

Trapped: “Holding on to the Knife’s Edge”

**Economic Violence against Filipino
Migrant/Immigrant Women**



A Participatory Action Research Project conducted by:

**The Philippine Women Centre of B.C.
Vancouver, British Columbia
September, 1997**

This project was made possible through a grant from:

Status of Women Canada

and support from:

The Feminist Research, Education, Development and Action Centre (FREDA), Yasmin Jiwani, Project Manager

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the project core group of 12 women who enthusiastically volunteered their time and energy to this project.

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Cover graphic from: *Kababayan*, January – June 1994

Thanks also to Emmanuel Sayo for his assistance and for information on the history of Filipino migration to Canada; Carlo Sayo for graphics; May Farrales for transcription, and Sean Parlan and Maita Santiago for assistance with the final report.

Dedication

To the brave Filipino migrant workers for generously sharing their stories and experiences. And to the future generations of the Filipino community as they continue the struggle for liberation.

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Preface

When we conceptualized this project in the fall of 1995, we thought that it would be simple and easy research on economic violence against Filipino migrant/immigrant women. But as we dug deeper into the lives and experiences of these women, we began to realize that there is far more to the violence of 'de-skilling' and other forms of social and economic violence than we initially realized. This type of violence stretches all the way from the home country of these women to the homes of their employers in Canada.

Right from the start, the project was limited by a research grant which allowed for only a single paid researcher to work for six months. The scope of the project was just impossible for one person to complete, let alone write the first draft. It was only through the dedication and commitment of the core group members who volunteered countless unpaid hours that this project was finally completed with much satisfaction and joy. The Centre is very proud of these women.

This experience has further deepened our grasp of the extent of our marginalization as working women from the South. It has taught us to strengthen our resolve to continue to resist and struggle for our liberation.



Cecilia Diocson
Research and Education Committee
Philippine Women Centre of B.C.

February 6, 1997

Introduction

Dina's story...

Of the nine in my family, seven of us are working abroad. I left the Philippines in 1993 because of low salary, the calamities, and I was thinking for the future of my children.

I am a graduate of Bachelor of Science in Nursing, but at the time, the salary of the nurse was only P3000 (\$150 Cdn) and then for the small hospitals, it was only P500 (\$25)! I worked for two months in a hospital and I was paid only P1000 (\$50).

My husband worked in a fish pond. He didn't want me to go abroad. So I conditioned his mind. I worked in Manila for two months before leaving to work abroad in Italy, so that it won't be too difficult for my kids to have a sudden separation. After the two months I asked my husband if they could survive without me. He said, "No! It was very hard even though it was only two months! How much more for two years?" But I still left. I told them not to cry because this was for their future. I left my children in the care of a relative.

I went to Italy through direct hiring, but you know, the processing of the papers took so long that my employer didn't wait for me! So when I arrived there I was jobless. I stayed with my sister. My sister noticed I was upset because whenever I saw an airplane, I was always wishing that I was on it going home. I really felt homesick. My mind was still in the Philippines with my kids.

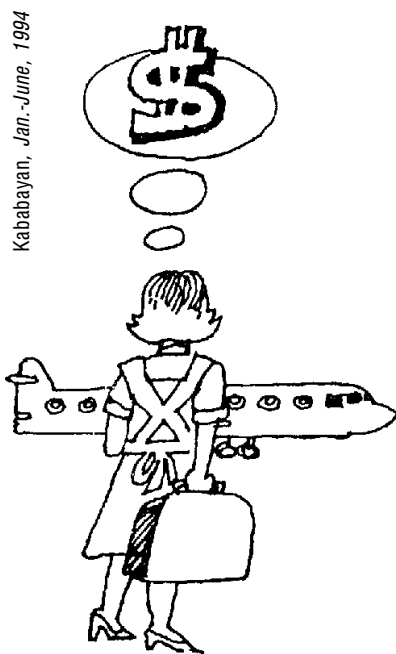
I was able to find an employer in Italy. The husband and wife were both doctors. I worked there for six months in a double job — as a

secretary and nanny. If there was a patient buzzing, I had to answer the call and then run again to the kitchen! I told them I want to leave. I was crying, I said I could not handle it. I really could not stand the attitude of their child. He was really a spoiled brat. He was really bad. Sometimes he would hold a knife in front of me and sharpen it. He swore at me and used bad words. The nanny that replaced me only stayed there for one month. They were wondering why I stayed longer. I said I have a family. I was only thinking of my children and if I left I would be jobless again.

Through a referral I found another employer. I looked after two children — two and five years old — the same ages as my own kids. They were so attached to me. I treated them as if they were my own children. I poured all my homesickness for my own kids to them. I said to myself that I won't look after kids again because it hurts too much. I tried to keep busy and join groups. My salary was 10,000 Lira (\$700) the minimum wage.

My worst experience was here in Canada. I came because my sister-in-law direct hired me. I went directly to their house after I arrived here. I worked as a nanny for their four kids. I did all the work — cleaning, cooking and laundry. For me, it was okay to stay and work without pay if I didn't have a family to support, but I did! My sister in Hawaii was sending me some money. I worked for them for six months. They only paid me \$300 [for the entire six months] and then I paid \$217 for my medical fee. So you see how much was left of the \$300!

I found my current employer through a



friend. My salary now is \$850 and I look after two teenagers. My sister-in-law still wants me to work for them on Saturdays and Sundays even just to iron their clothes. I said, I thought this was Canada and that I would be free? They really wanted to exploit me.

It makes me sad to think that I only worked as a nurse for two months! I brought all my medical books with me when I went to Italy so that I would not forget my skills, but it is really hard to accept that type of work. I really want to practice my nursing! But first I will sponsor my family. They are my priority. But my salary here is so little and I have to send money to the Philippines, plus the expenses here are so great. I really want to take a refresher course, but I know it will be hard when my family arrives because we will need to have double or triple jobs.

My children are now five and eight years old. I've spent so much money on long distance calls! My feeling right now? I am scared. I don't know if my kids will still accept me because of the long separation. I am like a stranger to them. They only know me from pictures. I can feel the gap between us developing.

Sometimes my employer's visitor asks me how I can bear to have left my children. I just say, "I am still alive and kicking." But you know, if you are inside the room alone...deep inside...if you don't know how to handle it, you will be crazy! That's happening to some of our



fellow migrant workers. So I must be psychologically and emotionally strong and remember I am doing this for the future of my kids. But sometimes this is not enough. I also need the support of other women. I might be strong alone, but together we are even stronger!

Dina continues to work as a domestic worker. Her story is like that of thousands of Filipino domestic workers who have entered Canada to clean the homes and care for the children of "middle and upper-class" Canadian families under the government's "Live-in Caregiver Programme." Her story is that of a "de-skilled" immigrant and working woman who was drawn to Canada by promises of a "better" life. But once in Canada she found that she had been deceived — pushed to the extreme margins of Canadian society. Trapped in an exploitative and oppressive global economic system, these women will do anything in order to survive even if it means enduring the slave-like and inhumane conditions of chronic poverty. This desperation is expressed in Filipino culture as *kapit sa patalim* or "holding on to the knife's edge."

Why are these women trapped in low-paying domestic work when they are trained and skilled as nurses, teachers and midwives? What are the destructive personal and economic impacts of chronic “de-skilling” (or the systematic and forced removal of skills Dina describes)? How do these women resist and struggle to change the system which de-skills them?

