

Migrant Filipino: Domestic Workers in Canada

THE PLIGHT OF SEEKERS OF GREENER PASTURES

Due to its consistent demand for domestic workers, Canada has opened its doors to foreign migrant workers from all over the world, specifically the Philippines, which supply a steady number of Filipino domestic workers. Based on the research literature, such workers are not given ideal working conditions, but bear such sacrifices in order to provide a better future for their families back home. Their realities are explored in this paper, along with possible solutions to alleviate their current problems.

It is part of human nature to seek greener pastures. Being content is a state that can be elusive especially if the hard reality projects an uncertain and unstable future for an individual and his or her family.

The necessity to migrate to a foreign land to find a more stable life for one's family has become the prime motivation of most migrant workers. Had their countries of origin provided them with enough opportunities to support their families, they would have stayed put in the comfort of their homes. However, it is far from the realities of most Filipino migrant domestic workers in Canada.

The current trend of women joining the workforce has caused enormous changes in traditional family roles. Dual careers have left most families in dire need of outside support in home management and care of children and their elderly family members. Availing of daycare and housekeeping services may be very costly. An alternative for such families would be to hire a live-in worker to take care of all their domestic needs. This opens the doors of employment opportunities for many foreign workers especially from a Third World country like the Philippines to try out their chances for better financial security in a wealthier land.

In their desire for a better life for their families, thousands of workers, mostly women, invest a lot of money to process their papers to migrate to Canada to work as domestic caregivers and workers. They would risk to be apart from their families and work for strangers in a foreign land as a sacrifice that they hope will be worth the material benefits it would bring their families. They are likewise motivated with the possibility of being reunited with their families as residents in Canada in the near future.

However, the reality is not as rosy as it seems. Studies have shown that the situations of Filipino migrant domestic workers lack finish (Cohen 81). There was organized a study group to investigate the matter (Grande and Kerr 12). A steering committee was established, which consisted of representatives of domestic workers who took on the roles of participant researchers, collaborating organizations, namely the Women's Advisory Committee of the Philippines - Canada Human Resource Development Program (PCHRD), the Coalition for the Defence of Migrant Workers' Rights in Toronto, and PINAY in Montreal. These organizations set the goals of the project, and recruited researchers within and outside their respective organizations. In-depth interviews have yielded confessions of the personal and professional plight of such workers in their jobs:

The perception of domestic work as non-productive work that requires little skill has made women less likely to be protected by national legislation and institutions of receiving countries, as well as subject to provisions that are conducive to various forms of abuse. (Grande and Kerr 7)

This has given rise to societal issues of gender inequality, racial discrimination, family disintegration, labor exploitation, etc. and has reflected violations of human rights of workers.

Interviewees in the aforementioned studies have revealed unfair labor practices and oppressive living conditions in their place of work. The nature of their jobs followed flexible working hours to suit their employers' way of life and requirements, such as being called upon any time of the day and night to do any type of chore the employer demands. The living conditions dictate a difficulty to draw the line between work hours and off-duty hours for the domestic workers. Some live-in caregivers have also reported being given substandard lodging facilities and inadequate, culturally insensitive food and may be subjected to verbal, physical and even sexual abuse (Grande and Kerr 10). Since their work is in the private homes of their employers, such abusive conditions go on unmonitored, and hence, they are rendered unprotected by their human rights.

Most migrant domestic workers, mostly women enter Canada through the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP). Its requirement is for women workers to live in their employers' home for 24 months with only a temporary immigration status does not give them enough security. Apart from the fact that migrant workers are categorized as a special group, such a population lacks support and services from the Canadian government (Gorgonio):

Although the LCP is the only program that offers one landed immigration status after completing 24 out of the 39 months needed to work as a caregiver in Canada, there are a lot of hurdles to be passed before the qualified workers can petition their families. (Cayat)

The prolonged separation from their families may cause intense longing and loneliness, not to mention dire consequences in terms of familial attachments and thinning of bonds. This may greatly affect the worker's mental health and emotional disposition.

This paper attempts to analyze the struggles of the Filipino migrant domestic workers in Canada and offer possible solutions to alleviate their plight and to seek betterment for their and their families' welfare based on the research literature. The aim of this work is to make readers aware of the dire social realities these workers live in and to solicit their support and appreciation for such workers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

History of Migration of Foreign Domestic Workers to Canada. Recruitment and hiring of domestic workers have been ongoing in Canada from the time of the confederation. It peaked during the second half of the nineteenth century with the rise of the urban middle-class and the prosperity of rural farmers. Having domestic help then became a necessity, as well as a status symbol of the privileged class. Originally, British females were encouraged to settle in Canada as servants or potential wives for lonely bachelors. They were preferred by the Canadian state in collaboration with the British Empire as the "enlightened" and "well-mannered" females befitting the rising middle class (Cohen 83). The lure of advances for travel fare, guaranteed employment and promised opportunities for social enhancement in Canada's "nation-building" scheme propelled the British migrant women to seek Canadian employment (Barber 22).

