

Chato's story:

Life in Italy is no 'dolce vita'

by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

Chato Basa's story sounds like your typical tale of a barrio lass determined to find her way out of poverty. Growing up as the eldest of eight children in a poor family in the Philippine island of Mindoro, she completed her tertiary education as a working student. But in an underdeveloped country like the Philippines, she realised early on that she could only do so much to change her life situation and move her family to a higher notch in the economic ladder. Despite the warnings of her friends, she decided to try her luck as a domestic helper in Italy.

Chato knew from the very start that she was going to Europe undocumented but the prospect of earning a good income outweighed the risk. She was further emboldened by the fact that she had relatives in Italy who were also undocumented migrant workers. On 31 October 1986, she flew to Switzerland with a tourist visa. With 22 other Filipinas who had also been recruited to work as domestic helpers in Italy, she boarded the midnight train to Milan. The train coach they were in was locked. Chato and the rest of her companions were instructed not to answer nor open the door of their coach if someone knocked. Luckily for them no one knocked and the dreaded passport checking did not occur.

"It sounds easy but this is not the experience of the majority," Chato stresses as if to

warn those who still want to go to Italy through this means. "Some have to walk — and walk for months to cross the border. Along the way, they encounter all sorts of harassment including rape, even gang rape."

Chato did not really have to work as a domestic helper in Europe as she had set out to do. She used to work as office assistant to Girlie Villariba, the former director of Centre for Women's Resources. Before Chato left for Italy, Girlie furnished her a list of friends whom she could contact there. One of them was Marilee Karl, who was living in Rome at the time as director of Isis International.

Chato was immediately hired as a regular employee of

Isis International doing mainly administrative work at the start and eventually venturing into other tasks such as publications. Luck struck Chato the second time when the Italian government declared a general amnesty for undocumented migrants in December of the same year.

The work in Isis was not entirely new to Chato for she had already learned about the women's movement and NGOs in general in her previous job. It was her work in Isis International that led Chato to seriously look at the issue of migrant workers. The materials they were receiving from networks around the world made her realise the various issues confronted by migrant women

workers. She also learned about organising strategies through those materials.

She started spending her days off from Isis doing organising work among the women, who were free only on Sundays and holidays. Sometimes she would adjust her own worktime to meet with the other women who had their days off on weekdays.

Before long, the Filipino Women's Council was founded, with Chato as its moving spirit. It aims to educate Filipino women migrants about their rights and does lobbying work on their behalf. "We want to do a lot more—in fact we used to have a publication—but we don't have the time and financial resources." Chato is also a member of a number of networks including the Migrant Women's Network in Italy, the Filipino Women's Network in Europe, the Italian and Migrant Women's Organisation and the Italian Caucus on Women. Being involved with these organisations, she has participated in international conferences including the Beijing Conference representing the interests of migrant women.

When Isis left Rome and moved to Manila in 1991, Chato found work with the Society for International Development, another international NGO, and continued to work among Filipino migrants. In 1992, she joined the Foundation for a Compassionate Society. At present, Chato works with Centro Internazionale Crocevia, an Italian development organisation. Her first assignment was

to assist in the coordination of the NGO Forum on Food Security during the World Food Summit that took place in Rome in 1996. At present, she coordinates Crocevia's Secretariat and is part of Crocevia's project evaluation team. One of the projects she is working on is a collaborative effort between Isis International-Manila and

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Crocevia to promote women's radio programming. Chato is happy to be working with Isis again. She has come full circle.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

When Chato first arrived in Italy, there were only some 15,000 migrant Filipino workers there. Today, that number has ballooned to 50,000, easily making the Filipinos the fourth biggest migrant group in the country.

Italy is a popular destination for migrant workers because work conditions, parti-

cularly for domestic helpers, are generally better compared with other countries and basic workers' rights, such as unionisation, are guaranteed.

The role of the family in the migration process to Italy is well established. Most new migrants have relatives who are already working there. Over 60 percent obtained jobs through relatives and friends who provide information, financial support and other assistance (Batistella, c.s., 1991, 16).