These urgent questions must be explored. Usually the issue of violence against women has primarily focused on the personal forms of violence women face through physical and verbal abuse. Although this type of violence is often tied to issues of patriarchal structures in society,

analysis tends to focus around gender politics. While undoubtedly physical violence against women is a serious problem in our society, Dina’s story illustrates the necessity of exposing the social and economic forms of violence that Filipino women in Canada experience every day. Social and economic violence (such as the chronic poverty of de-skilling) perpetuated by the system upon women makes them more vulnerable to physical and other forms of violence. Social and economic violence against women may be even more threatening and all-pervasive than physical forms — raising critical questions about the very essence, justness and humanity of Canadian and global society.

Creating the conditions: Community organizing at the Philippine Women Centre

Drawing on their personal experiences of socio-economic violence, a group of Filipino domestic workers who are members of the Philippine Women Centre (PWC) conceptualized and implemented this research project. Called “Economic Violence Against Filipino Migrant/Immigrant Women,” (or the VAW project) it was conducted from January to November 1996. Project grants were received from Status of Women Canada and the Feminist Research Education Development and Action Centre (FREDA).



Community grassroots organizing at the Philippine Women Centre has been ongoing since 1986. With more than ten years of experience, the PWC has successfully built and sustained a community of strong and empowered Filipino women — despite the extreme and complex marginalization they face because of their class, race and gender. Precisely because of this context of ongoing community organizing, the conditions were created for the project to emerge and flourish. Consciously the project was never separated from the Centre’s overall organizing work.

The PWC was conceptualized in 1986 by a group of Filipino Canadians connected with the B.C. Committee for Human Rights in the Philippines (“BCCHRP”). The group was organizing in the Vancouver area to gain a deeper understanding of the Filipino community, particularly about the situation of the increasing number of Filipino domestic workers whose presence they saw as an urgent human rights issue. The group believed that the migration of these Filipino domestic workers in Canada had its roots in the political and economic crisis in their

country of origin and also in their “receiving” country. They recognized the need to study, organize and act on the issue and deepen the understanding of women’s struggles in the Philippines, Canada and the world.

Through the efforts of six Filipino women, the PWC was formally launched in February 1990 and officially registered as a non-profit society in January 1991. Its vision was that of an empowered community of PWC members who share:

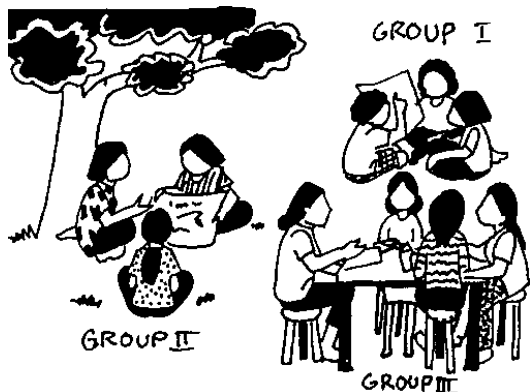
- a common interest in the issues and problems relating to their reality as marginalized women in Canada;
- a common desire to preserve and increase awareness of their shared historical, political and cultural roots in a multi-racial society; and
- a common willingness to uphold the principles of human rights and freedom for all Filipino women, wherever they may be.



Visioning: empowerment through participatory approaches

In sum, the PWC aimed to empower Filipino women to understand the economic roots of their challenges as immigrants, women of colour, and low-income earners, and to collectively assert their struggle for their rights and welfare.

A research process based on our principles: What is Participatory Action Research?



Halinat Magsanay mga Kabaro: Modyul sa Pagsasanay ng mga Tagapagsanay, CWR, 1994

Educating, organizing and mobilizing the Filipino migrant workers has been the particular focus of the PWC throughout its operations. This is in recognition of their extreme exploitation and oppression and, consequently, their great potential for leading collective action and further organizing efforts. Through informal discussions, collective living, social activities and formal education sessions, the PWC has gained a rich and deep understanding of the situation, experiences and needs of these women. Working towards empowerment through participatory approaches, the PWC continues to fulfill its vision of a strong and empowered community of women of colour.

Carrying out educating and organizing work with marginalized women, the PWC recognizes that the methods, style and process of this work must also be based on principles of openness and participation towards collective empowerment. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) model was chosen by the PWC to carry out this project. The PAR model was developed in the Philippines and in Latin America using popular education and community organizing methods.

Generally, PAR is:

- empowering
- participatory
- feminist

It is a process which allows marginalized women the opportunity to collectively share, understand and analyze their situations through telling their own stories. Unlike traditional research projects, there is no single researcher who keeps herself at a distance from the subjects of the research, simply collecting information and then writing it in a report. The collective spirit of sharing and openness is emphasized between the participants *and* the researchers.

The PAR model also recognizes and maximizes the women's vibrant culture. The use of Tagalog was encouraged. Skits, singing and dancing also helped to express Filipino culture and reinforce connections to the homeland.

PAR is also feminist in the sense that it helps women gain a deeper understanding of the socio-economic roots of their "disadvantaged position" in their community and encourages them to change their common situation and the structures which create it.



Halinat Magsanay mga Kabaro: Modyul sa Pagsasanay ng mga Tagapagsanay, CWR, 1994

The PAR model is a continuing process of developing an understanding and analysis of women's situation.

It is a cycle of:

- analysis
- reflection
- action toward the strengthening of women's grassroots organizations.

Step 1: Firming up the research team and objectives

The development of the project concept and proposal (like all PWC projects), was carried out in a collective manner. Discussions about the need for a project dealing with social and economic violence against women occurred during gatherings held at the Centre on weekends. (Weekends are the only time when domestic workers have their days off.) A core group of 12 volunteers was formed, made up of PWC members and the coordinating collective.

photo by Ted Alcuitas



Informal story-telling

The core group was given three main responsibilities:

- 1) developing a research framework;
- 2) overall coordination; and
- 3) planning and implementing the project.

Their first tasks included hiring a researcher for the project and giving her an orientation to the PWC and the project. The VAW project was placed within the context of the PWC's work and its analysis and belief in empowering women to understand, analyze and take action to change their situations.

Through discussions, the core group set the

objectives for the research. These were:

- 1) To gather stories of women to show the realities of their lives;
- 2) To raise the women's understanding of their exploitative situations;
- 3) To make the Filipino community aware of the issues regarding the roots of migration from the Philippines and the plight of Filipino migrant workers;
- 4) To collectively take action to change their situations, and,
- 5) To recommend to the home country and the

Canadian government measures to improve the situation of marginalized women.

Step 2: Training of research team and pre-testing of methods

Many of the women were already familiar with the PAR

methods used in previous projects and were comfortable sharing their experiences (a practice encouraged at the PWC). The women had acquired different levels of facilitation skills which they had learned through practice at the PWC. All were encouraged to facilitate.

Once the research objectives and basic methodology were set, the core group agreed that the focus group method of informal story-telling would be an effective way for women to collectively share their experiences, analyze, reflect and take action.

The focus groups followed a list of guide questions which began with personal background

of the participants and moved to sharing their experiences of being migrant workers in Canada. [For focus group question guide, see Appendix.]

The focus group guide was first pre-tested by the core group in one full day of focus groups at the PWC. Members of the core group volunteered to facilitate the discussions which were recorded and documented. From the pre-test, areas were noted where more questions needed to be asked

to encourage further discussion and the question guide was subsequently refined.

Step 3: Data gathering

The three main methods of data-gathering were:

1. Focus group discussions;
2. Individual interviews; and
3. Questionnaire distribution.



Kalagin ang ating Tanikala, CWR, 1994

Focus groups

Eight focus groups were held over a period of two months. Most were held at the PWC while a few were held in women's homes or other public meeting places. Members of the core group volunteered to facilitate the discussions. The atmosphere of the focus groups was warm and informal. A sense of trust and understanding developed among the participants about the need and purpose for the research.

