



Returned Women Domestic Workers: What's in Store for Them?

Digest version by Anabee Concepcion

This article is based on the regional synthesis paper by Josefa "Gigi" Francisco, current director of the Women's Resource & Research Center in the Philippines. The paper was read at the Regional Policy Dialogue on Foreign Women Domestic Workers: International Migration, Employment and National Policies held on 10-14 August 1992 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The event capped a five-year cooperative policy review, research and dialogue forum of several research, women's rights, and migrant workers organizations and institutions in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Singapore and Bahrain. Gigi contends that a vast majority of women domestics return to their home countries after their overseas employment and face harsh conditions that compel them to engage in repeat or serial labor migration. She raises concerns over the inadequacy of economic-oriented "re-integration" efforts and criticizes government policies and programs for their inability to respond to the problems for which, she contends, governments are directly and morally responsible. Her paper will be published by the Asian and Pacific Development Center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



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Issues of re-integration

The temporary or transient nature of overseas domestic work carries with it the expectation of the workers' return and re-integration into the home country and society. There appears to be a wide-spread anxiety, particularly on the part of receiving countries that overseas domestic workers, in spite of the temporary nature of their employment, actually harbor desires to emigrate. This is best expressed by stringent rules and regulations imposed upon foreign workers regarding the nature and length of their stay.

This reaction from receiving countries is based on a number of realities:



- the existence of actual cases of overstaying contract workers;
- research findings which show that many domestic workers wish to emigrate;
- the existence of illegal migrants and asylum seekers
- economic factors in sending countries that do not augur well for re-integration scenarios.

It is important to consider two critical factors regarding female work migration:

- What do foreign domestic workers themselves say about return and re-integration?
- What proportion of the women are actually returning and re-integrating? And why?

Although there is limited data on the subject, information at the micro level do provide a basis for responding to the above queries. Response to a study revealed that a short 2-3 year contract was preferred by most women, largely due to close family ties and orientation. This is an indication of the maximum amount of time the women could endure being separated from their children, spouses, parents and friends.

Media plays a large part in sensationalizing cases of women overstaying, making it appear as if it were the norm rather than the exception. Majority of the women return to their home countries after their contracts expire.

On the other hand, studies also showed that there are a number of cases of returnees with

actual or intended repeat labor migration or serial migration. This shows that there are women who, technically speaking, do not go through the process of re-integration. Economic factors in home countries provide the rationale for continued overseas work.



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Serial migration results in deferring for later time actual re-integration. Many who are unable to gain permanent legal status in the receiving country may use serial migration as a fallback. But the actual and potential possibility of serial migration may be adversely affected by two factors which have come to be felt in varying degrees by sending countries: (a) limited market and (b) increased number of women wishing to work abroad with whom returnees need to compete for overseas employment.

In order to further understand the cycle of temporary labor migration, a distinction must be made between the concept of *return* - i.e. the act of coming back - and the concept of *re-integration* - the process of being part of/fitting into a unit. And while the process of re-integration really begins at the time of physical arrival into one's country of origin, its impact cannot be fully measured until sufficient time has lapsed to allow for the returnee to once again be treated as a regular household member.

There are generally two types of overseas workers whose cases require distinct re-integration interventions, 1) those who return after finishing their contracts and did not exhibit any signs of having experienced major



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problems or exploitation, and, 2) those who return prematurely after having experienced major problems after exploitation. Returnees of the second type require immediate crisis intervention measures and support systems (e.g. medical assistance, repatriation, counselling, and economic assistance).

Unfortunately, recent micro studies reveal that the existence of re-integration programs are generally geared at returnees of the first type and in only as far as economic re-integration was concerned. And if governments were unable to provide adequate services and support mechanisms for re-integrating returnees who were not suffering from any crisis situation, they were less prepared to meet the needs of those who had.

Conclusion

The synthesis of the country-based micro studies on re-integration reveals that government policies are presently wanting in terms of enabling returnees, particularly those who have decided to return permanently, to build upon and develop whatever positive gains returnees and their families had obtained from temporary overseas employment. An examination of non-economic gains, such as positive psychosocial changes in both the workers and their families, and their being channelled towards development objectives may be more realistic, fruitful, empowering, and transformational.

Governments must as well recognize that there are bound to be *casualties* for which the state, by virtue of its systematic promotion of the export of human resources are directly and morally responsible. The risks and dangers that women domestics face, great as they are now, have been produced and exacerbated by government's own weaknesses, neglect, confusion, and in some cases, miscalculations. Support mechanisms for returning women domestics who have been abused, exploited, and violated need to be given immediate attention.