

(Dis)Empowering Filipino Women Domestic Workers in Japan

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The migration of labour has been economically beneficial to the Philippines and Japan. Despite the colonial history of the countries, the Philippines and Japan are in an economic bilateral agreement through the Japan-Philippine Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) that mutually benefits both countries to cope with the changing demands of globalization in the international community.

The remittances being sent by Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) to their families serve as an important source of investment in the Philippines (Ordinario 2012: 1). Migration fuels the Philippine economy through its Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) classified OFWs by occupational categories, and service workers ranked first on the list of migrant workers. The service sector, primarily dominated by domestic workers, is highly associated with women (IOM 2013).

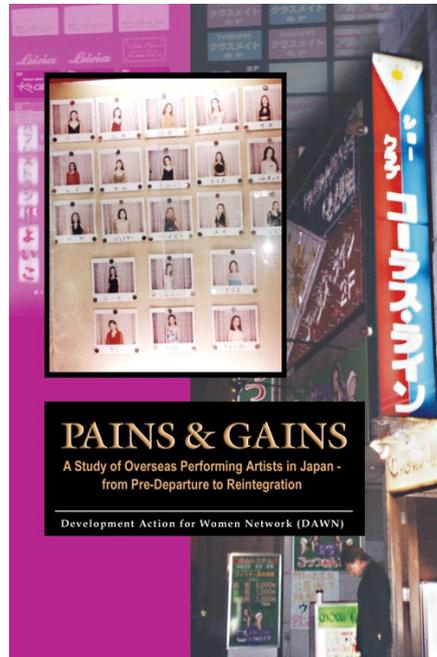
Japan, on the other hand, lacks labour force due to its declining birth rate and ageing population. To address these concerns, the Japanese government is restructuring its labour market to be structurally dependent on legal and illegal foreign migrant workers (Ball et al 2002: 1016). In June 2014, the Cabinet suggested accepting foreign domestic workers, or house keepers, for support of Japanese working women in National Strategic Special Zones (Hayakawa 2015: 15). This has led to the amendment of the Act on National Strategic Special Zones to modify the immigration regulation in accepting domestic workers (Hayakawa 2015: 15). According to a published article against the bill, Susumu Murakoshi, President of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations contended that the domestic workers who will be hired are vulnerable women (Hayakawa 2015: 15).



Filipino Domestic Worker, photo taken by Akira Kodaka (2017) from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Filipino-housekeepers-Japan-dream>

The Philippine government is gearing up towards exporting labour to countries in need of workers to embrace neo-liberal ideals to economically benefit the country. In spite of its intention to improve the lives of the Filipino people, the labour migration policy attempts to hide the visible layer of injustice to the migrant workers, especially to those women workers engaged in services. Despite the existence of laws and bilateral agreements between the host and sending countries, Filipino women migrant workers are vulnerable to discrimination due to the mere fact that they are: a) Filipino, and b) women. These two elements of being a migrant worker perpetuate the racialized and biased idea on women's work that devalues their worth.

Filipino women migrant workers in Japan have a negative history in the entertainment industry as Overseas Performing Artists (OPAs) in nightclubs. The OPAs experience various forms of discrimination such as confiscation of passports and other documents, contract violations—from OPAs to hostessing jobs—and low wages given after the contract, language and cultural barriers, and the harassing nature of work. This stereotype has been reinforced by most Japanese people towards Filipino women migrant workers.



"Pains and Gains" by the Development Action for Women Network (2003)
<<http://www.dawnphil.com/books.htm>>

In addition to the historical employment of Filipino women migrant workers in Japan, the familial setting of these women in the Philippines adds to the multiple layer of their marginalization in both countries. Filipinos are known to have strong familial ties and acquire mutual support among family members through *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). This culture strictly holds to women family members working as migrant workers abroad, though it may apply to unmarried young women workers slightly differently from married women domestic workers.

Unmarried Filipina migrant workers, in general, have their obligation to financially support their immediate (and in some cases, extended) family members in the Philippines. As a daughter who has debt of gratitude towards her family, she has to contribute to all kinds of expenses incurred by the family, and it is quite typical of unmarried Filipina migrant women to provide financial support for sending one of her siblings (or extended relatives) to school.

Married domestic workers with children, on the other hand, are much more willing to sacrifice themselves and put up with the maltreatments they experience at work to enable her family to lead a 'decent life'. In a case where both the father and the mother are working abroad, she repays the debt of gratitude to the extended family member who takes care of her children by financially supporting them. In order to meet the demands of her own children and extended family members, she has to work multiple jobs despite being paid minimum amounts, whether documented or undocumented, just to send money and be considered as a daughter and mother who returns *utang na loob*.

In the context of the Philippines and Japan, Filipino women domestic workers are affected by the state-inflicted marginalization that reinforces discrimination against them because they are women. The historical employment of Filipino women in Japan as OPAs inculcated a derogatory perception towards them. Thus, engaging these women in domestic work would only establish discriminatory value towards their work such as low-wage and unvalued work.

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