The focus group sessions often lasted from three to five hours. Many common experiences and feelings were shared by participants about their experiences of emigrating from the Philippines to work abroad.

Interviews

Personal interviews were also carried out with individuals who could not attend focus group sessions. The interviews followed the same question guide used in the focus groups as it was found to be effective in drawing out experiences and encouraging bonding between the researcher and participant. The disadvantage to individual interviews was the lack of exchange found in the focus groups.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed by the core group and used to gather biographical data on the participants and to act as a first step in gathering information about the kinds of issues women were facing.

Step 4: Data processing, analysis and validation

The longer and more difficult, yet ultimately fulfilling, aspect of the project was the processing of the vast amount of data that came from the research. All the focus groups and interviews were first transcribed, then translated from Tagalog to English. The complete collection of focus group and interview stories well exceeds 500 pages. The research team transcribed, typed and translated the material over a period of several months.

The analysis and validation process was carried out by the core group. They reviewed the research outcomes — reading through all the transcribed focus groups and interviews — to gain

a sense of the wealth and vitality of the women's stories and also to include any additional thoughts or experiences. This process was done by dividing the material between small groups and individuals. The women then read through and began to categorize the material into main issues and broad headings.

Once this was done, several more workshops were held to reflect on and analyze the data gathered, and come up with actions for change and recommendations. The summary of findings from numerous focus groups, interviews and workshops are contained in this report.

Target participants and outreach

The main target population of the research consisted of Filipino women from marginalized socio-economic levels, particularly domestic

workers and other immigrants. Women from marginalized socio-economic levels from other immigrant communities were also targeted for participation.

The core group did the outreach for the focus groups mainly by word-of-mouth. Most of the participants are part of the large network of women connected to the PWC. Outreach was also done through various other organizations and agencies such as Immigrant Services Society, West Coast Domestic Workers Association, Multicultural Family Support Services Society, Committee for Domestic Workers and Caregivers Rights, Filipino Women Support Group at Broadway Church and Nuestra Voz — a Guatemalan women's group. Posters and the *Centre Update* (the PWC's newsletter) also advertised for participants.

Profile of participants

The total number of participants was 56. The research was based on stories gathered from 52 Filipino women, 2 Filipino men, and 2 Guatemalan women. Initial data gathering was carried out in Spring 1996.

Thirty of the participants were interviewed in small focus group discussions facilitated by members of the core group for the project. The rest of the participants were interviewed individually.

The following data highlight aspects of the demographic profiles of the participants.

Age

The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 56 years, with the majority (75 percent) being between 25 to 39. Considering that most migrant workers work for several years in other countries like Singapore before coming to Canada, the average age of these women at the time they left the Philippines would be even younger.

Marital status

The majority of the women (56 percent) were single, fewer were married (30 percent), separated or widowed (14 percent).

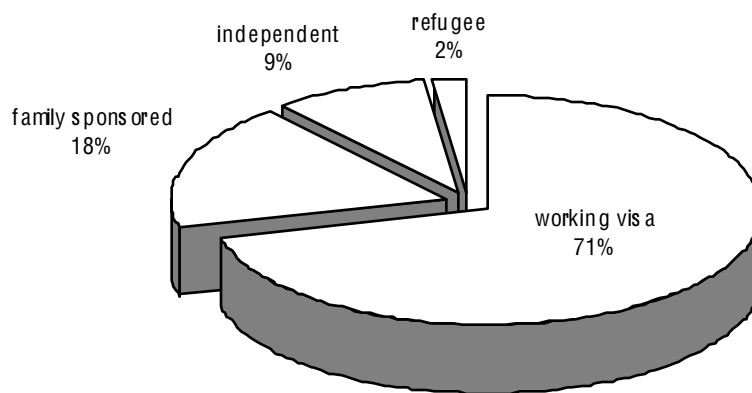
Immigrant status

Most of the women (71 percent) came to Canada on working visas as domestic workers. Eighteen percent came through family sponsorship, while 9 percent came as independent immigrants. Two percent came as refugees. Of those who came on working visas, 43 percent were directly hired by their employers, while 57 percent went through a placement or recruitment agency.

Number of years in Canada

The majority of the women (44 percent) were recent arrivals to Canada (coming within the last 2 to 4 years). This reflects the dramatic increase in the number of Filipino women entering as domestic workers under the LCP, as well as the membership of the Centre. (Most women, after completing their 2 years as live-in caregivers, take on several jobs and have less time for volunteering.) A small number (4 percent) of the participants had been in Canada for less than 1 year, and 20 percent of the participants for less than 2 years. Twenty-one percent arrived 5 to 9 years ago and 11 percent 10 to 20 years ago.

Chart 1 — Profile of respondents: Status upon entry into Canada



Family background

Most of the respondents came from big families. Ten percent had more than ten siblings, 40 percent had seven to nine siblings in the family, 42 percent had four to six siblings.

Place of Origin

Most of the participants came from rural areas (71 percent), with fewer (29 percent) coming from urban areas of the Philippines.

Chart 2 — Profile of respondents: Number of years in Canada

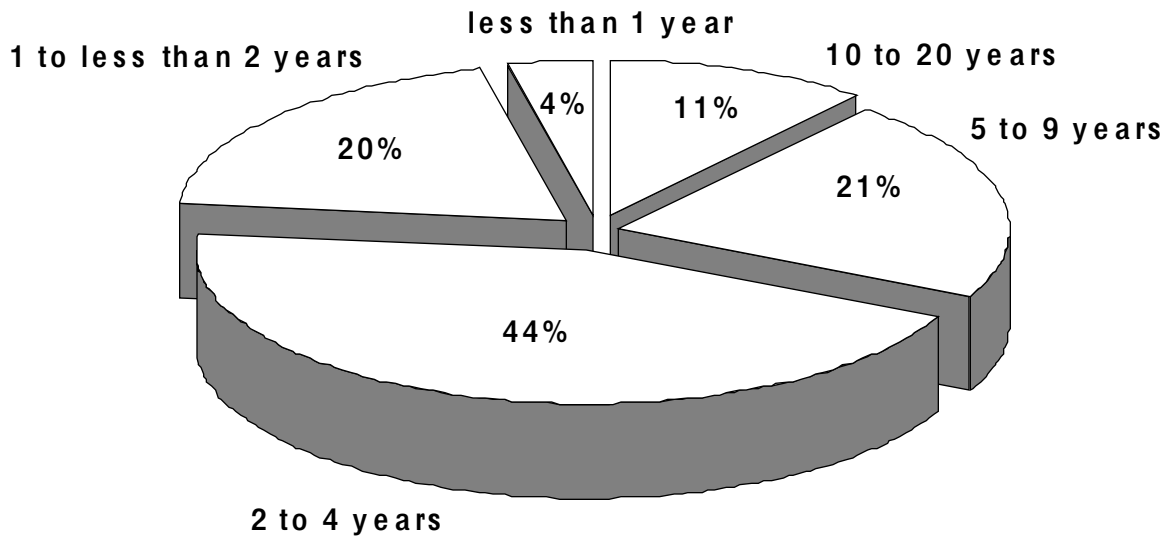
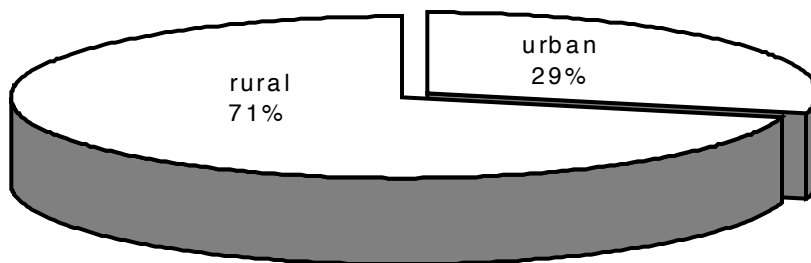


