



Understanding Asian Women in Migration: Towards a Theoretical Framework

by *May-an Villalba*

A greater and still growing proportion of migrant workers coming from countries within Asia and working in other Asian countries and in the Middle East are women. What is the reason for this phenomenon? And what are the specific conditions of women migrant workers?

This article attempts to draw together relevant factors and to study their relationships towards the articulation of a theoretical framework for understanding women in migration in Asia. Obviously, it is necessary to make a qualification that this attempt is a preliminary one and is primarily based on information observed from and gathered during the course of operation of Asian Migrant Centre based in Hong Kong. Analysis of such information continues to be done within the staff and board of the centre. But results cannot be called final and definitive as yet.

Several primary factors contribute to or play a significant role in the growing migration of women within Asia: first, the globalization of capital and thereby the labor market; second, the gender issue in Asia specifically on how women are regarded in society and what their assigned functions are according to tradition and customary law; third, the growing re-division of Asia between urban and rural Asia; fourth, the push and pull factors which in

general cause persons and in particular push women in Asia to migrate and fifth, the activities of recruitment agencies and their various instruments who fulfill the policy designs of governments for greater labor trade.

I. Globalization of the labor market

The globalization of capital through the multifaceted activities of transnational corporations (TNCs) has rendered the "nation state" concept practically meaningless. These activities include direct foreign investments, intra-firm trade, technology transfers and support of multilateral aid and lending agencies like the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). For example, a transnational corporation like Nike Inc. is a US company financed by Japan whose production is organized by contractors in South Korea and Taiwan. Actual production of Nike shoes is conducted or more



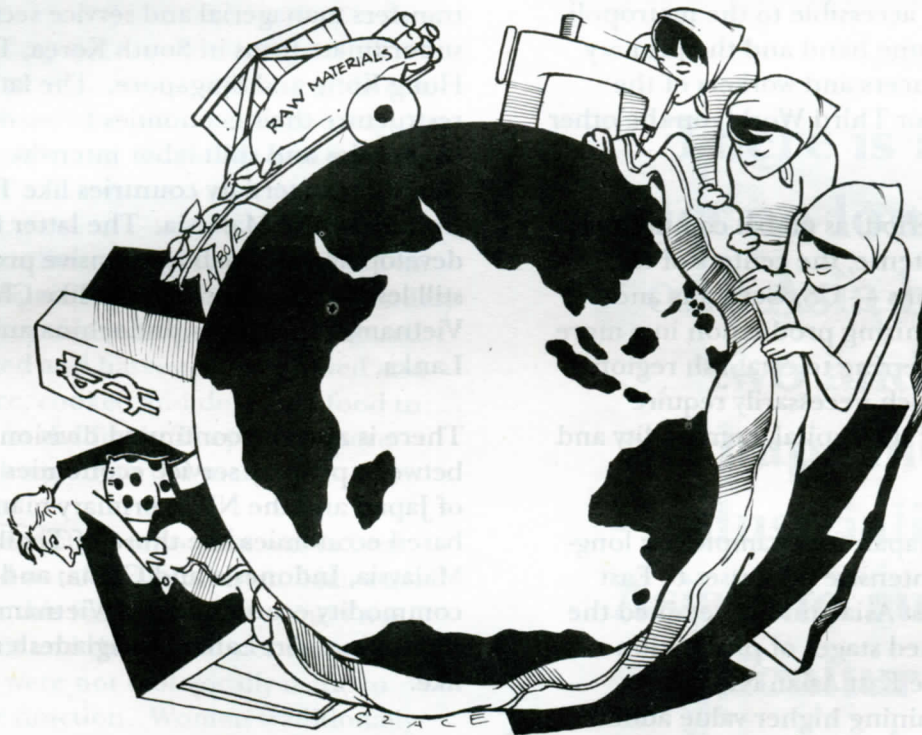
precisely subcontracted in Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and China. Nike is a TNC without a nationality. Profits are dispersed among corporations in the US, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and China.

The globalization of capital has brought about the globalization of labor as well. Not only have workers from different countries come under one enterprise and has made possible their interaction across borders, globalization of labor has also allowed for the trade of labor in the same enterprise and between countries as in the case of the hiring of Filipino plant

states must in fact increasingly consider investment and labor laws in neighbouring countries and synchronize its own with its neighbors or risk losing competitiveness.

