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A maid in servitude: Filipino domestic workers in the Middle East

Kathy Nadeau¹

Abstract

This paper presents Filipino economic history as a way to provide a brief background to the events that precipitated one Filipino woman's migration to the Middle East. Her story is not rare but shares in common patterns with the stories of many other female contract workers, especially domestic workers. It chronicles government policies and business practices that profit from their remittances. It is being retold here so that the invisible world of female contract workers and, more often than not, the poor conditions under which they live and labour, might be better understood.

Keywords: Domestic workers; Filipino contract workers; the Gulf Crisis; Kuwait; Philippines.

Introduction

Until the 1970s, most out-migration from the Philippines was undertaken by individuals and families with the intent to stay in places like Canada and the United States. However, as discussed later, the 1970s Oil Crisis combined with, then, President Ferdinand Marcos' illicit use of foreign aid money, gave rise to a huge economic downturn and high unemployment rate in the country (Bonner 1987). At the same time, there occurred a burst of economic activities in the Gulf region, which attracted Filipino men who migrated there in large numbers for waged work. That is, the decline of the Philippine economy paralleled the growth of the oil industry in the Middle Eastern Gulf states in the 1970s.

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These states, successfully, collaborated to raise the selling price of oil on the international market, which resulted in a sudden influx of surplus funds. Profits were channelled back into the development of local infrastructures, which resulted in a huge construction boom that created many new job opportunities for foreign workers. The populations in Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates being young and still below one million were unable to meet the new demands for labour (Birks and Sinclair 1979 cited in Addleton 1991: 511). Also, Middle Eastern females scarcely participated in the work force. Thus, the Middle Eastern Gulf states recruited foreign contract workers from nearby countries around Asia (Addleton 1991; Gardener 2005; Icduygu and Sirkeci 1998; Nair 1999).

At the same time, President Ferdinand Marcos, quickly, recognized this new trend of migrants going to the Middle East as an opportunity to gain an additional source of revenues, and capitalized on it by setting up an *Overseas Employment Program* that is still on-going. International labour opportunities and local economic insecurities and poverty created out-migration from the Philippines. The Philippine government's strategy of placing its own citizens in jobs abroad to shore up its economy has been replicated and used by other economically depressed countries such as India and Thailand for the same purpose.² The current economic crisis, increasing militarization, and the U.S. government's interference in Philippine affairs³ continue to contribute to solidifying the structural conditions that compel Filipinos to seek work abroad. That is, after gaining independence from the American colonizers in 1946, the Philippines emerged as a showcase for democracy in Asia. It had a newly developing

² For a brief on the Philippine government's placement service, see: Parrenas 2001, especially, Chapter 2, Carino (ed.) 1998, also see Teft 1995, p.1. Details concerning labor migration from India to Bahrain, can be found in Gardner 2005. Also, see: Addleton, 1991.

³ For an extensive discussion on the American CIA's involvement in Philippine internal affairs, see: McCoy 1989. Also, see: Nadeau and Suminguit 1999.

Middle Class and one of the highest literacy rates in the region (Miralao 1997:190; Youngblood 1990: 15). However, Marcos, with complicit support from U.S. powers that be,⁴ disbanded the Philippine's democracy and established an authoritarian dictatorship that lasted until he was ousted from power in February of 1986.

Marcos's shift to authoritarian rule destroyed the Philippine economy as he and his wife, Imelda, and their coteries, squandered and stole billions of dollars that were designated for national development projects. By the time Corazon Aquino became president in 1987, after the murder of her husband, Ninoy Aquino, by Marcos's military in 1983, which sparked a People's Power Revolution that overthrew the dictator, the nation was financially bankrupt (Balisacan 1994; Boyce 1993; and Broad 1988). In exchange for restructuring the Philippine debt repayments, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank policies continued to exert a stranglehold over the political economy. In 1989, the Aquino government was given a U.S. \$1.3 billion loan from the IMF on the condition that the liberalization (e.g., abolishing price control, oppressing labour unions, and export-oriented development) of the economy be continued, along with privatization of the government-owned industries and institutions. President Fidel Ramos (1992-1997) added another U.S. \$650 million loan from the United States to the Philippine foreign debt (Lindio-McGovern 1997, 35). The structural adjustment measures in Ramos's national development plan, likewise, reflected the policies of the IMF. The worker remittances become a significant source for generating foreign currency, helping repayment of the national debt spiralled under the government of Aquino and Ramos, and continued through the 1990s into the 21st century. As of 2005, there were 988,615 Filipinos working overseas, and the estimated annual remittances from overseas workers amounted to 10,

⁴ Significantly, the United States' export-led foreign policy and anti-communist operations in Southeast Asia, especially during the Vietnam American War period, contributed to the Philippine's economic decline.