Chart 3 — Profile of respondents: Place of origin



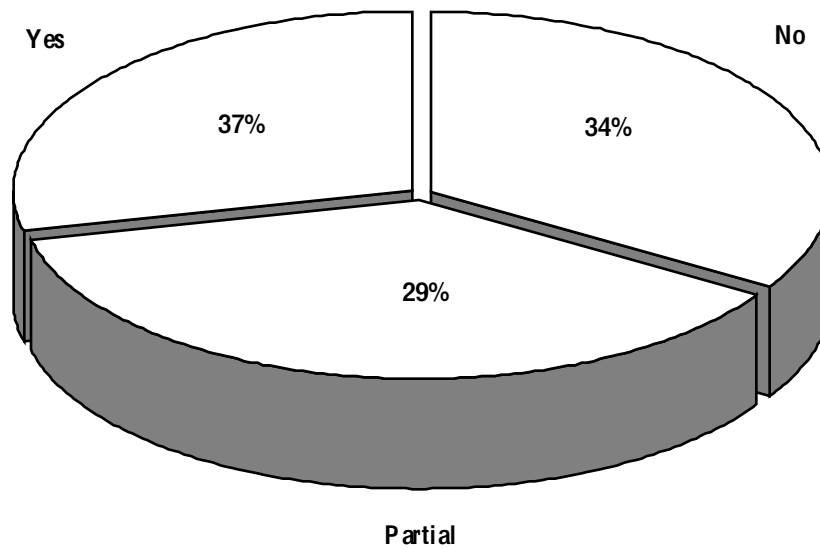
Percentage of migrant workers who are “breadwinners”

An important characteristic of the domestic workers who participated in the project is that the majority (37 percent) were the principal breadwinners in their families. Thirty-four percent were not the principal breadwinners, and 29 percent were partial breadwinners. This reflects the feminization of Filipino migrant labour.

Pattern of migration

Less than half (46 percent) came directly from the Philippines to Canada. A larger number (53 percent) had passed through at least another country as migrant workers, many from Singapore and Hong Kong. More than 10 percent had gone to Europe, the Middle East and other Asian countries.

Chart 4 — Profile of respondents: Percentage of migrant workers who are principal breadwinners



Educational and professional background

The data on the participants' educational and professional background are striking. The majority of the participants (75 percent) had obtained Bachelor's degrees in the Philippines (and in Latin America), while some had Master's or Doctoral degrees (7 percent). Several (14 percent) had taken "undergraduate" (different from Bachelor's degree courses in the Philippines) or vocational training, and a few (4 percent) had obtained solely high school education.

Types of degrees held:

Master's or Doctoral: (7 percent)

- Medicine, Education, Economics.

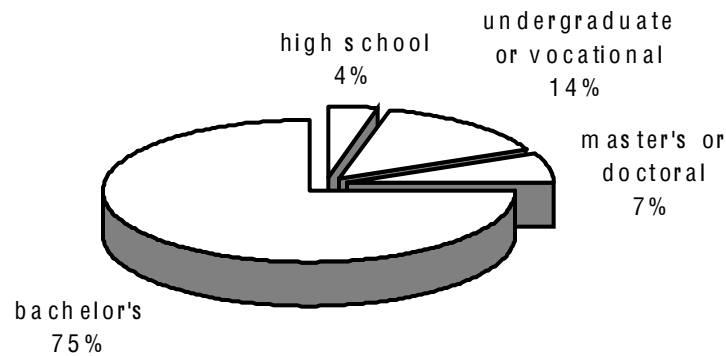
Bachelor's: (75 percent)

- Midwifery, Education, Business, Nursing, Psychology, Mass Communication, Social Work, Architecture, Marine Biology, Biology, Agriculture, Fine Arts, Chemistry.

Undergraduate or Vocational: (14 percent)

- Accounting, Education, Agriculture, Journalism.
- Cosmetology, Medical Secretary, Nursing Aide, Secretarial.

Chart 5 — Profile of respondents: Educational background



Migration of Filipino women to Canada: The global and historical context

The violence Filipino domestic workers and immigrant women in Canada face takes on many forms and begins long before the women come to Canada. To understand the issue of the social and economic violence against these women, it is important to place their migration to Canada in a global and historical context.

While migration has existed since the beginning of human society, migration has taken a different meaning because of its global scope and significance. Every place in the world has been impacted by the movement of people. The underlying cause of worldwide migration is the globalization of capital and capital's endless search for profit. Through its continuous expansion, international capital distorts the patterns of economic development of countries, forcing people to "migrate" in order to survive. This is especially true for peoples from the underdeveloped countries of the South suffering under colonialism and neo-colonialism. When we speak of labour migration, it is really about the movement of people from the underdeveloped countries of the South to the "developed" countries of the North.

Root causes of migration from the Philippines

Filipinos have been leaving their country to work abroad since the turn of the twentieth

century when American contractors hired seasonal labourers for construction. During the period of American colonial rule, thousands of Filipino agricultural workers were recruited to work on Hawaiian plantations and fruit farms in California.¹



Balis newsletter, vol. 5, No. 1, June 1994

Today, the Philippines is the number one exporter of labour in the world, with 7 million Filipino migrant workers in over 168 countries. It is estimated that 2000 Filipinos leave the Philippines every day to work abroad.² Collectively, this exported Filipino labour pumps an average of \$5 to \$7 billion U.S. into the Philippine economy every year.

The root causes of Filipino migration lie in the semi-colonial and semi-feudal character of Philippine society. This state of affairs is caused by the continuing domination of U.S. imperialism and domestic feudalism over Philippine society. This means that the country remains agriculturally backward and without basic industries, leaving the

Philippines in a forced state of underdevelopment and extreme poverty.

Eighty percent of the population owns less than 20 percent of the country's resources, while 20 percent of the population owns 80 percent of the country's resources. Seventy-six percent of the population lives below the poverty line.³ Unemployment and poverty are rampant. The unemployment rate in 1994 was 8.4 percent while the underemployment rate (of those who are working part-time) was 20.9 percent. Many sources indicate that these figures underestimate the actual rates, which may be as high as 40 percent. The daily minimum wage in the Philippines is 50 percent lower than the daily cost of living.⁴

Ted: It was a hopeless situation in Manila. Even if we work so hard, our one month's salary is not even enough for a week's supply of milk! We could not survive with the situation.

This state of underdevelopment is compounded by a highly commercialized education system that continues to create a pool of highly educated and skilled workers that cannot be absorbed locally. Instead, they are geared for the export market and the needs of transnational corporations. Furthermore, this education system fosters the colonial mentality that "West is best,"

thus cultivating the belief that the U.S. is "paradise on earth."⁵

The migration of Filipino labour has been sanctioned by official Philippine government policy. Known as the Labour Export Policy (LEP), this government scheme of systematically exporting labour is part of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed by the IMF/World Bank as a condition for Philippine borrowing from these financial institutions. The LEP seeks to alleviate continuing problems of massive unemployment, trade deficits, foreign debt and social unrest.

First adopted by the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s, labour export remains a key part of the current U.S.-Ramos regime's so-called "development" plan known as "Philippines 2000." The main attractions are a highly educated, highly skilled and cheap exported labour force. This, according to the Philippine government, makes Filipino workers competitive in the global capitalist market.