How does globalization impact on the labor trade?

It is axiomatic in both concepts of capital and labor markets that production of commodities and services is guided by the principle of profit — capital invests where production costs are cheapest and where location is most advantageous for production and distribution of commodities. Capital locates labor and em-



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

managers in Thai factories as well as the wholesale migration of construction workers, manufacturing workers, domestic helpers and entertainers across borders. Furthermore, most forward looking TNCs already organize production on a global or regional level to achieve economies of scale which are necessary in a growing competitive market. The regional and global scale of production has rendered national laws insignificant. Nation

plys it. Or labor locates jobs by migrating to where the jobs are.

When industrial production was directed by national development goals, it was organized in the urban and port areas where labor was available in large numbers and where distribution was facilitated by the presence of roads, ports and other infrastructure. There arose a dichotomy between urban and rural areas



within the national economy. The division of labor was mainly between the industrial workers in the urban areas and the primary commodity producers in the rural areas.

The same principle applied when production became international and when it was directed by global market needs. Through TNCs and multilateral lending agencies, industries were built in the metropolitan countries (Western Europe, North America and Japan) and the Third World served merely to provide the raw material needs of these countries. It is no accident that the World Bank-IMF in the 60s and 70s were institutions that mainly provided infrastructure development in the Third World in order to integrate it to make its primary products accessible to the metropolitan countries on one hand and the primary commodity producers and workers of the peripheral states or Third World, on the other hand.

In this current period, as global competition becomes more intense, the centers of the three global regions — US, Germany and Japan — are organizing production in a more regional way, preferring to establish regional trading blocks which necessarily require regionalization of the capital, commodity and labor markets.

It is evident that Japan for example has long-shifted its labor-intensive processes to East Asia and Southeast Asia and has retained the highest value added stages of production within Japan. The East Asian NICs have followed suit, retaining higher value added stages of production while relocating labor-intensive processes to China, Vietnam, Southeast Asia and South Asia. However, in relation to Japan, the NICs particularly Korea and Taiwan remain to be sub-units of production linked to the primary trade stimulus of Japan.

The rise of the yen to new heights has sparked heated debate in Japan over the benefits of shifting key manufacturing technologies...

The argument comes as Japanese companies begin contemplating another wave of investments in Asia, the second time since the mid-80s.

Japanese companies will certainly accelerate moving production bases abroad, rather than exporting goods and parts tagged with extremely high prices.... (Yamaichi Research Institute)

While transnational corporations globalize the labor market, it also globalizes its divisions. Japan relinquishes low end production to less developed Asian countries, Japan develops a labor market that is higher skilled. Where high-skilled labor is getting too prohibitive it transfers managerial and service sections to its subordinate firms in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The latter also restructure their economies to become service economies and shift labor intensive production units to tertiary countries like Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. The latter further develop and shift labor intensive processes to still less developed countries like China, Vietnam, Philippines, Indochina and Sri Lanka.

There is also the continued division of Asia between primary service economies like those of Japan and the NICs; primary manufacture-based economies like those of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and China; and primary commodity economies like Vietnam, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the like.

The issue of women migration must be seen in this context.

II. Gender in Asia

Up to the end of the 19th century Asia was entirely rural and agriculture based. Asia's cultures and religions some of which go back 6,000 years or earlier were entirely conceived



in an agricultural and rural setting. The religions that persist today — Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Shintoism, Animism, and even Christianity — use symbols and languages that hark back to natural and agrarian reality.

Up to the middle of the 20th century, specifically up to 1946 after the Second World War, there were no industrial countries in Asia except for devastated Japan. Rural culture was therefore dominant and pervasive.

In traditional, rural and agricultural Asia, women were regarded as the weaker sex. Agricultural production required hard physical labor and was perceived as the domain of men. At least men dominated in the physically-exhausting and hazardous aspects of agricultural production — clearing of forests, preparing of land for cultivation, hunting, fishing, shepherding, irrigation dam building and the like.