Over the years, Canada has opened its doors to other cultural groups to avail of employment opportunities as domestic workers, however, it was apparent that there was preference for Caucasians over colored workers. Racial prejudice was manifest, although in times of lack, Canadian families had to settle for less "cultured" whites, colored and Asian workers (Cohen 85).

In 1981, the federal government established the Foreign Domestic Movement (FDM) in an effort to protect the rights of domestic workers. This movement enabled domestics to apply for landed immigrant status in exchange for their services. Eventually, this was replaced by the Live-In Caregiver Program in 1992 which is responsible for recruiting foreign migrant domestic workers.

CURRENT PROCESSES IN SECURING MIGRANT EMPLOYMENT

The prevalence of poverty, political instability and lack of economic opportunities push many poor countries to send workers to migrate to more economically stable nations like Canada. These developed countries prefer docile laborers who are willing to be paid much less than their western counterparts (Gorgonio). Such desperation of these migrant workers, usually considered second-class citizens often result in abuses and lack of services for their welfare.

Filipino migrant workers spend thousands of dollars to have their papers processed for employment. In a pre-departure orientation for Filipino migrant workers, Connie Sorio, coordinator for the Asia-Pacific region of Kairos or Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiative, a church-based social justice movement with 11 affiliate churches, and also the founding officer of the Community Alliance for Social Justice openly explained procedures in migrant employment in Canada:

She opened the eyes of aspiring workers to the realities of the migrant domestic employment. She reported that in the processing of papers, a lot of complaints were received about recruitment agencies that have left domestic helpers in despair with the release of processed working papers being the biggest issue. (Cayat)

There is a risk that an employer backs out of the employment agreement and stops applying for a visa for the worker due to the tightening of immigration laws on the legitimacy of the employment. If immigration officers find out that the employment is illegal, then the domestic worker is deported:

However, since Canada has no regulatory law on the conduct of recruitment agencies, no penalties could be imposed on them or the employers and the only available relief for a complaining migrant worker who files a civil case for compensation resulting from fraud is no more than CA \$ 5,000.00.

(Cayat)

Although the LCP wished to project an image of a non-discriminatory body, it was criticized for requiring domestics to hold a visitor or potential immigrant status upon entering Canada instead of the usual immigrant status according to the Immigration Act:

In the evolution of immigration policies for recruiting domestic workers from confederation to the present, we can trace a racialized pattern of preference that begins by encouraging domestics of British and northern European descent to build their lives and families in Canada, to ones that discourage, via careful legal prevention and discourse, the settlement of domestic workers from third world countries. (Cohen 86)

Furthermore, domestic workers are not allowed to enter the country with their immediate family, unlike highly skilled foreign workers whose spouses are even issued separate work permits (Ragas 25).

The Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) announced that live-in caregivers are eligible for work permits for up to three years and three months provided they remain with the same employer.

Hence, the three year and three month work permit becomes useless to workers who end up changing employers and the application for a new work permit usually takes a long time to process, severely impacting the workers' chances of completing the 24 months of work within the 3 year period required for qualification for landed immigration status.

STATE OF FILIPINO MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN CANADA

The in-depth study by Grandea and Kerr (14) unearthed ugly realities on the living and working conditions of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Canada. Some workers became research participants themselves by interviewing other domestic workers and got to compare their own experiences with those of others. Research questions centered on three issues: immigration, employment and human rights and family relations.

The unusual status of domestic workers as non-standard employees and non-family members in a family setting has constrained them to assert their rights. For instance, when they receive gifts from their employees as a show of gratitude or appreciation, they are distracted from raising issues on unfair wages and workloads (Grande and Kerr 18). Because their employment is unmonitored, they are prone to be taken advantaged of, especially with the fact that they are in unfamiliar ground. There have been reported cases of sharing of nannies wherein the caregiver has more than one employer, her workload is heavier without a corresponding increase in her salary. For employers who are unable to pay the full salary this becomes an attractive option. Another unfair labor practice is to require a worker to work without pay for a certain period on a trial basis. In some cases, employers ask domestic workers to double work in their businesses, in violation of the terms of the work

permit. Although this is illegal in Canada, some workers have no choice but to agree to such arrangements because they cannot remain unemployed for a prolonged period of time. However, it endangers their opportunities for eligibility for landed immigrant status. It likewise jeopardizes their chances of surviving financially. Both ways, the workers lose because their refusal would mean the employer's displeasure and their compliance could mean their deportation (Grande and Kerr 22).