Working abroad becomes the only "choice" when faced with the economic crisis of the Philippines. Sixty five percent of the Filipino migrant workers are young women, giving credence to a trend known as "feminization of migration." The need for women workers is rooted in the shift from manufacturing to service sector jobs and the increased participation of women in the work force of industrialized countries, resulting in the need for workers (most often women) to do domestic labour.⁶ Women in particular are recruited to work in urban areas in

Batis newsletter, vol. 5, No. 1, June 1994



transnational factories or are exported as cheap labour and trafficked globally as domestic workers, mail-order brides, or prostitutes.

Rose: My husband was a seaman at the time. I had a sister who worked in Canada as a nanny and she gave me an offer. So I said, sure, why not? What am I doing here? Despite having a farm there you have to have side-line work like selling Tupperware. If the rain wipes the farm out — that's it for us! We depend on our salaries, so I have to work outside of the country. So, I grabbed the opportunity.

History of Canada's immigration policy

The emergence of capitalism and the growth and expansion of colonial powers into North America and other parts of the world is the context for immigration to Canada today. Except for the First Nations people, Canada is a country populated by immigrants.

While French colonists began to settle and exploit New France in the early 17th century, British colonists during the Industrial Revolution sought to claim the land and began clearing it for agricultural purposes. Because of the settlement needs before the late 19th century, there were basically no systematic immigration policies.⁷

Immigration to Canada is generally broken down into five phases:

- 1 — French era
- 2 — British era
- 3 — French, German-speaking, Slavic and Scandinavian groups
- 4 — Post WWI: increasing restrictions based on arbitrary and racist factors
- 5 — Post WWII: characterized by a greater number and increased diversity.

The vast majority of immigrants were European-born although through the liberalization of immigration policies during the 60s and particularly the 70s, “European countries have been progressively and rapidly de-emphasized as sources for immigrants to Canada.”⁸

Correspondingly the number of people of colour from the South rose. But the number of people of colour from the South did not surpass the number of European immigrants until 1976.

The immigration of people of colour to Canada has always been regulated and influenced by the historical development of Canada as a capitalist country and therefore, its labour needs. The class and racial bias of the history of Canada can be clearly shown through its immigration policies. Poor people and people of colour were only allowed in to fill Canada's need for cheap labour — Chinese labourers to build the railway; eastern and central European farmers to settle and develop agricultural land in the West; and more recently, women from the South to do domestic work.

But while Canada has encouraged immigration to fulfill its own labour needs, it tightens immigration in times of economic crisis and to maintain an “ethnic balance,” or the predominance of the white status quo. The examples of Black slaves in the 17th century; the Chinese head tax of \$500 in 1903; the limits set on Japanese immigrants in the late 30s and 40s; and the implementation of “continuous passage” to exclude the South Asian people in the early 20th century are clear examples of how Canada has had in the 1900s a “closed door” policy for people of colour.⁹

The Filipino community in Canada

Filipinos are part of the later wave of migration to Canada which is dominated by people of colour from the underdeveloped countries of the South. In fact, Filipinos are

relative newcomers to Canada, first entering the country in the mid-1960s. The quick growth in the numbers of Filipinos is striking.

Between 1968 and 1973, the Philippines contributed 23,892 immigrants; by 1976 immigrants from that source were arriving at a rate of about 6,000 a year (with the Philippines ranking seventh).¹⁰ The Philippines ranked third as a source for immigrants to Canada in 1995, with 15,143 immigrants from all immigrant classes entering that year.¹¹

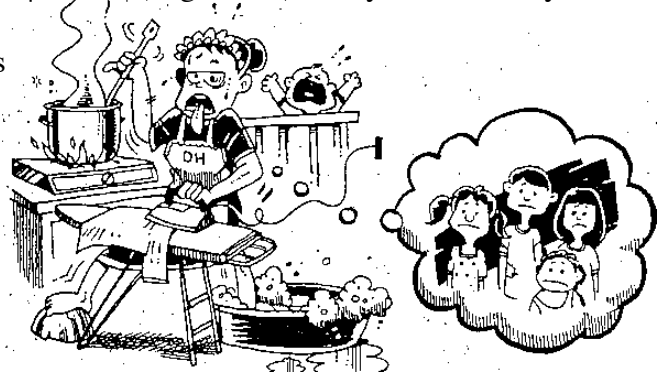
The pattern of Filipino migration to Canada can be roughly divided into three periods or “waves.”¹²

- **1960s to early 1970s:** Filipino immigrants from the first wave were mostly professionals (doctors, nurses, medical technologists, teachers, etc.) and skilled workers (garment workers, etc.). These Filipinos came when Canada’s economy was growing, to fill the labour need.
- **The 1970s:** As the political and economic crisis in the Philippines intensified with the declaration of martial law in 1972, Filipinos continued to enter Canada as professionals. With the addition of the “family reunification” category under Canada’s immigration policy, there were also many family members sponsored by the first wave of immigrants.
- **The late 1970s to the present:** The striking growth of the migration of Filipina domestic workers marks this last wave. While independent and sponsored immigrants continue to enter Canada, Canada’s need for the cheap labour of domestic workers is dominant.

The Filipino community can be classified into two groups: **immigrants** (residents and citizens of host countries who immigrated to Canada); and **migrants** (migrant workers; the undocumented; students; professionals or petty bureaucrats sent to study or train abroad; exiles; government officials; and others on temporary residence

abroad). These 200,000 Filipinos are highly urbanized — concentrated in Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg and other large Canadian cities.¹³

It is important to note that most statistical immigrant information profiling the Filipino immigrant community in Canada only



IBON, “Sapped!”, Freedom from Debt Coalition, 1993. includes those with landed-immigrant status (whether or not they are currently Canadian citizens) born in the Philippines. These data therefore, do not include Canadian-born children of immigrants, domestic workers that come under the LCP, or the undocumented. These Filipino immigrants are in their prime productive years (i.e., between 25 to 48 years old) and are highly educated.¹⁴ In fact, immigrants from the Philippines are more likely than all immigrants and people born in Canada to have a university degree, illustrating the continuous “brain drain” from the Philippines. The training and education of Filipino immigrants is subsidized by the Philippines, but is used to serve Canada’s labour needs.

But while Filipino immigrants are among the most highly educated of all immigrants to Canada, their incomes are lower than those of people in other groups. The average income of Filipino immigrants (not including domestic workers) is \$21,700, compared with \$23,700 for those Canadian-born.¹⁵

History of foreign domestic workers in Canada

Foreign domestic workers have been recruited to Canada since the 1880s. Domestic workers during this early period were poor women recruited from Britain and other European countries.

The presence of foreign domestic workers at this time was rooted in the economic and settlement needs of Britain and Canada.

The benefit to Canada was two-fold. Immigration aided settlement of the country (thereby protecting the west from American annexation), and provided a ready supply of workers for unpleasant jobs that native-born Canadians didn't want.¹⁶

Overpopulation, high unemployment rates and severe poverty threatened the stability of British society during this period, and it is possible that Britain had even more to gain than Canada from the relocation of large numbers of people.¹⁷

Domestic work was seen as having a very low social status. Most women did not stay in domestic work if they could find other work. Many of the exploitative conditions that women faced then are continuing today.

Because of the placement of domestic work within the private sphere rather than the public sphere, it has no monetary value. Thus, in a capitalist society it is given low value and equally low wages and the women who perform the work are given low social status.

The policy of importing domestic workers has always been the result of women in industrialized countries of the North moving into the work force. When women in industrialized countries leave the home to work, hiring a nanny becomes an affordable option for most middle and upper class families.

It will always be easier for Canadian women to foist the housework on a domestic worker than to persuade men to do their share.¹⁸

The first immigration policies to target domestic workers from countries of the South were the agreements between Canada, Jamaica



Sharing our experiences

and Barbados, called the “Caribbean Domestic Scheme.” The women entered as landed immigrants and were required to do live-in work for one year.