Women in traditional society participated in agriculture but in a subordinate and secondary capacity. They cleaned up the newly cleared fields, planted and harvested, winnowed and pounded rice, cooked and delivered food to the workers in the field. They spent more time in the home than did men.

The second function of women was to bear children and to take care of them. Men could not perform this function. They could not bear children and they could not nurse infants. They were not biologically made to perform the function. Women traditionally therefore stayed home and took care of children while men stayed out.

The third function of women in traditional society was to provide sexual gratification to men.

As a result of this traditional experience, women were perceived to possess certain values and skills which became in the minds of

men institutional characteristics of the women.

For example, women were ideally required to possess physical attributes pleasing to men. They were to be submissive to men, fair cooks, skilled in house management and endowed with physical attributes necessary for child-birth and child rearing. They were seen as patient, hard working, obedient and uncomplaining, fatalistic, dependent on men, skilled with their hands, and meticulous in giving attention to details.

Because physical survival was the need of traditional society, physical strength was given primacy in the order of human attributes and

**There is in
fact no longer
one Asia but
two and
perhaps more
- industrialized
Asia and rural,
agricultural,
developing
Asia, North
Asia and
South Asia.**



the primacy of place to men. Women were taken in relation to men, wives in relation to their husbands, sisters in relation to brothers, daughters in relation to fathers.

All of these attributes were codified in religious thought and customary law and reinforced the subordinate role of women even in the minds of women themselves. For example, the subordinate role of women in Shariat Law is well established. One woman's testimony is not credible. Two women's testimonies equal what is accepted by women. In Hinduism, women are required to be subordinate. In traditional Hindu culture, when husbands die, wives were asked to join their husbands in their graves. This was glorified under Hindu dogma. There are other practices which oppress and degrade women which are traditional and accepted in society. But the point is made that women are the more vulnerable of the sexes in the labor market.

In depressed situations in Asia therefore, it becomes easy for men to send off their women (wives, mothers, daughters, nieces) to work in foreign lands when the opportunity arises. They are mere appendages of men and are obedient to their wishes. On the other hand, it becomes easy for other Asians to receive women into their factories, homes or business establishments for the same reason: women are perceived to possess those ideal attributes mentioned above. They possess common virtues of women and unlike men are not as threatening. They are thus far more readily welcomed and accepted in labor receiving countries.

III. The re-division of Asia

The migration of women workers from one Asian country to another Asian must also be seen in the context of the development within Asia of a section of industrially developed, service-oriented economies that are develop-



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

ing structural labor shortages. Led by Japan, the industrialized section of Asia includes the NICs — South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore; the new NICs - Thailand and Malaysia; Australia and New Zealand; and Southern China. In the Indian sub-continent, we have the industrial cities of Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and New Delhi surrounded by the rural sections of India and the peripheral states of Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) observed that the migration of workers to the Middle East reached its apex in the 70s and would level off in the 90s. The earlier wave of migration was attributed to the unique phenomenon of the OPEC oil boom in the 70s and was predicted as not likely to be replicated in the near future. The ILO projects that the main destination of Asian migration will be Japan and the NICs.

There is in fact no longer one Asia but two and perhaps more - industrialized Asia and rural, agricultural, developing Asia, North Asia and South Asia.



Industrial Asia

Japan and the NICs have reached a certain level of industrial development that allows them to compete in the world market independently as second line players or collectively as Japan's dynamo partners. This trend continues as Asia becomes the main destination of Japanese foreign investment.

In fact these countries have become net exporters of capital and have growing production processes outside their countries. Japan and the NICs are exporting labor-intensive aspects of their production to China, Vietnam and Southeast Asia because labor costs as well as real estate costs have become prohibitive at home. Besides, labor and real estate costs are still very low in China, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia. For example a garment worker in South Korea receives anywhere between US\$800-US\$1,000 per month in wages. A garment worker in Indonesia receives no more than US\$100 per month in wages. It is easy to imagine that Korean garment manufacturers

would shift in droves to Indonesia in this case. And they are shifting.

As a result of shifting labor-intensive processes across borders, Japan and the NICs have strategically shifted production into the most automated, high technology and higher valued added areas. Simultaneously, the character of their economies changes with more emphasis being given to banking, trading, insurance, financial and investment services, tourism and travel services, catering, entertainment, communication and energy generation. There is thus a shift from *blue-collar* to *white-collar* work among its workers.