689,005 billion U.S. dollars (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration 2005).

The Philippine migration flows became increasingly feminized, since the 1980s, as more women than men migrated for jobs as nannies, maids, housecleaners, cooks, entertainers, and in other helping professions and service occupations (Ward 1990; Ehrenreich and Hoschschild 2003). This female domination peaked in 2001, when over 90% of all overseas Filipino contract workers were women.⁵ The new type of feminized migration flow was patterned after and facilitated by expanding social support networks, including non-government organizations, churches, and cultural organizations (Law and Nadeau 1999). Before Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990, there were, approximately, 500,000 Filipinos reported to be working around the Middle East, although few worked in Iraq during this time period, due to ordinary Iraqis being too poor to hire them (Wayne 2003).⁶

However, there are no statistics about the gender and ethnic discrimination those Filipino women have been subjected to in the Gulf countries for decades (Abrera-Mangahas 1998). This paper aims to reveal the story of a female Filipino Contract worker who witnessed the war in Kuwait in 1990. Although, the experiences are believed to be shared by many Filipino women who have been immigrant workers in the Gulf States, no representativeness is claimed here.

Delia's Migration

In summer 2000, I interviewed ten returned migrant workers from the Middle East, Singapore, and Japan in the

⁵ 2000. "Fast Facts on Philippine Labor Migration" (Quezon City: Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc., file). Also, cited in 2001. "Migration Statistics" sheet presented on March 4th at the National Migrants Sunday, Ateneo de Manila Labor Center file.

⁶ According to Arnold (2003) and Janardhan (2003) this situation changed when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, as American companies there, preferentially, hired Filipinos and other nationals with English speaking skills, rather than local Iraqis looking for work.

Philippines. I was riveted by their stories. I present Delia's saga because it shares patterns in common with the stories of many, albeit not all, other domestic workers. Her saga uncovers unfair labour practices that commodify and sell women to work as servants, sometimes, leaving them in almost slave-like conditions. It lends insight onto the recruitment practices of fraudulent recruiters and some of the risks taken by female migrant workers. Delia's saga, specifically, chronicles a hidden world, in which women are laid open to potential abuse and enslavement by employers, in the global domestic worker industry that cuts across national boundaries. It, also, tells of poor Iraqi soldiers who risked their lives to help refugees for a fee, across the desert into a safety zone in Iraq. Delia's tale shows the triumph of our common humanity during wartime. What is being retold here is also the reality of the dreams and sufferings caused by government policies of export seeking benefits from the hard earned remittances sent by these women. The story is also revealing about the complexity of international migration where distinguishing the regular migration from the irregular is not always straightforward.

In 1987, Delia (pseudonym) unwittingly applied for a passport at a fraudulent recruitment agency temporarily set up in the town center. It cost her \$25,000 pesos, or a sum total of \$ 5,000 U.S., to process her paperwork over a two month period. In order to pay for her trip, her family had to sell a piece of land. Together with three other Filipinas, she was driven to the Aquino International Airport in Manila where to her surprise she was given only a passport with a tourist visa for Hong Kong. They were instructed on what to say and told by the recruiter escort, not to squeal on the agency, when going through immigration control. Delia, by this point, had prepared herself, psychologically, to return home if caught with a fake passport by immigration officials. They all made it through customs. The recruiter exchanged their old passports for new ones with entry visas for Kuwait, from which point, he left them on their own.