*The advent of the Caribbean Domestic Scheme also marked the gradual transition from a predominantly white labour pool in domestic service to one in which the majority were women of colour. The degraded status of domestic work and of non-whites proved mutually reinforcing as women of colour became identified with the occupation.*¹⁹

The scheme ended in the late 1960s and was followed by “relatively open migration” until 1973 when the temporary visa system was introduced. This change basically turned foreign domestics into a “class of disposable migrant labourers.”²⁰

Lobbying by domestic workers’ rights organizations against the discriminatory and

exploitative nature of the programme led to the development of a more regulated federal immigration programme called the Foreign Domestic Movement (FDM) in 1981. After two years of live-in work and proof of some skills upgrading, the domestic worker could apply for landed immigrant status. However, to qualify for the programme, women had to have one year of working experience as a domestic, and certification of completing a domestic worker training course at a recognized school.

With the FDM there was, “a dramatic rise in Filipina entrants.”²¹

In 1991, the Live-in Caregiver Programme (LCP) was implemented. The most significant change from the FDM were the requirements for the programme. The minimum criteria for status as a landed immigrant is the completion of the two-years of live-in work. This is the programme that exists today and which continues to bring in thousands of Filipino domestics to Canada every year.

Liza's story

I came here in October 1993 because I was unable to find a permanent job in the Philippines. My job then was contractual, but the contract that I signed was not as a nursing staff. "Janitorial services" was stated on it. Of course I was disappointed, but it was just for experience. So I didn't mind.

My job offer in Canada was as a "live-in caregiver." In my mind, a live-in caregiver is some kind of a nurse, which was related to my [university] course. I thought it was an opportunity for me to come to Canada. One reason why I took up Nursing is that it is one of the courses that can ensure my leaving the country. I wanted to go to the States.

I was disappointed because I thought a live-in caregiver was a private nurse. I didn't know that it meant being a maid! I felt so low. My brother-in-law's brother said I am so high class. If only I had known what it meant when I was in the process of applying, I would have processed it and lowered my expectations. Instead, I was very disappointed.

I haven't practiced my profession here because there are restrictions. I did volunteer work instead. But I was only feeding old people, talking with them, giving them manicures and playing games. Establishing rapport is related to nursing, but my practice was limited. I looked for volunteer work where I could practice my skills. But I could not find one because they still have requirements -- even for volunteer work!

Carmen: In the process maybe you already forgot what you learned?

Liza: Of course. Sometimes I hear familiar words but I can't remember anymore what they mean. But there's a little bit left in my mind. What I am doing is buying medical books in garage sales. At least I can retain the medical terminologies. That is my pastime — reading. I also bought a medical dictionary. Every night I've been reading it so that my knowledge will be refreshed.

Carmen: Are you planning to study or do upgrade courses?

Liza: Even in my first year I already wanted to process my nursing registration. I even asked if I could study. I wanted to do upgrading not only in English, also in the field of Nursing. But there are restrictions. I am not qualified. Plus the payment. I can't afford it. I have to pay \$750 per month and the course will run for five months. My net salary is only \$700 so it is really hard to upgrade here.

Carmen: What is your opinion on the mandatory live-in requirement [of Canada Immigration's Live-In Caregiver Program]?

Liza: Lots! You lose your skills...you're developing backward skills. No update — no development. Our knowledge regresses because of so many restrictions. You are not allowed to study a degree. You're not allowed to work on different types of work. You want to study but your income is not enough for your tuition.

My first authorization permit said, "Restricted of study." My second authorization permit says, "Allowed for part-time study." So I feel happy. I started applying, but I am not allowed to study academic credit courses. So we have an opportunity to study, but you remain stagnant. They just give you a little bit so that you will feel better.

I didn't know that I couldn't practice my profession, because what was in my mind is that the live-in caregiver is a private nurse. I wasn't aware that "live-in caregiver" is the term that is used here for "nanny." I didn't even know the meaning of "nanny" before. There was one woman in the embassy. I asked her about her job and she said she was a "nanny." I said, "Mine is live-in caregiver." I didn't know that it is the same. It makes me laugh when I remember it!

What is de-skilling?

- skilled — “Having acquired mastery of or skill in something (as a technique or trade).”
- de — (prefix) “Do opposite of, remove from...”²²

Although the term “de-skilled” is not commonly used, it refers to the systematic process of removing the mastery of a skill or trade from a person. While any knowledge is lost without practice, (like forgetting one’s first language), de-skilling also implies a forced removal or imposed loss of skills.

Such is the experience of millions of highly-educated Filipinos who cannot be absorbed into the Philippine economy. They are forced to work abroad as domestic workers, seafarers, factory workers, janitors, entertainers and in other low-paid positions. In Canada, immigrants from the South arrive finding their foreign education worthless, forcing them to return to school (if they can afford it) or take on low-paying service sector jobs.

The physical nature of this kind of work (what many women call, “the three D’s: dirty, difficult and dangerous”) also serves as a way of de-skilling Filipinos. The clearest example of this is found in the following story:

Jane: If you don’t practise your profession there’s an effect. Your brain

gets rusty. Sometimes, when you write, your hands are very stiff. That’s the truth. After a while, your hands are lacking practice because you’re doing another job daily.

Because the economy cannot absorb these

skilled workers, it forces them into lower-paid physical labour which most are not used to. This leaves the women disoriented and forces them to adapt and re-orient themselves even before they leave the Philippines.

Beth: (Doctor in the Philippines, Master’s from the University of the Philippines.)

When we decided to come here, we re-oriented our mind and decided that whatever professional egos we have there will remain there.

This is a totally different place. Whatever crown we had there we were mature enough to realize we are in a new place and we accepted the situation.

Elsie: I didn’t expect that the work in Hong Kong would be so hard. I didn’t know how to clean. I didn’t know how to operate the vacuum. I told my employer that I didn’t know how to operate the vacuum and I didn’t know how to cook. So she asked me what did I do in the Philippines? I told her that I was a student.

Marela: (Teacher in the Philippines.) The first work I got over here lasted for two weeks. I was a baker. Of course, I was totally confused. I didn’t know how to do it.



Carmen: Did you have any background as a baker?

Marela: Of course none. My problem really was that I forgot the muffins all the time. So I burned some and I was so embarrassed and I also had tendonitis. My hand really swelled up and I was taking medication. Maybe that was why I was also forgetful because of taking medication to reduce the swelling in my hands. And I didn't realize it made me drowsy.

...I passed the interview. She said I have the aptitude. Just that I got confused some days. They didn't fire me. I left on my own — before I got fired. (laughter) I burned myself. I forgot the muffins.

De-skilling becomes a chronic cycle since most women cannot leave domestic work even after the two-year live-in requirement. The low-wage work results in a financial burden since most women continue to pay off debts incurred from immigrating from the Philippines and sending money home to their families. This cycle of poverty, debt and de-skilling keeps the women in perpetual bondage.

Because the LCP also restricts domestics from studying academic or vocational courses during their two-years of live-in work and because many do not have

enough money or time to study, their de-skilling is heightened.