Women make up nearly half of Filipinos working overseas since the mid-1980s. In Italy, about 70 percent of the Filipinos are women, most of them domestic helpers. In fact, unemployment among Filipinas in Italy is unheard of, says Chato. This is not the case with men, most of whom come to Italy because their wives, sisters or daughters sponsored their entry. However, there is a significant number of Filipino men who used to work in the Middle East but moved to Italy after the Gulf War. Being illegal entrants and unemployed, they suffer alienation, humiliation and depression and one consequence is that many have become drug users. Some drug-dependent men enter into intimate relationships with two or three women at the same time and rely on the women to support their drug habit. If the women refuse to give money, they will be beaten. There are also reports that some men force the women into prostitution because of this. Very often, these men also completely stop working.

The result of these intimate relationships, whether based

on love or convenience, is the growing number of Filipino children born in Italy. Because the parents, especially the mothers, have to continue earning a living as domestic helpers, they cannot care for their young children. The most convenient solution then is to send the children to the Philippines to be raised by the grandparents or other relatives. It is a sad reality that while countless Filipinas tend to the comfort and convenience of foreign employers across the world, they leave their own children and families in the care of others if not totally by themselves.

As a result, the women migrant workers have to shoulder a heavier financial burden. Not only do they have to support their immediate families, now they also have to support the person who's taking care of their children and sometimes all the other members of the extended family with whom the children share a house. It's not surprising that even after decades of working in Italy, many have no savings.

"The money they send home is never enough," notes Chato. To ease the guilt and to make up for their absence, the absentee parents shower their children with material things. Many children grow up spoiled, drop out of school or marry early. A number have become drug users, as pushers know that children of migrant workers are easy targets, since

they have money but no adult or parental guidance.

While legal protection and support mechanisms are available for migrant workers in Italy, the picture is not all that rosy. The most common problems related to domestic work arise from noncompliance with the law that guarantees equal rights to all documented workers originating from coun-

their domestic helpers for getting pregnant.

Another major concern is the inability of the migrants to assert that they are qualified to do other jobs, even if they hold college diplomas in the Philippines. However, Chato believes that it is also their fault, refusing for example to take language lessons even if these are available for free.



Chato in the Rome office of Isis International. Her first exposure to the new ICTs

tries outside the European Economic Commission. Some employers take advantage of irregular situations to avoid work contracts and withholding taxes. This puts the worker in a precarious condition, particularly in case of need such as sickness, and also ties the workers to a particular employer (Battistella, c.s., 1991, 17). Some employers also force longer work hours without corresponding compensation, or salaries lower than that received by Italian workers in equivalent work. In some cases, employers have fired

"Their reasoning is that other jobs are not available anyway, while entering domestic service is a surer opportunity. Very few Filipinos become industrial workers. They also refuse offers of support to engage in small businesses. They don't want to take the risk. To them it's better to be domestic workers because it doesn't require capital."

The huge number of Filipinos wanting to migrate to Italy has given rise to various abuses. Where there only used to be state-sponsored migration that required a direct-hire

system—employer to employee through official channels—now there abound recruitment agencies that charge exorbitant placement and processing fees.

Chato herself had to pay P43,000 (around US\$3,500 at the time) when she left for Italy in 1986. Her relatives who were already in Italy at that time pooled their money together and lent it to her without interest. Most migrating Filipinos now have to raise around US\$5,000 at 10 percent monthly interest if they borrow from traditional money lenders. Some have to sell or pawn properties like a house, a piece of land, or even draft animals like water buffaloes. Sadly, most of them cannot recover these anymore because they have to prioritise sending money to their families as soon as they start earning abroad.

The proliferation of fly-by-night recruitment agencies has also led to the unprecedented increase in the number of undocumented migrants. At present around 25 percent of migrant Filipinos in Italy are undocumented.

CHANGING MIGRATION PATTERNS

The armed conflicts in Eastern Europe and some parts of Africa have altered the usual migration patterns to Italy. Where Filipinos used to be the third largest migrant group, now they are outnumbered by Moroccan and Albanian refugees.