The service industries, particularly tourism and entertainment industries, have grown also because the higher income generating capability of the population create the need for consumption of more goods and services. A whole new industry therefore grows to meet increasing needs for public consumption - tourism, travel, hotels, restaurants, night clubs, karaoke bars, parks, etc.

The service oriented economies consequently need to create a new labor structure to meet new demands of the economy. This is achieved by re-orienting universities and colleges towards services or by putting more emphasis on or investing to improve on courses which meet new economic demands. Meanwhile, there is a host of graduates and educated population who do not participate in production because of their age, or some physical disability and/or because of their sex, i.e. female graduates become housewives and do not become economically productive. There is therefore a need to increase the labor participation rate to include all aging and technically capable women. But they have to be liberated from their *traditional* home roles, first. It is for this reason that the demand for women domestic helpers has grown in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.



Grace de Jesus-Sievert



Rural Asia

The other face of Asia is the rural and backward one. In order to make the presentation more concrete we need to look at the cases of India and the Philippines, for one reason, and Thailand for another.

Although India is an industrial country, its size, its multi-ethnic population, its class structure and the oppressive aspects of its religion (i.e. caste system) negate on the macro level whatever it should receive as an industrial country. India's industrial society is dispersed and can be found in a few urban ghettos only such as Bombay, New Delhi, Calcutta. In these ghettos, the best and the brightest Indians live lives of a quality as high as or higher than anywhere in the advanced industrial world. Below the wealthiest in India is a mass of upper middle class Indians numbering about 100 million more than the populations of Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore put together, who get the highest education, receive the most modern medical services, who live in high rise condominiums, ride the most state-of-the-art motor vehicles, and who eat more than sufficient food.

And yet, there are 700 million other Indians living in slum and rural areas with inadequate income, health care, education and food and who have very little possibility of moving up the social ladder. About 35% of the rural population live in absolute poverty. About 60% of the whole population live below the poverty line. Furthermore, because of the caste system, nearly 30% of the population are confined to institutional poverty simply because they are shut off from every possible socio-economic opportunity.

Because of the universal education system in India, there is a large pool of highly-qualified, English speaking and technically-skilled labor force which are unemployed or underemployed. They receive incomparably low wages. An engineer in India is paid US\$300 a month

whereas the same engineer is paid US\$1,000 in Saudi Arabia or Taiwan. This is the base from which labor export industries draw their exports to the Middle East and Northeast Asia.

Similarly, the Philippines having been colonized by the US has a large pool of college or secondary school graduates who have specific skills and who are able to speak English. This facility with language has enabled tens of thousands of Filipinas to meet the demand for English-speaking maids in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. Filipinas are preferred over Thais or Indonesians in this respect.

The unemployment rate of the Philippines is about 25% of the labor force. A large majority of the population (variably 70% - 80%) live below the poverty line.

A university professor in the most prestigious Philippine university would earn about US\$250 per month in wages. The same position in Hong Kong would earn him anywhere from US\$1,000-US\$2,000 per month in wages.

Filipino public school teachers, nurses and many doctors receive far less than what a Filipina domestic helper receives in Hong Kong which is now US\$450 per month. If we consider that maids have free food and lodging and free winter clothes according to a standardized work contract, that amount is not minimal. Is it any wonder that many domestic helpers in Hong Kong were previously teachers and nurses in the Philippines?

Finally, Thailand is a major labor exporting country in the entertainment sector not because it is not industrialized or predominantly rural. Its labor export industry is quite active and its entertainment industry well established in Thailand because of active advertising by airlines, hotels and banks. It has therefore gained an international market which it now must serve outside its national borders. Thai massage girls and the like are quite popular and are in demand in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere.



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

Is it any wonder that many domestic helpers in Hong Kong were previously teachers and nurses in the Philippines?

IV. Pull factors

Labor shortages

Initial labor shortages in many Asian countries were occasioned by the construction booms of the 70s and 80s. This was particularly true in the case of the Middle East states. Japan and the NICs as well as Malaysia, Thailand and China more recently experienced construction booms which their national construction labor forces were unable to meet. Massive migration ensued. In China, there was massive migration

from the hinterlands to Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing.