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On arrival in Kuwait, Delia was met by two of her four female employers who were spinster sisters living together in one compound: one was teacher, the second a business woman, the third a doctor, and the fourth was a banker. Delia was interviewed by each one of them, and, then, "made to do all of the housework by herself." As she explained, while making a huge gesture with her hands, "they lived in a Big House." Not only did she have to do all of their housework, she was responsible for washing four cars everyday. "Imagine four cars", Delia reiterated in exasperation. There was only one other helper, an Indian cook, while Delia "had to do all of the household chores alone." Each spinster sister lived in a separate quarter, and there was a large inner quarter that they shared in common. Delia was given no day off. She was not allowed to use the phone, not even to receive incoming calls. She had to contend with four masters, each with their own personality. The two elder sisters were very harsh in demeanour, while the two younger sisters behaved more kindly towards her. She was not allowed to go to sleep until midnight, and could never sleep ahead of her masters. Delia's workday began at 4:00 AM, in the morning. Otherwise, she would be awoken by loud ringing bells. Mealtimes were a constant struggle for her at the beginning. She was unaccustomed to eating lamb and spicy foods, and lost a lot of weight. Besides having difficulty adjusting to a new diet, she was not given her full month's salary. Although her contract, explicitly, stated that she was supposed to receive 8000 pesos a month, on arriving in Kuwait, she was given only 4000 pesos, or \$80 USD, per month, and that was what she remitted to her family.

Of all the many chores that Delia had to do, it was the ironing and washing of the cars that she found most difficult. The four sisters wore veils from head to foot, and their laundry was no less than a mountain of clothes that piled taller than Delia, herself. She had to iron, daily, but that wasn't the real problem. Rather, after ironing, they expected her to wash the cars. As Constable (1997) noted, Filipinas, generally, believe that washing cars is a male task. They,

also, believe that it is not healthy to take a bath until one has cooled down. Delia believed that she “shouldn’t wet her hands anymore after ironing” but, at the outset, she couldn’t complain. Until one day, she told them that having already taken her morning bath, she found it hard to proceed from ironing to washing the cars, and if they persisted to force her to do so, she would go crazy. So, they agreed to release her from this duty.

There were other acts of cruelty, a few of which stand out. She didn’t know how to use the “clamp system” to turn the stove on and off, so they got “pissed off” and scolded her. She broke three glasses when washing the dishes, and she had to pay for them. One day, she was cleaning the tropical bird cage, and all of a sudden, the birds flew out! She was made to pay one month’s salary to reimburse them for the loss of the birds. Another example, she was not allowed to go outside of the house, except to throw out the garbage. She had no friends, no contact with anyone since she wasn’t even allowed to use the phone. Throughout this ordeal, Delia couldn’t complain, even though she wished that she were back in the Philippines.

The home in which Delia lived and worked was, dangerously, situated three minutes from the airport when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Suddenly, they heard explosions and bombings all around. Her employers forbid her and the cook from going out. She pleaded with them to allow her to return home. They responded: “if you want to go you will get killed.” They scurried her and the cook to a ranch outside of the city just as the Iraqi soldiers were about to ransack their home. During the war, everyone was scared as there was a constant barrage of bombings. Delia, repeatedly, demanded that her employers return her to the Philippine Embassy, and, two weeks later, they relented. Arriving at the embassy, Delia recalled hearing that there were some 60,000 Filipinos already there, out of a total of around 100,000 Filipinos working in Kuwait. All other institutions were closed. Her employers asked the embassy officials whether they had to pay Delia her salary that was due her.

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The embassy personnel said that they did not, so she was made to sign release papers. She spent another week languishing at the embassy, before learning that the Iraqis were offering Filipinos a way out of Kuwait! Iraqi soldiers had promised to escort them to Baghdad for a price of ten Dinars per head. From there, they could go to Jordan and, then, back home to the Philippines.

A group of forty Filipino men and women banded together when confronted by the Iraqi soldiers, each saying "he is my husband" or "she is my wife." They did this to avoid the possibility of anyone being raped by the soldiers. Delia decided to take her chances with the Iraqis when she realized that she was not going to get any real help from the Philippine Embassy. Her group walked for a couple of days through the desert during the bombings. It took three weeks for them to reach the refugee camp in Iraq. The Filipinos survived by sharing whatever resources they had. When they, finally, arrived at the refugee camp, it was packed full with people from the Philippines, China, the United States, and many other nations. They stayed there for three more weeks without having even a bath. There were no public toilets or bathroom facilities. It would not be until two days before they were to be deported, or sent home, that they would be given blankets by their Iraqi caretakers. Prior to that, they slept with their bags and were prepared to die. As Delia explained, "even if you had money, you couldn't use it" and whoever had savings used it to buy water. There was a strong bonding between Filipinos who shared everything. Also, there were many incidents of Filipinos having nervous breakdowns. Many suffered from depression and other sicknesses. Some of them, died.