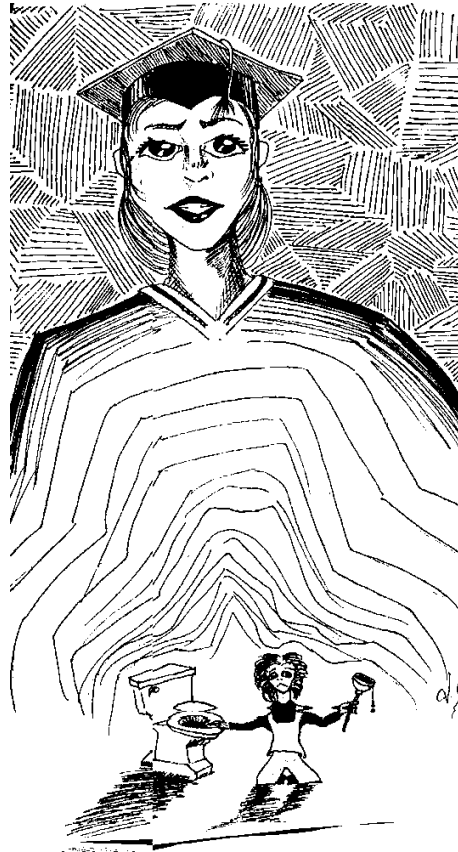
Judith: Our expectation was that when we came to Canada we can study. That was how we understood it. We can study immediately. We can upgrade. We didn't realize that we have to wait for two years. We thought that if we arrived here and worked only eight hours, then we can study at night and we could do it. We didn't realize that we can only do that after we are landed immigrants.

Liza: For the cost of the refresher course, it's so expensive — \$750 per month! It's equivalent to my net earnings. How about my requirements for expenses here and the amount I send home? How will you take care of your basic needs for five months? That's the difficulty. You may want it, but then there are a lot of hassles. A lot of obstacles.

Leaving the Philippines to work abroad, doing difficult, dirty and dangerous work, and being trapped in a cycle of debt and de-skilling leads many women to extreme desperation. They describe their situation as *kapit sa patalim*, which literally translates as, “holding on to the knife’s edge.” The term describes a state of extreme desperation where you hold on to whatever it takes to survive, even though you know that it is gradually killing you. You hold on to the “knife” as a last desperate attempt to survive.

The well-known and globally publicized stories of domestic workers Flor Contemplacion and Sarah Balabagan are clear examples of this. Flor, a domestic worker in Singapore was hanged after being accused of killing her ward. Many

graphic by Carlo Sayo



believe that she was framed. Sarah Balabagan a sixteen year old, was working as a domestic in the United Arab Emirates when she was raped by her employer. She later killed him. Working abroad as domestic workers is the only chance for survival for thousands of Filipina women and their families. They will work abroad even if it means enduring exploitative and slave-like working conditions and the destructive impact of de-skilling.

Ana: As a domestic worker, we feel that we will just accept this job because we don't have any choice. For us, it's as if they are holding us by the neck.

De-skilling is a subtle way of destroying individuals and an entire community. It has violent social and economic impact for Filipino women and their community. It manifests itself in the form of loss of skills, low self-esteem, loss of self-confidence and a feeling of inferiority. This leads to a sense of shame, social alienation and silencing. The economic results are poverty and low-wages, as well as inhumane and slave-like conditions that the women must work in. In the long-term, women are continually relegated to the domestic, health, service and other low-wage sectors. The economic pressures and years of family separation often also lead to domestic violence and family problems.

Social impact

Canadian institutions deny that the women have any skills beyond domestic work. The LCP forces them to stay in live-in domestic work and if they attempt to do any different types of work, their foreign education and skills are not recognized. Their skills, their worth and ultimately their persons become “invisible” in Canadian society — they become socially **alienated** and **isolated** and effectively **silenced** and **destroyed**. This is an essential part of the de-skilling process.

Pauline: I didn't expect them to look at me as if I don't know anything. I feel that way. They always say that I am a grade 12. But I

am a university graduate. That is a big insult. Right?



Stories and laughter: Empowerment through participatory approaches

Cora: I brought along my transcript, my diploma, my certificates in teaching. I thought I would be a tutor. Gary, the husband spoke to me. You came here Cora as a nanny. Not as a teacher. So I said, oh well, okay. I couldn't do anything. It seemed as if they poured cold water on me, because I still had initiative and interest because of the five children, but I had no chance. They did not accommodate me.

Suzy: I graduated from Communication Arts. It was more of journalism and broadcasting. I was a journal officer at the Senate. I recorded minutes of the plenary sessions. I applied as an administrative assistant in a travel agency. The vice-president told me that, “I'm sorry I cannot hire you because you are over-qualified.” So after that I degraded myself from a university graduate to just a high school graduate.

This systematic denial of skills naturally results in **low self-esteem, a lack of confidence and a feeling of inferiority** and **shame** which also comes from the low social status associated with domestic work.

Susan: After you have not worked for two years in the trade or profession that you have trained for, you begin to doubt if you still have your ability to do your previous work.

...When you fill in a resume, I can hardly think of anything to write in there. I don't know what to put in.

Liza: I feel like I'm afraid. I'm a nursing graduate from the Philippines. I passed the board and then worked in the hospital for about a year. Then I came here in Canada. Now I feel that my competency to work in the hospital is already lost. I don't have confidence that I can still manage to work in the hospital.

Ria: Yeah, at first I felt bad. I am not used to being ordered around. I felt that I was being abused and stepped down upon. (laughs) Everyone I met who were my friends have also finished Midwifery, Nursing, and Commerce — they also feel the same. That's because we're not like that in the Philippines.

Joyce: ...people just look down on you and then you work as a domestic helper...I was thinking how I would practice my profession and how I was going to survive with this kind of work?

Ana: When my employers dropped me off at the airport [in Singapore before coming to Canada] I am so emotional! I feel happy! I can't explain it. I feel like garbage that they just threw away.

Economic impact

The economic impact of de-skilling manifests itself in low-wages, slave-like and inhumane working conditions and in the women's continued

relegation to housework and other low-wage work. Compounding this, the women find their finances stretched to the limit.

i. High costs to emigrate

There are extremely high costs to immigrate for most women. After spending a vast amount on education, a domestic worker faces high costs to work abroad, which include the recruitment agency's placement fees, document processing and travel expenses.

Because the majority of Filipinos cannot afford these high costs, they have to borrow money either from relatives, an agency or from unscrupulous loan sharks to cover their air travel and processing expenses. Some loan sharks charge an interest rate as high as 20 percent which they apply daily, weekly or monthly. Many women shared that for the first years of working abroad they could not even make enough to pay off their loan. They are caught in a cycle of debt, exploitation and oppression that they cannot get out of.

Borrowing from relatives not only becomes a financial debt, but there is also the added personal debt called, *utang na loob*, which in Filipino culture is the sense of obligation or gratitude one feels towards someone who has given you a favour. Some women shared experiences of feeling forced to stay and work in exploitative conditions sometimes for free for relatives or friends because of their *utang na loob*. Some women worked for as little as \$350 for six months of work for their relatives who brought them over.

Recruitment agencies in the Philippines and Canada prey on the vulnerability and desperation of the women. These agencies are left unregulated by the Philippine or Canadian government since both governments profit from the continued presence of migrant workers in Canada.

Agencies charge exorbitant fees as high as P40,000 (\$2105 Cdn) depending on what

services are included in the placement package and which country the worker is going to. Fees may either be paid in cash or by installments taken from the worker's salary. The agencies in the Philippines and in Canada recruit women from the poorest areas of the Philippines — the rural areas — to work abroad. The length of waiting time for placement may take anywhere from two weeks to two years. Meanwhile applicants have to give up their current jobs (if they have any) in order to facilitate and follow-up their applications.

There are also illegal agencies that send women abroad as “tourists” to work. Some women even shared stories of being brought to Canada by a fake recruiting agency only to find when they arrived at the airport that no agent or job awaited them.

ii. *High costs in Canada*

Once in Canada the women cannot escape the cycle of debt and poverty. Earning a meagre minimum wage salary for difficult and dangerous work, the women also face numerous and ever-increasing charges, costs and deductions from their salaries.