The second form of structural labor shortages mentioned earlier was the low unemployment rates in Japan and the NICs. Industrialization had led to the employment of most employable sectors of the population. There was no longer any space for national expansion. This was true in the dynamic economies of Japan and the NICs and this necessitated importation of labor. In Taiwan and Korea, more local workers aspired for white collar jobs leaving sectors of the economy in critical shortage of



**In Japan,
construction
and manual
workers and
entertainers
were allowed
in unofficially.
These were
considered the
3Ds
(dirty, demanding
and dangerous).
Local workers
did not
consider these
jobs dignified.**

workers. Foreign workers were *allowed* to come in the mining, fishing, construction and, in some instances, small and medium-sized manufacturing industries. In Malaysia, plantation workers and maids were allowed to come in from Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand. In Singapore, maids and assorted workers were allowed to come in. Migrant workers make up nearly 20% of the entire Singaporean labor force today.

In Japan, construction and manual workers and entertainers were *allowed* in unofficially. These were considered the 3Ds (dirty, demanding and dangerous jobs). Local workers did not consider these jobs dignified. In Korea, manufacturing workers (garments, textiles and footwear industries) were illegally recruited mainly by small and medium-sized companies. In Taiwan, manufacturing workers were hired by small subcontractors for garments, textiles, toys and footwear products. Many workers justify their entry as foreign domestic helpers who double up as sweatshop workers. Illegal migration has put many women migrants under the mercy of employers. It has also allowed notorious gangs to recruit entertainers who are then kept in slavlike conditions which are exposed in the media from time to time. To avoid the embarrassment of unregulated labor trade, the Taiwan government legalized the importation of foreign domestic helpers as well as attendants of handicapped and elderly persons in May 1991. Moreover, Taiwan has increased the quota of foreign factory workers.

Labor participation rate of women and elderly

As the unemployment rate receded to 0-2% in Japan and the NICs, government took measures to employ every able-bodied person. Primarily married women and elderly people were pushed back into employment. In some countries, the labor department encouraged companies to hire differently abled persons.



In most cases, the employment of married women, the elderly and the differently abled sectors of the population hinged on the availability of foreign domestic helpers who took over significant chores at home. The hiring of foreign maids to do what was once the domain of housewives and mothers became a necessity.

This need is clearly shown in many of the NICs which legalized the entry of foreign maids in the 70s and 80s as in Hong Kong in 1975 when it issued the Standard Employment Contract. From a mere 44 contracts attested to by the Labor Department in 1975, the number has grown to 101,000 contracts today. (Immigration Department, Jan. 1993) They come mostly from the Philippines; 90,000, Thailand, 7,000; Indonesia, 3,000; and India and Sri Lanka.

The importation of maids is an explicit admission of the labor shortage in the domestic sectors in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore if not in other sectors as well.

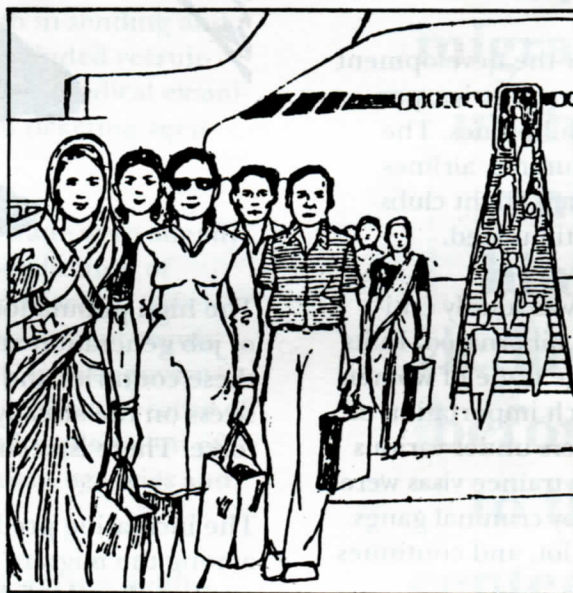
The labor shortage also reflects a cultural need.