There's a lesser-known form of Filipino migration to Italy, and these are the Filipinos who have been trafficked into prostitution, mostly in less urbanised areas of northern

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Italy. "Girlie bars" have been proliferating in this region, catering to male Italian farmers. Some of the women wind up marrying their clients.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an unusual mode of migration was that of country girls from the Philippines going to Italy to enter nunneries. Some religious congregations in Italy and elsewhere in Europe would recruit these young women to become sisters. But it turned out that their real "vocation" would involve taking care of elderly nuns, cleaning the convent, doing the laundry, and cooking. What's more, some of them were made to work outside the convent to earn their keep. "I knew a priest who once helped a young woman escape from the convent because they really are abused through excessive physical work," Chato narrates. "It was really oppressive and exploitative. We said, why don't you just work as domestic helpers?"

LESSONS FROM ORGANISING MIGRANTS

When asked what lessons

can be drawn from her long experience in organising migrants, Chato has this to say: Learn to appreciate the value of networking.

"Before, support NGOs and migrants' organisations in Italy tended to work individually, separately. Now we've learned to enter into tactical alliances even with church groups and policy-makers. Once, we hosted a forum when some members of the Philippine parliament came over. It generated a lot of interest among the Filipinos in Italy. Even those working in professional sectors asked us to let them know when we are organising another activity even on other issues."

The Filipino Women's Council is leading the socio-economic working group for the Filipino community Jubilee 2000 programme organised by the Catholic church. As such, it is expected to bring in the migrant workers' point of view in analysing the debt issue and social problems like gambling and drug abuse. In line with this, it will organise seminars, fora and other activities like a poster-making competition and a cultural presentation.

Chato believes it is important to take advantage of such networking opportunities because this will mean another space to advance the advocacy of migrants' rights. She is also proud of the fact that the FWC has already achieved some level of recognition. Proof of this is that many institutions are offering to collaborate with them. "It's only the Philippine Embassy that we are not working with. Even church-



Chato and some members of FWC in a planning meeting

based organisations are put off by them. They are only interested in making money. We just go there when we have to have some papers processed.”

Such an attitude is not without basis. While the export of cheap labour has been a significant means of propping up a constantly beleaguered economy, the Philippine government through its embassies abroad has been unable to provide overseas Filipino workers with meaningful assistance when they find themselves in distress.

GAINS

One of the outstanding achievements of the FWC and other migrants' organisations in Italy is the legislation of a

number of benefits such as equal access to health services.

In Beijing, the FWC was one of the groups that lobbied for the inclusion of a statement in the Plan of Action recognising the economic contribution of domestic helpers. But Chato is not pinning her hopes on this. “It’s just like any other international document,” she says. “If the recognition is not translated into rights and privileges, then that is nothing.” The other gain has to do with cultural mediators. Cultural mediators are migrants trained to understand the laws and interpret these for their fellow migrants. Their principal task is to assist migrants in understanding official procedures and serve as interpreters in

cases where they need to deal with government entities and other Italian institutions or even in negotiations with their employers. The Italian government pays the cultural mediators to provide this service. Chato herself serves like a cultural mediator, although not an official one. She responds to inquiries and requests from her fellow migrants through some form of a referral system. She also trains Italian educators, public-health workers and other government employees on cultural sensitivity and generally how to relate with Filipinos.

Chato looks forward to the day when migration for her *kababayans* (fellow Filipinos) will not be synonymous to alienation, abuse, maltreatment, deportation and victimisation by unscrupulous recruiters because gainful employment opportunities would have become available in her home country. She looks forward to the day when her fellow Filipinas will not have to be placed in powerless and vulnerable positions when they migrate to foreign lands. She looks forward to the day when migrating to a foreign land will simply be a choice but staying in the Philippines will still be the best option. ☺

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Ref: Battistella, c.s.. Graziano. “Filipina Domestic Workers in Italy,” *Filipina Women Overseas Contract Workers ...At What Cost?* Quezon City. Women in Development Foundation, Inc. (Women Overseas Workers Program). 1992.