of *Kaibigan*, a resource and research institution that addresses the plight of overseas workers. (The word *kaibigan* means “friend” in the Filipino language.)

These workers are casualties of the armed war in the Middle East and an economic war at home — as individuals,

they bear the brunt of deliberate government policies here and in other Third World countries to export their own citizens in order to earn foreign exchange. Over the short term, these policies do manage to ease unemployment and garner precious dollars. But over the long term, this international division of labor fails to provide economic security for the workers to provide real solutions to the economic crisis currently confronting the country.

Leaving home

Today’s overseas workers follow in the footsteps of Filipinos who have sought employment overseas for nearly a century. In 1906, the colonial government offered the workforce as cheap labor, and Filipinos travelled to Hawaii to labor in the sugar plantations being established there. By 1934, nearly 120,000 Filipinos worked in Hawaii, and many in time settled there or moved to the United States. After World War II, a second wave of Filipinos emigrated to other parts of the globe. Farm workers, together with nurses, doctors, dentists, and other professionals, headed for Asia, Europe and Africa. Warbrides of the US military also left the country, as did Filipino sailors working on international vessels.

Like the first two waves of migration, the current swell of workers also provides needed labor to an area undergoing an economic boom. This most recent wave began in the 1970s when soaring oil prices suddenly enabled the oil-producers in the Middle East to industrialize on a massive scale. These countries lacked the necessary workers and technical expertise, but they could pay to import them.

To meet the demand, the regime of the late President Ferdinand Marcos began to actively promote overseas work. The Overseas Employment Program was created specifically to improve the Philippine economy by shipping labor abroad, and rather than create new jobs at home the govern-

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petrodollar

ment aggressively looked for markets for its workers.

The administration of President Corazon Aquino continued to promote the trade in labor, in part to ease the perpetually high unemployment.

Today, in an economy that depends on harvesting and selling the country's natural resources, people rank among the top five exports. Like workers from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, about 3.5 million Filipinos live abroad legally, including more than one million who have left the country permanently. As many as 1.5 million more are thought to be working illegally as undocumented labor. These workers live in 120 countries, but more than half a million work in the Middle East, primarily Saudi Arabia.

Most of them use their earnings to support their families in the Philippines. According to data from the country's Central Bank, overseas workers send home \$1.5 billion a year through the banks. Since 1982, when Marcos issued

an executive order on the subject, all workers abroad have been required to remit a set percentage of their salary—as much as 70 percent—through these official channels, thereby enabling the government to track and tax their earnings.

(Nonetheless, Estela Banawis of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration or POEA, the federal agency that regulates the workers's recruitment and tenure abroad, estimates that an additional \$2 billion—or more—also arrive through unofficial channels, like couriers and returning friends and relatives.)

These earnings are one of the archipelago's most important sources of foreign exchange. The Philippines imports about \$2.1 billion more each year than it exports. It also currently owes foreign creditors \$26.8 billion, and under a strict repayment policy spends about \$3.5 billion a year on debt servicing—primarily for interest payments—which is more than it receives in new loans.

"It's the remittances of overseas workers that are used to repay the debt and not money from exports," says Men Santa Ana of the Manila-based Freedom from Debt Coalition, a broad-based coalition working to change the country's policies on foreign debt. "The government will do anything to generate precious dollars. So it aggressively promotes the employment of workers overseas."

Overseas blues

The remittances the workers send home may be high, but so are the costs of their labor. The "brain and brawn drain" saps the country of skilled workers like nurses and teachers and brings considerable social consequences. Marriages deteriorate, children grow up without a parent, family ties loosen. And working overseas also brings risks.

"The workers are often unpaid and badly treated," Gina Alunan-Melgar, executive director of *Kanlungan*, a non-governmental organization that was created in 1989 to respond to the migrant workers' plight. (*Kanlungan* means "sanctuary.") Today, *Kanlungan* offers assistance and counselling to returning workers who can also use the center as a shelter when they first return.

The risks the workers face begin at home. To find a job abroad, workers must rely on recruiters who are legally responsible for their safety and well-being. The POEA supposedly limits the number of recruiters—it has licensed about 600, mainly in the Metro Manila area. But hundreds more work illegally, particularly in the provinces, where people can be desperate for jobs. According to *Kanlungan*, the illegal agents often work together with their official counterparts, leaving workers who encounter problems without legal protection.

The job search can be expensive, particularly when illicit recruiters get involved. Although by law they are only supposed to charge 5,000 pesos (about \$180) for

their services, in practice workers are typically charged 20,000 to 50,000 pesos (\$710 to \$1,790), depending on the job and country. So workers on a two-year stint, for example, may spend the first year paying the debts to their recruiter before they can begin to send the needed money home.

Once they arrive, they face additional dilemmas. Living and working conditions are often poor, and people may find that the agreement they made with the recruiter has fallen through. Contracts might not be honored, or their wages may be changed. Maria Vinarao, for example, signed a contract for \$200 a month, but only ended up earning \$126. And her first two months pay went to the recruiter, on top of a flat fee of 18,000 pesos (\$640).

Until the early 1980s, most overseas workers from the Philippines were men—doing construction in the Middle East, for example. But by the mid-1980s, many more women were leaving the country in search of work: nurses, medical assistants, teachers, service workers, women destined to be domestic helpers in Saudi Arabia and Singapore, or "entertainers" in Japan.