In the above countries as well as in the Middle East, there has been a long tradition of the *amahs* and the *house slaves* who do housework and child care. Possession of *amahs* and *slaves* was also a status symbol. More recently, where British colonialism took root, there was the tradition of *governesses* and *nannies*. A Pakistani participant in the Asian Pacific Development Center conference in Colombo in 1992 stated that in Pakistan economic prestige could be measured by means of possession of a cellular phone and a Filipina maid.

Such traditions cannot be found however in South Korea and Japan which possess very closed cultures. Normally, foreigners are not accepted to live in homes. And normally, the tradition is for wives to stay home.

Surplus incomes and investing at home

The construction boom in the Middle East and in East Asia in the 70s and 80s raised the incomes of households two fold or sometimes three-fold. After consuming more durables at home (household appliances and the like) it became fashionable to employ maids. This is especially true in the Middle East where no commensurate development in social welfare could be initiated by the traditional cultures of society. Child care and nursing continued to be the work of housewives and maids.



Asian Migrant Forum No. 6 1992

The atomization of the family in East Asia and the break-up of the traditional extended family, along with higher educational attainments among the population leading to higher social aspirations were also factors that led to the importation of domestic helpers. The concept of a three to four member household promoted by housing authorities and private residential construction companies which built flats and apartments for the occupation of no more than five persons also helped to disintegrate the extended family system in many East Asian and Southeast Asian states and paved the way for importation of maids.



Demands for entertainment and sex

The higher income levels in Japan and the NICs and the working values (long working hours) produced a new culture of consumption of sex and entertainment among white collar workers in the 70s and 80s. Japan and the NICs are notorious for practicing long working hours in highly competitive and stressful work environments. Workers relieved their tensions and stresses by consuming nightlife services. When this inevitably created social problems at home, Japanese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese companies encouraged their employees to take organized holiday tours, inevitably sex tours in Asia.

This served as an impetus for the development of sex tourism in many Asian countries, particularly Thailand and the Philippines. The development of hotels, restaurants, airlines, banking, catering services, bars, night clubs and karaoke industries was stimulated.

When Japanese sex tourism was loudly criticized in the 80s, sex tourism hibernated. In its place, there developed a huge trade of women into Japan and the NICs. Such importation of sex and entertainment workers under various guises of cultural, student or trainee visas were carried out unofficially and by criminal gangs. This cost women migrants a lot, and continues to cost them a lot.

V. Push Factors

Unemployment

The biggest push factor for labor migration is the high unemployment and underemployment rates in several countries in Asia notably the Philippines, Vietnam, China, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, among others.



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

The high population growth rates, low levels of job generation and foreign investments in these countries and the low wages place a stress on the already highly pressured labor force. There is keen competition for jobs.

The increasing predominance of women among the migrant populations in Asia can be attributed to the following factors. In a situation of job competition in a male-oriented society, it is usually women who are pushed aside first. It is women who are first to be offered jobs overseas.

Another factor is the high level of education and high level of economic expectation among women in some countries such as India and the Philippines. In the urban areas of these countries are teeming millions of qualified women workers who cannot find jobs locally.



A study made by Asian Migrant Workers Centre in 1991 showed that the rate of women migration is outstripping that of male migration. A baseline study into foreign domestic helpers belonging to four nationalities in Hong Kong showed that college educated and degree holders accounted for 54% of respondents. Another 32% of respondents had achieved secondary education.

The role of traders of women and their instruments

As the demand for foreign workers grew in labor importing countries, traders of labor and of women mushroomed both in sending and receiving countries. These included recruitment agencies, travel agencies, medical examination agencies, airlines and ticketing agencies and the like.

These instruments in labor trade were already in existence prior to the liberalization of government labor export and foreign travel policies and even before government regulatory bodies were established. In fact, government regulatory bodies came about because of the many cases of abuses and exploitation of migrant workers by recruitment agencies and labor supply companies.

The labor export industry is still not tightly controlled and in fact is an area of great corruption. Many labor supply groups are nothing more than operations of criminal syndicates who prey on ignorant applicants and on women who seek any job overseas.