One day in September of 1990, a Filipino Senator visited the refugee camp and told them that Saddam Hussein had made an agreement with the Philippine Embassy that the Filipinos would not be harmed. Some of the Filipino refugees had Iraqi passports, while others did not. Others had lost all of their papers. There was a bit of a commotion, until a decision was reached that everyone would leave in

batches. The first group to go would be those who had their passports, the second and third groups would be those who lost their papers. Delia boarded the plane to go home with no money, no shoes, and no baggage. All she had was her handbag. Her necklace was stolen by the Iraqi soldiers and even her shoes were stolen by someone in the camp. What she remembers most about her ordeal is that it was a time of "Filipinos helping fellow Filipinos." Even when she landed 'penniless' in Manila, one of her fellows who had a place to stay in the city, invited her over. The next morning, her friend brought her to the bus terminal, and gave her some pocket money, so that she could go home.

Delia's arrival home caused a big commotion in the town. As she explained with tears in her eyes, she was "thin, very dark, and her hair was in disarray." Her parents were so overjoyed to see her that they were crying, and the whole town came out to welcome her home. Delia's story doesn't end here. While "the Philippine government did not even bother to check" to see how she was doing, Delia heard on the radio that President George Bush made an agreement with the Iraqi government to pay a certain amount of compensation to those affected by the war. So, she went to the Bureau of Immigration to process the necessary paperwork. Seven years later in 1997, she received 170,000 pesos (\$3,400 U.S.) in compensation from the Iraqi government. This made it possible for her to construct a house. Also, she is able to make ends meet by selling vegetables produced from her own farm. At 37 years old (at the time of the interview), Delia seemed happily married with three children. She ended her story wondering how she survived such an ordeal without going crazy, and concluded that her "strength was heaven sent." She brought "a bible, rosary beads, and a prayer book" to Kuwait, and it was her faith in God, she exclaimed, that carried her home safely.

Concluding Remarks and Analysis

Soaring oil prices enabled the Middle Eastern Gulf states in the early 1970s, to industrialize on a massive scale. They

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lacked sufficient manpower, so they hired foreigners, instead, to do the low paying construction work. In response, then, Philippine President Marcos established the Overseas Employment Program to improve the local economy by exporting labourers, rather than creating new jobs for them at home. Later in the 1980s, when the construction industry waned, more Filipino women than men were migrating to work in the Middle East, especially as domestic helpers. Subsequent Philippine administrations have continued to export workers in an effort to, partially, alleviate the increasingly high unemployment rate. But, this quick fix measure is not without costs.

Delia's story exemplifies some of the risks workers encounter from the outset, with recruiters who charge them high fees and are legally responsible for their safety and well being. Desperate for jobs, many, like Delia, are tricked by illegal agents who send them overseas without any legal protection. The job search can be expensive as Filipino workers are known to sell properties and incur debts to pay off high recruiter's fees and the costs of transportation. Once at the work place, they may face further hardships such as extremely poor working and living conditions. In the case of working inside the privacy of another's home, these domestic workers often work longer hours without extra pay: they are underpaid and even get physically and/or sexually abused by their employers. Delia was overworked, housebound, denied phone privileges, and earned far less than agreed upon in her written contract. Migrant workers have to learn new cultural ways of behavior. Far from their families and support networks, they are especially vulnerable during times of political instability and change. For example, according to Goldoftas (1991), an estimated range of 40,000 to 60,000 Filipinos were stranded in Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion.

In the aftermath of the chaos, they received little assistance from the Philippine Embassy. At first, the embassy was closed and when it reopened, the Filipinos were left to fend for themselves. Many took abandoned vehicles or, like Delia,

paid Iraqi soldiers to lead them on a dangerous trip through the desert. They had to cross through many military check points, and most had to sell their belongings for food and water. Once in the refugee camps, the Filipinos were stuck there for weeks on end before they could get out. About 30,000 Filipinos returned home this way.

After returning home, most of these Filipino refugees from Kuwait were unable to find employment in the Philippines. Many suffered from post-traumatic stress syndromes resulting from being abused by the soldiers. Some were suffering from experiences of being physically and/or sexually abused by employers. Yet, the Philippine government provided little free counselling or guidance in the direction of helping them to find jobs or to assist in their reintegration back into Philippine society. In short, it is the Filipino overseas workers who are the victims of economic and political turmoil. The government's policy of siphoning off their remittances may help to build up the economy by lessening unemployment in the short term, but, over the long duration, it will only ever more ferociously feed into the international division of labour that increases the gap between the rich and poor.

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