

Globalization and Migration Activist Responses

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Cet article examine comment les femmes philippines en Europe ont réagi face au défi mondial de l'émigration. Elles ont fondé Babaylan en 1992, le « Réseau des femmes philippines », qui a donné du pouvoir aux domestiques venues des Philippines en leur permettant d'établir un système de soutien grâce à des liens avec les autres travailleuses émigrantes et aussi de les motiver à réclamer leur place dans la société.

Globalization is synonymous to the phenomenon of acceleration. For the past 25 years rapid changes have affected political, economic and social developments around the world

Acceleration is seen in vast technological changes, media revolution, global economic integration, and massive changes in production systems and labour markets. All these rapid increases in transnational flow of capital, trade, and technology have marked effects on international migration as well. Global economic restructuring has led not only to disruption in less developed or developing economies, it has also been a factor in unemployment, wage decline or job insecurity in dominant market economies (Hamilton and Chinchilla). Heavily indebted countries, like the Philippines, have resorted to labour export to help them stay afloat

The globalization of technology, especially communications technology, have also had an impact on international migration. Fax, telephone and email have replaced what used to be snail-

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pace letter communication. Relations between immigrant communities abroad and home communities have been facilitated by these new possibilities. As in many other countries from the global South, the globalization of mass communication including TV, film, video, and music has reinforced dreams of easy life abroad for many Filipinos. These "imagined lives" reach even peasants in remote villages. Migration becomes very attractive. Linkages between receiving

and sending countries are readily established. Networks connect migrants and non-migrants, where news and information are shared. This sustains the flow of migration. Studying networks, particularly those linked with families and households, sheds an understanding in the development and encouragement in additional migration (Boyd).

The Philippines has not been spared by these developments. To date, there are approximately seven million overseas Filipino workers. These workers remit millions of dollars back to the Philippines, boosting the Philippine economy.

In early 1980s, many Filipinas married western men through contracts with agencies or through newspaper ads. As they settle down in these new countries, they "invite" friends and relatives to visit them who either find work or also get married. In the U.S., for example, family reunification is one of the main factors contributing to increased immigration. Another study indicates that 41 per cent of pre-arranged employment of Filipinas in Italy is facilitated by a member of the family (Barsotti and Lecchini). Networking also contributes to increased migration. Job opportunities are readily shared. Earlier migrants assist subsequent migrants with accommodations, jobs, and contacts. Individuals from home countries hear of these successes thus encouraging further migration. Migration may continue even after the initial impetus for migration no longer exists.

Impacts on Families

Filipino migrants are extremely family-centered and give priority to remitting earnings to the family left behind. The standard of living of these families improves considerably, and their status in the community is elevated commensurate to the remitted dollars.

From 1975 to 1994 Filipino overseas contract workers pumped more than US\$18 billion into Philippine coffers (Gonzalez). Many Filipino NGOs demand that these remittances be used for projects that create jobs to enhance the economy in the Philippines and thus make migration a less attractive alternative. The government uses these remittances to pay foreign debt. Nevertheless, individual or micro-level processes show their impact on the macro-level. Many migrant groups and associations have gradually been founded abroad. Often, these associations pool

in the Philippines

their resources and provide funds for projects in home communities. Many migrant organizations have helped repair local churches in the Philippines, expand library facilities, or build playgrounds. Remittances have therefore also effected improvements on the lives of community members outside migrant families.

In some cases, the remittances to families have become counter-productive. Increase in consumerism is one of the negative consequences of remittances sent to families. The creation of a global culture brought about by the revolution in mass communications has promoted foreign influences through films, music, TV and videos. In the Philippines, there is a new popularity for signature apparel, such as Lacoste, Nike, etc. These remittances have also created a dependency attitude in the recipients. The motivation for self-realization has been overshadowed by expectations at migrating.

Migration has also had an impact in the social lives of both the migrants and the families left behind. Statistics show that Filipinas comprise more than 60 per cent of Philippine migrants, with an upward trend (Philippine Department of Labour and Employment). This fact has various implications. Families may be indefinitely separated. Migrant Filipinas become the “dollar mommies” with little personal closeness to their offspring. The husband-wife relationship may deteriorate as well due to long separation. It is not unusual to hear of husbands’ extramarital affairs while the wife is abroad. Women migrants particularly experience isolation especially when working in a foreign language. They are also forced to live in a foreign culture that often has low regard for poorer countries. Abuse in many forms is common in these situations.