Government policy

One of the earliest labor exporters, the Philippine government undertook a "temporary" policy to export excess labor in the 1970s. According to Senator Bobby Tañada, who spoke to representatives of groups of migrant worker associations and support NGOs in Manila in November 1992:

The role of labor supply companies cannot be underestimated. They seek out migrant workers in the villages and in the hinterlands victimizing them before they get to the urban centers. Many of the recruitment gangs employ protection from police.



During the martial law period, the Marcos government encouraged the labor export industry as a temporary 'stop gap' measure to reduce the country's unemployment problem and balance of payments deficits...

Today, the temporary labor export industry has become permanently temporary. Moreover, it has grown... from being a stop gap measure... to being a vital lifeline for the nation... The labor export industry is really the biggest success story for the country...

We might add that the more it is successful the more a failure of the Philippine economy it reflects.

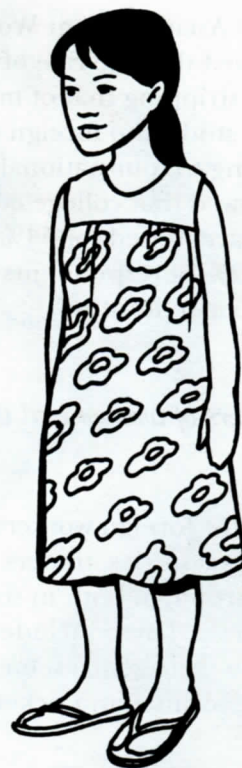
The labor export industry has become the major industry in the Philippines. It enables the country to earn more foreign exchange than any particular traded commodity. It employs and feeds roughly a quarter of the total population. It certainly props up the airline industry.

Unlike in the earlier period of migration, today women are no longer required to secure a "No Objection Certificate" from their father (if they are unmarried) and from their husbands (if they are married) which was an earlier requirement for one female to acquire a passport.

This rule facilitated overseas jobs applications from women.

Advertisement and media

In very depressed societies, media accounts of life in highly industrialized countries is a great 'come on' for the unemployed and underemployed. In the case of the Philippines where migrant workers are glorified even by presidents who call them "new economic heroes" there is a greater push for migration on the supply side



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

Movies and TV shows as well as radio programs glamorize and to some extent distort the reality of migrant workers working overseas. The popular appeal of communication media increases the desire of people to migrate and to earn dollars.

Migrant workers themselves are the main advertisers of the values of labor migration. By using fashionable clothes and accessories, by buying household appliances and by demonstrating a new life style, many family members or members of the community are initiated into the labor trade industry.

VI. The condition of women migrant workers in Asia

Labor migration in Asia partakes of boom and bust cycles. The first oil boom in the 70s was followed by a depression and by another boom



in the early 80s. In 1991 there was another depression brought about by the Iraq war and migration has not come up to previous levels so far.

Overseas contracts in Hong Kong are usually for a period of two years. In other cases, contracts are co-terminus to projects being completed. Further, work visas are issued on the strength of contracts or guarantors. A guarantor is anyone vouching for the migrant worker's employment and up keep and for the worker's repatriation at the end of the contract or for any emergency reason.

A migrant worker is only employed under very strict provisions. Should any of the provisions and conditions become invalid, the migrant worker may stay on in the host country only under illegal status. As an illegal worker, the person loses the rights, benefits and the protection of law as a contract worker. These conditions differentiate a migrant from a local



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

worker and become a tremendous source of insecurity and vulnerability.

The conditions under which foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) work include a two year work provision with a corresponding two year visa.. However, contracts may be terminated by the employer or the domestic helper at any time. Conditions for the issuance of visa stipulates the FDHs cannot change their status and cannot change guarantors (who might be the employer or recruitment agency person) without the latter's consent.

Other constraining factors vary from country to country. In Singapore, FDHs are not allowed to marry locals. In Hong Kong, FDHs are allowed to stay only for two weeks after a premature termination of contract. Under this condition, FDHs are compelled to accept terms and conditions which may be oppressive and exploitative. Numerous cases of abuses have been reported ranging from non-payment or underpayment of wages, physical and sexual assault, no holidays and no rest days in contravention of the contract. Such working conditions are tolerated by many FDHs because the prospect of returning home or of becoming an illegal worker is a worse option.