Self-esteem issues arise from cases of discrimination from their employers. Racial prejudice of some employers set strict boundaries between them and the workers as cohabiting human beings such as not sharing eating utensils, drinking glasses, toiletries, sheets and laundry facilities, making the workers feel degraded (Grande and Kerr 22). The feelings of loneliness and isolation are emphasized when they are excluded from the family's activities and are treated as outsiders. Longing for their families and friends back home can be intense and may hamper their performance at work.

Most domestics endure such pathetic conditions with their loved ones back home in mind. The desire to be able to provide their families with a better lifestyle inspires them to go on. Financial pressures to pay off debts they have generated in coming to Canada also need to be paid. Somehow, the study seems to point out that such sacrifices are not worth it. The prolonged separation from their families have led to emotional stress, difficult parent-child relationships, and family break-ups. Intense loneliness has caused some spouses to stray leading to marital discord or disintegration (Grande and Kerr 26).

The benefits of such conditions tip to the favor of Canadian employers leaving the domestic workers at a great disadvantage. Since the demand for domestic

workers continue to grow, such injustices and unfair labor practices need to be amended to regain the balance.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS THE SOCIAL ISSUE AT HAND

Based on the literature, many possible solutions to the current social problem at hand are offered. These suggestions are directed to the Canadian government, the Philippine government and to the domestic workers themselves.

First of all, awareness of the pathetic conditions of most of the foreign migrant domestic workers must be recognized and accepted in order for policies to be amended. The abolition of the Live-In Caregiver Program is one big step towards the emancipation of foreign domestic workers. They should be recruited as independent immigrants and should not be tied to a particular employer. Also, their security should be cloaked with the more concrete possibilities and more reasonable qualifications for landed immigrant status. Processing of papers and permits must be smooth and swift and workers must be allowed to work while waiting for renewals of work permits.

Domestic workers should be ascribed the value they truly deserve. One way to show this is to award more points to domestic work in applications for landed status. Their wages and benefits must be commensurate to their workloads and qualifications. And government should monitor working conditions and uphold the rights of these workers. In the first place, such rights must be explained and made clear to them. Arrangements for family reunification should also be solidified to further motivate the domestic workers to perform better in their jobs. Employers should likewise undergo orientation sessions to understand, accept and appreciate the cultural differences and to be aware of their responsibilities in respecting the

rights of domestic workers. A system of ensuring their compliance with contract provisions must also be established.

For the government counterpart in the Philippines, policy changes are likewise in order. Recruitment agencies must be regulated and required to provide adequate information to aspiring workers before contract-signing. Fees charged in the processing must be reasonably affordable to ease the burdens of the applicants, and processing of papers should be speeded up and simplified. Domestic workers must be given ample orientation to arm them with the information necessary in living and working in their destination countries. The Philippine government should be in bilateral agreement with the Canadian government to protect Filipino migrant workers, as both countries will benefit in the import of their labor and services. However, government should also intensify efforts at internal job creation to reduce the pressure of their people to migrate to foreign lands for employment opportunities.

As for the domestic workers in Canada, colonial mentality which dictates that life is better in the West should be eliminated. They should be educated of their rights and learn to assert themselves so as to prevent abuse of their docility.

Organizations of domestic workers should be strengthened to meet the specific needs of the workers and unity among workers should be fostered. As a united body, they can advocate for changes through various activities and movements to push their causes to the right authority.

Foreign domestic workers need to be empowered for them to be able to achieve their goals in their migration. Considering that the stakes are high, they must be proactive enough to ensure their own welfare and that possible inequalities be minimized if not eliminated. Of course, they would need all the support they can get

not only from their employers but from the government agencies involved in their foreign employment.

CONCLUSION

The saying that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence is a true reflection of man's discontent with his own lot. This may be viewed in two ways. Either the individual accepts his state and makes the most of it or move to the other side of the fence to try out the greener pasture. Sitting on the fence to passively observe both sides usually leaves the individual in a permanent state of indecisiveness and dissatisfaction, never knowing how it is to live with his feet on the ground.

Foreign migrant domestic workers are unsung heroes who courageously go out of their comfort zones to seek greener pastures for their own families. They risk being away from their loved ones, enduring loneliness and uncertainty in a foreign land. This paper has attempted to expose their realities to make people aware of their struggles in the pursuit of their dreams for their loved ones. It is but conscientious to accord them due respect and ensure that their rights are upheld. Supporting their cause is just one way of alleviating their burdens. Eliminating the injustices and inequalities they endure as domestic workers may be a tall order for mere civilians to endeavor. That would necessitate government support. But encouraging them in their low points and most especially if they reach the verge of despair will keep them standing tall and continue in their journey towards greener pastures.

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