This shift brought entirely new problems of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Women report being raped, harassed and treated, in effect, like slaves. Would-be singers and entertainers find themselves working as prostitutes. Domestic servants may be beaten or locked in the house, fed just once a day, or forced to work gruelling hours.

Many women, like 32-year-old Sofia Boraz, who worked in Kuwait for five years, find themselves working for women who are uneducated, housebound, and jealous. "I was treated well," says Sofia, "but the wife at my first job was jealous. That's why I left."

Even a good situation can have a dingy lining. "They were good to me; they treated me like part of the family," says Lilanie Cambay, 22, who worked for a professional couple in Kuwait for 16 months. "Sometimes Madame might be tired, but if she wanted something, she asked nicely." Still, Lilanie describes that "people there put down the Filipinas. About once a week, Madame would get angry, say that I was an animal."

Says Alunan-Melgar, "Women working in a foreign land are exploited three times over. They're from the Third World, they're women, and they're working in lowly jobs. It's risky for anyone in that position."

Even the POEA acknowledges the extra risks. "Women are more vulnerable and face more hazards in work. There are lots of problems with

domestic helpers," says the agency's Banawis. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are second-class citizens who cannot legally drive. The Filipinas are not even considered workers because Saudi labor laws explicitly exempt domestic servants, leaving them without any legal protection or recourse.

"To prepare women workers for the conditions of their jobs, for the difficulties they might encounter with a different culture and the exclusion of labor laws, we offer pre-departure seminars, especially for the domestic helpers," says Banawis.

Nonetheless, although these workers are a mainstay of the Philippine economy, the government does little to actually protect them. According to Kaibigan, the Philippines has failed to ratify conventions with other countries that could shield its workers, leaving not one labor agreement with another country that could protect Filipino workers there.

"Aquino calls the overseas workers our unsung heroes," says Santa Ana, "but despite what they have contributed, they haven't been well-protected. And they need to be."

Deserted in the desert

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, an unknown number of Filipinos were trapped there — estimates range from 40,000 to 60,000. In the chaos that followed, they received little official assistance.

The Philippine Embassy in Kuwait City was closed the first day after the invasion, for example. Its staff had fled the country. But even when it reopened, the overseas workers had to rely on their own resources to escape. Without organized transportation, people took abandoned vehicles or paid to be ferried out. During the dangerous trip through the desert, they passed through military checkpoints—one woman counted 24—and often had to sell their belongings for food and water. In the refugee camps, they waited for weeks until they could get a flight out. About 30,000 people returned home this way.

The Philippine government played a minimal role. It hesitated to evacuate the workers, responding with what several observers tactfully called "ambivalence." Using funds from the Overseas Workers'

Welfare Administration, it eventually paid for the flights of about 10,000. But the International Office for Migration (IOM) shouldered the rest, together with the Philippine Airlines and governments of other countries.

About three-fourths of the returned workers are single women in their 20s and early 30s, primarily domestic helpers. Many of them, isolated in their homes, could not get information about the war or their options of returning home. Some were taken back by employers to Saudi Arabia or Europe, and others were held back by employers who asked them to stay — or took away their visas and passports.

An unknown number were raped by Iraqi soldiers and fellow refugees. Many observers claim that the government showed particular insensitivity to the women workers. Foreign Secretary Raul Manglapus was widely quoted in the Philippine press for questioning reports that Filipina workers had been raped, quipping that if rape is inevitable, women should relax and enjoy it.

Today, workers like Maria and Lilanie remain jobless. The economy, weakened by a drought, typhoon, and major earthquake within a single year, has no work for them. Neither one of them can afford the placement fee that could buy jobs abroad, but they see returning overseas as their only chance to support themselves. Maria will work overseas again "if God's willing," she says. Lilanie wants to return to Kuwait.

She very likely will have the chance. Unwilling to abandon its strict schedule of debt repayments, the Philippine government remains as desperate as ever for foreign exchange. It fully intends to seize the next opportunity and help rebuild Kuwait. Job orders, says the POEA's Banawis, have already come in. "We're pinning our hopes on that work."

Implications of migrant labor studied

While the governments in the Philippines and elsewhere in Asia continue to routinely export their labor, a regional group of organizations in Hongkong, Malaysia and the Philippines is trying to learn what this labor trade means to the workers and their families.

"Our goal is to develop a data base about overseas workers: why they go, what problems they encounter, what services and advocacy they need," Lucia Pavia-Ticzon, director of the Manila-based Women's Resource and Research Center, which offers feminist training and education in projects throughout the country.

Together with the Center for Women's Resources, Kaibigan and Kanlungan, the WRRC is studying migrant labor in three communities in the Philippines.

Earlier this year, a team of WRRC researchers spent over a month conducting interviews in Tuding in the province of Benguet, where the recent decline in gold mining has left countless families without a way to support themselves. The research, which focuses on women who work as domestic helpers, is looking at 150 families of prospective workers, returned workers, and women currently employed abroad.

The findings are still being analyzed, said Rosanna Fronteras, a WRRC project researcher. But the effects of overseas work are clear to her.

"The women go because they reason that no matter how painful it will be, they're willing to make the sacrifice so they can feed their children and send them to school," she says. "But the children are unhappy, not inspired in school. Most of the husbands we talked with couldn't manage their lives without their wives and drank too much. Migrant labor destroys people's lives. It destroys the family and the future of the children."