Japan issues entertainers visas valid for three months after which they must return home and re-apply. But the common practice is that entertainers overstay their visas and become illegal. Once illegal, they are made by employers to accept terms and conditions that put their lives and reputation in jeopardy. The danger of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS is real and pressing.

Many women are duped into taking jobs which they did not expect to land. Many Thai and Filipino women have been victimized after reaching Taiwan and Japan. They discover that they have been sold to white slavery by gangs who operate on a global scale.



Women migrants have no control of their living and working conditions. They live and work in the same place. They have no privacy and often they are not allowed to meet others or to use telephones. They have no specified working hours, they can be roused in their sleep and made to do work till past midnight. In many instances, maids do not have their own sleeping quarters. This provides opportunities for male persons of the household to sexually harass maids who can not defend themselves.

Entertainers are provided small rooms next to the bar and are often times locked in. Several incidents have been reported in which entertainers locked in their quarters burned to death when bars were set on fire accidentally in Taiwan and Japan.

Entertainers especially those who are illegal simply have to work until they have been able to pay spurious debts. Out of desperation many entertainers take drugs and alcohol and end up wanting to commit suicide.

Manufacturing workers also live in inhuman cubicles or rooms and are forced to work overtime without pay. A study of migrant labor conditions in South Korea revealed migrant workers receiving substantially less wages for the same work. Many are also victims of physical abuse by co-workers and by managers.

Women migrant workers also work in an alien society where they are not familiar with local language and customs. They often experience racial and sex discrimination. Their work is undervalued and debased. They are treated as less than human.

The greatest let down is that in many cases women workers discover that they have become pawns in the larger game of economic and political power between governments. Workers are traded between countries just like any other commodity and serve the needs of individuals and corporations as well as governments to which they can hardly identify.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the main features and critique of women migration in Asia as well as summarize the main factors that contribute to the migration of women in Asia.





• Women migration in Asia is mainly a response to the economic boom in the Middle East and East Asia and the labor shortages in industrial sections of Asia — Japan, the NICs and increasingly Thailand and Malaysia in the service industries and a response to the demands of their services oriented economies. This is the primary factor. These labor shortages in East and Southeast Asia are caused by the restructuring of their economies which again is conditioned by the demands of competition in the global market in the context of regionalizing trade blocs.

• In particular, women migration responds to the demand for a labor shortage in the traditional areas of women's responsibilities — housekeeping and sex entertainment which are sectors no longer acceptable to women in Japan and the NICs. Obviously, without the demand for these specific types of labor in Japan and the NICs there would not be any women's migration to these countries.

• Women migration draws from a huge supply of surplus labor in several rural countries in Asia which supply meets the specific demands of the labor market in Japan and NICs and by cultures in both sending and receiving countries which define and maintain the traditional role of women.

• Women migration however is initiated by government policies in both sending and receiving countries which encourage labor export and labor import, respectively. The governments are ably assisted by recruitment agencies who find profit in trading workers across borders. They are part of a burgeoning labor export industry that includes airlines, banks, hotels and the entertainment industries which place a large emphasis in global travel through mass media and advertisement.

• The main problem of women migration is that it reflects and reinforces the traditional Asian values which regard women as sex objects or as home keepers. This sustains the male dominated cultures of Asian societies.

• The sex trade industry is immoral in many ways. First, the condition of sex industry workers is intolerable because most sex workers are illegally employed or are employed under various guises. Second, sex services are inhuman and dehumanizes both men and women. Most women are only forced by poverty to become prostitutes. The condition of domestic helpers is also intolerable because it promotes modern day slavery. It forces women to work without defined work hours and under conditions where they cannot have human dignity. Domestic work does not provide women human freedom and rights in many instances. Salaries that women maids receive are not equivalent to the dehumanization that they receive in return.

While these are to be condemned as immoral and inhuman services, measures should be taken to legitimize the entry and work permits of these migrants who are already deployed. This is to make monitoring of their work possible. Every hour that a woman migrant worker works illegally is an hour of grave danger to her physical and mental well-being. Governments must therefore legitimize their existence.

• Women migration must be criticized also as a manifestation of the historical economic exploitation and oppression of Third World countries and of unfair and unjust division of Asia between have and have not countries.

About the author: *May-an Villalba* is the executive director of the Asian Migrant Centre in Hong Kong.