Gender Perspectives in Migration

It is important to include women-specific issues in migration discourses. Current trends show that migratory flows are no longer male-dominated and that women are migrating from the Philippines independently. New social needs have created a demand for services in which only immigrant women are prepared to work. Women migrants often take up menial and low-paid occupations, with particularly difficult working conditions. Often they are good promised jobs abroad only to be trafficked into prostitution or forced to work in sweat shops, as domestic

servants, or as entertainers. They are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and gender-related violence like rape, sexual harassment, and physical abuse and face degradation due to stereotypes that devalue women and women’s work. Recognizing the gender perspective in migration means recognizing these women’s human rights.

Migrant women should enjoy the same privileges and opportunities as other women in the countries to which they migrate. The gender-agenda should be top priority in shaping migration politics; this, however, is not always the case. In 1995, at the NGO Forum on Women in Huiaro, China, migration was a hot and contested issue. Yet, at the Fourth World Congress on Women in Beijing just 50 km away, migration was hardly discussed by the official delegates although migration is one of the major issues of the twenty-first century.

Solidarity and Activism

As global restructuring affects all our lives, our responses have to take global dimension as well. We need solidarity groups at all levels—regional, national and international. Our strategies also have to change. It is legitimate to demand justice, however, what usually is missing are plans for action. By celebrating our little successes we bring in new energy and hope into our situation. We thus build our self-confidence. An empowered self can accomplish more than a defeated self. A group with self-confidence can truly make a difference. By actively negotiating, we move forward.

The response of Filipinas in Europe to the global challenges of migration is forming networks, one of which is Babaylan: Philippine Women’s Network in Europe. Babaylan was founded in 1992 during the first European meeting of Filipinas in Barcelona. The meeting was to discuss, among other things, trafficking in women

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and, most important, empowering Filipinas in Europe. Forming this network was empowering. This network is our support system. It is heartening to know that we can call upon each other for various activities and support in a variety of issues. Just meeting each other already fuels renewed energy.

Networking cannot be underestimated. Through personal and group networking we reach out to undocumented migrant workers. These invisible workers need our support. We also need to network with Philippine-based organizations. Many Filipino migrants are being forced to return or voluntarily doing so. We need to be prepared for such situations, especially where injustice is at play. We are well aware of unexplained deaths of overseas contract workers returning in coffins. We have to work together.

What would be a common agenda for an effective and relevant response to globalization and migration? Is there anything more common than the women themselves? Migrant women are the center of change. Our political actions or agenda may not be the same—but our consciousness exists. Our feminist presence in political groups has not been regarded seriously enough. Sometimes, we are invited to participate only as an afterthought; or perhaps as handy makers of sandwiches? We want to be active members in planning and decision-making. We are capable partners, not simply assistants. This recognition is due to us as women, as Filipinas, as migrants.

The economic position of immigrant women is no longer marginal because it is central to the economic developments of post-industrial western society and responds to new social needs (Campani). Many migrant women's groups showing social action, like Babaylan for instance, are refusing social marginality. We need to shift our perspectives in order for us to move forward. We look at migration as neither a degradation nor improvement (this would be wishful thinking) in women's position, but a restructuring of gender relations. This restructuring need not necessarily be expressed through a satisfactory professional life. It may take place through the assertion of autonomy in social life, through relations with one's family of origin, or through participating in networks and formal associations. The differential between earnings in the country of origin and the country of immigration may in itself create such an autonomy, even if the job in the receiving country is one of a live-in maid or sex worker (Campani).

With an attitude that "we count," migrant women can claim pride in their contribution to society. I look forward to the "coming-out" of the domestic helpers, entertainers, and prostitutes—to be visible and be recognized as members of the working force. Visibility of migrant women is slowly happening. Migrant women are increasingly active in associations and creating networks. It is time we claim our place in society.

Globalization has taken its toll. Countless questions

nag us as this toll rises. How can the clash of values and cultures be minimized and elements of a common culture be constructed so that perceived conflicts can be resolved in a world that gets smaller each passing day? How can new forms of livelihood and standards of personal worth be created when the demand for human labour has reached massive proportions disregarding humane prerequisites? What institutional reforms and at which levels in society should changes take place? We do not stop at questions, we need actions. There is so much work to be done at the grassroots level. Solidarity groups are faced with greater challenges than ever before.

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