

# unaccounted costs:

*of nannies, maids and domestic help*

*Last March 17, 1995, Flor Contemplacion, 42, a Filipina domestic worker in Singapore, was hanged on charges of murder. Despite the last-minute pitch by Filipino and international organizations around the*

world, the death penalty was meted out on a woman who may have been an innocent victim, not only of a murder cover up, but also of the Philippine government's inability to protect its overseas workers; not only of Singapore's death penalty, but also of the poverty pervasive worldwide that forces thousands of women to leave their homes in search of better jobs. Flor, too, may have been a victim of what was an unhappy marriage seeking a way out.

Flor, a mother of four, was charged with the murders of another Filipina domestic worker, Delia Maga, and of Nicolas Huang, the 4-year-old child Delia took care of. According to Singapore, Flor strangled Maga and drowned Nicholas in a robbery attempt.

After Flor's arrest, she was advised by her court-appointed counsel to plead guilty and insane in order to receive a lighter sentence. But the same system that recommended this plea refused to recognize the insanity plea and sentenced her to die instead.

After lingering in prison for four years, witnesses came forward, the latest one only last March 9, suggesting that Flor may not have been the person who killed Delia and Delia's ward, and that Flor was several times drugged by the prison guards. There



"Babae" (Woman), ©Nes Bugayong, 1988



## Violence Against Women

was reason to believe that Nicolas' father may have been the one who killed Delia by strangulation after she failed to prevent the epilepsy-stricken child, who suffered an attack while bathing, from drowning in the bathtub.

Women's and migrant support groups began campaigning for a reopening of Flor's case. The effort caught momentum and the appeals for a stay of her execution spread not just in the Philippines but around the world. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights expressed grave concern for the fate of Flor.

Flor's children, whom she had not seen for six years, were flown to Singapore two weeks before her execution. They were allowed to visit but could communicate with their mother only through a glass panel. Two days before Flor's scheduled execution, the Singapore government announced that it had considered the new evidence but found no reason to stay the execution to allow time for a retrial. The Singapore government proceeded with the hanging.

The extent of anger and sadness that gripped the Philippines was unexpected. The clamor for justice in the face of injustice was a howling cry. And the questions and call for the responsible parties who allowed this woman to die continue to dominate the media, the politicians, the critics, the intellectuals, the street vendors and all who shed tears for this killing.

Was Flor guilty? And if she did she deserve to die, who is responsible for her death? The Philippine government? the Singapore government? the poverty she was fleeing from?

Flor Contemplacion's case reveals the Philippine government's condemnable

## The larger picture

Women's status and issues were brought to sharper focus during the preparatory meetings of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) last March in New York by the news of the sentencing of Flor Contemplacion. The CSW was meeting in New York to finalize the draft Platform of Action for the UN World on Women in Beijing this September at the time that Flor was scheduled to be hanged and the campaign for a stay of her execution had taken full momentum. Acting on a request by the Commission, its chair, Patricia Licuanan, and Gertrude Mongella, secretary general for the World Conference on Women, asked the UN Secretary General to intervene as "urgent action was needed since the execution was to take place shortly."

Flor's case was raised at the CSW by the Chilean and Ecuador representatives. "A human life—the life of a woman—is at stake. She is probably not guilty, that is at stake," they pointed out.

Singapore representative Crispian T.S. Tan argued that the matter was a bilateral issue. Dr. Licuanan then reiterated from the floor the Commission's concern regarding the scheduled execution, which was met with a standing ovation. As Rina Jimenez-David (member of the Philippine Commission on the Role of Filipino Women) wrote, "Everyone in the assembly hall rose to applaud the statement, with the sole exception of the Singapore delegate."

The conditions of migrant workers—many of them women—are

only one of the critical areas of concern identified as "obstacles of women in the world". The Platform of Action being formulated in Beijing will propose steps to be taken by governments, the international community,



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NGOs, the private sector and individuals for women's full and active participation in the development in all spheres of life.

This will include "actions to eradicate poverty; eliminate inequality in education; ensure access to relevant health care, employment and active participation; ensure further protection and preservation of the environment; eliminate inequality in sharing of power and decision-making; improve images of women in mass media; promote women's rights; and eliminate violence against women."

Although women have gone far since the first UN conference on women 20 years ago (in Mexico City in 1975), they have a long way to go. The CSW points out that today, although women already make a tremendous impact on society, statistics tell the true tale:

Only six of the 184 ambassadors to the UN are women. In 1993 only six countries had women as heads of Government, while the average proportion of women in the world's parliaments had dropped to 10 percent from 12 percent in 1989.

- Three-fourths of women over 25 in much of Africa and Asia are illiterate, a much higher rate than for men. Women account for two-thirds of illiterate people in the world.
- On the average, women receive between 30 and 40 percent less pay than men for the same work. Much of women's daily duty is unremunerated, and the value of household labor unrecorded.
- Half a million women, nearly all of them in developing countries, die each year from pregnancy related causes. Thirty percent of them are teenagers.
- One-third of all families worldwide are headed by women, the majority of them poor and with dependents young and old. They lack education, health and other support services, and frequently have no access to economic resources and legal protection.
- Discrimination may affect women throughout their lives, for in many cultures, disparities start at the earliest stages of life.
- In many parts of Asia and the Pacific, inferior health care and nutrition for girl children, coupled with maternal mortality and other factors, have caused men to outnumber women by five in every 100. In the rest of the world, as a rule, women outnumber men.
- Violence against women is pervasive across cultures and regions. The issue of sexual harassment has been placed on the global agenda.

neglect of its overseas contract workers, victims of all forms of abuse in other nations as a result of official impotence to place their welfare above that of diplomatic interests, but—and this is what matters most to those revenue-crazed, thieving Philippine officials—their top foreign exchange earner. Flor's case once again betrays Singapore's robotic, even flawed, legal system which, as with other authoritarian governments, rests on instilling in its citizens, not the essence of justice, but the instinct of fear. Flor's case highlights the most cogent argument against the death penalty—that of sentencing the innocent, by tragic mistake or vile design, to a fate beyond any sort of rehabilitation, which is an important, valid premise of a penal system, or repair.

In addition, Flor Contemplacion's case calls attention to the failure not only of one, but of nearly all governments worldwide, to protect the basic rights of migrant workers, specially those of the women. The deaths of Flor Contemplacion and Delia Maga call attention to the plight of all other Filipinas, as well as Sri Lankans, Pakistanis and countless other women—they who, desperate to escape the clutches of poverty, must risk their dignity and their safety, to work as domestic help in other countries. The standard rate of domestic helper in Singapore hovers at nearly \$200 monthly. Let the outpour of indignation over Flor Contemplacion's tragedy serve as a reminder that difficult this may be for either the Philippine or the Singaporean government, and governments everywhere else, to comprehend, the value of human life, including that of migrant women workers, is much, much more.

*Women in Action*