Since the women are under temporary contract working in Canada, they are required to renew their **work authorization forms** every time they change employers. The rate for the renewal seems to arbitrarily rise and is currently at \$150. This is paid to the Canadian government.

Even though the live-in requirement is stipulated under the LCP, domestic workers are also required to pay their employers for their **room and board** in the house. In British Columbia the rate is set by the Employment Standards Act at a maximum of \$350 per month. The issue of the live-in situation and the problems it creates for the women is outlined further in the

Philippine Women Centre's study, “Housing Needs Assessment of Filipina Domestic Workers” and in Geraldine Pratt's paper in collaboration with the PWC, “Is This Canada? Domestic Workers' Experiences in Vancouver, B.C.”²³ Since many women find it psychologically and emotionally impossible to remain in their employers' homes for the full week and many do not eat the family's food, they must spend extra for weekend accommodation and food.

The women are required to pay **double taxes**, both to the Philippine and Canadian governments. While they recently have been eligible for programs such as Medicare and Employment Insurance, they cannot avail themselves of any social programs from the Philippines, since there are virtually none.

Sulong, Itaguyod ang

Karapatan ng mga Manggagawang Pilipino sa Labas ng Bansa, (SIKLAB) — a migrant workers' organization in Vancouver is currently undergoing a campaign to end double taxation.

There are also numerous **charges** the Philippine government forces the overseas contract workers (OCWs) to pay through the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA). One example is the recently announced Memorandum of Instruction No. 8 which imposes a yearly \$25 fee to OCWs.

If and when the women qualify for landed status, they face huge **landing fees** and other processing costs. These include the Canadian \$975 head tax. Including the fees for securing police clearance from the Philippines, Canada and any other countries worked in, a woman can



easily spend over \$2000 applying for her landed status.

In a vulnerable and isolated position, women have shared stories of falling prey to various **financial scams**, such as shady insurance agents and salespeople. Some women shared stories of paying \$2000 for dish sets and accumulating huge personal debts from credit cards.

iii. *Sending money to the Philippines*

Women shared that the main reason they migrate to work abroad is to provide a means of survival for their families in the Philippines. Women send money home to their children who are in the care of relatives, as well as pay for the school, medical or other costs of any members of the immediate or extended family.

Through their dollar remittances to the Philippines, OCWs keep the Philippine economy afloat. Migrante, an international alliance of migrant workers' organizations, estimates that

on its foreign debt (estimated at \$40.6 billion U.S. in 1995).²⁵ The money sent to family and relatives is usually spent on imported household goods.

Long-term impact

The long-term economic impact of de-skilling is the women's continued relegation to domestic, health and service-sector low-paid work. Few are ever able to leave these kinds of work even after acquiring their landed status. They are permanently entrapped.

Ana: How can I study and work at the same time? It seems that when you come here, you don't have a chance to get away from being a nanny. You can change your job and work at McDonald's or in a coffee shop.

Jane: After I got my open visa, I did house cleaning because I didn't want to be a nanny anymore. Even if my eyes were closed I already knew what to pick up. I could already memorize it. So for me, I would like to experience another type of work. But I couldn't find another job so I ended up cleaning three to four houses a day. It was very hard.

Years of family separation puts a tremendous strain on relationships with spouses and children. It is often hard to cut the women off from their families as they are the "lifeline" or "heart" of the family.

Dina: I spent so much money on the long distance because sometimes when I

call my child will say, "Mommy I still want to sing." You don't see your child for four years and she tells you she wants to sing — you cannot say no. Last December when they were in Manila for vacation, I called and the three

Batis newsletter, vol. 5, No. 1, June 1994



OCWs remit five to seven billion U.S. every year. Some OCWs are required to remit 50 to 70 percent of their salary through Central Bank accredited channels.²⁴ The money paid to the Philippine government goes to service the interest

years old answered the phone. I said, who is this? Is this Lanie? She said, yes. And then I said, Lanie— this is your mommy — recognize me? She said, daddy is my mommy. So that's why I call every day so that she won't forget my voice.

I told my older daughter that when they go back to the province, I can't call them anymore since I was calling them every day. You know what? She shouted at me. She said, "All you think about is money! Why don't you come home now?!" and then she hung-up the phone crying.

I told my husband my phone bill is so expensive that instead of spending it on long distance I will just send it to you. He said, don't worry about the money, just keep in touch with the children.

He forced the child to talk to me again. I told her that I will sponsor them. I promised her but it is not true because I still have to wait to finish my two years as a live-in caregiver. I told her please don't cry over the phone. I said, I will just call you. But I haven't called them since because my phone bill is over \$500.

Coping mechanisms/denial

There are various ways that women deal with their de-skilling. Some use coping mechanisms, such as keeping busy or denying

they are de-skilled.

Beth: So if I considered myself de-skilled, I would not have reached what I have reached now. It's an attitude. And people just have to accept the fact that they are in a new place. Canadian standards are different and since we are in Canada, we just have to fit into the Canadian standard.

But it doesn't mean that you have de-skilled. It's just that you have to fit in. You have to be creative enough to be humble enough to retain. You have to re-orient yourself and do a lot of self-examination and submit to a counseling session for you to be able to realize these things.

Other women find creative ways to maintain some of their professional skills.

Liza: I finished Bachelor of Science in Nursing. I'm a registered nurse. I can feel my de-skilling in my field. I am losing what I learned in school. I do retain learning where I am efficient in bed-making! (laughter) Every time I make a bed, I think of the body mechanics once in a while, including the sister who taught what is the position of the back, like that. Including tucking the bed sheet. When I feel good I do an open bed, close bed. That's what I do at least to feel that I'm working in a hospital too. That way you can still recall your profession. I'm efficient in bed-making!

Kalagin ang ating Tanikala, CWR, 1994



De-skilling of the first wave of Filipino immigrants

De-skilling is not a new issue for the Filipino community. It is not specific to domestic workers, although their de-skilling is more intense.

Filipino immigrants who came during the first and second waves (1960s and 70s) were recruited as professionals: doctors, nurses, medical technologists and other occupations; but there were immigrants who came as teachers, architects or garment workers who were never able to practise their professions in Canada.

Ted: I was not very happy in that work because I was just assigned to erase drawings with an electric eraser. I was not given the opportunity to do what I can as an architect. This is not what I came to this country for! My brains are not made to erase!

Even those who attempt to have their professional education accredited face high costs. One woman spoke of spending \$10,000 over ten years trying to meet the professional association's requirements to have her architecture degree certified.

The same de-skilling impact of loss of self-esteem, silencing and being trapped in lower income levels is evident in these early waves of immigrants. Many Filipino immigrants who came 20 to 30 years ago still find it painful to discuss their de-skilling, especially with their own children

for whom they left the Philippines in the first place. This silence and denial results in a lack of understanding for the Filipino-Canadian youth who face identity crises as well as other problems.

Manuel: (Chemist in the Philippines, worked as a janitor in Canada, now in building maintenance.) One Sunday morning I was washing the toilet bowl. Then suddenly I was thinking, What am I doing in Canada? How come I'm doing this? I couldn't work. I wanted to flush myself down the toilet!

While de-skilling has violently impacted individuals, it has also violently affected and pervaded the larger community. Looking ahead to the future of the community, the first generation of Canadian-born Filipinos are also facing these continued consequences — particularly since they are also marginalized in Canadian society by class, race and gender.

Cora: It is very painful that after living here in Canada for 28 years we had such great hopes and great dreams. But it's very evident now that we're still stuck in the same position, doing the same job. There is a systemic discrimination in the system. We're being left out!

But I hope this will not happen to my children.

Surviving through resistance: Personal and collective struggles against socio-economic violence

Despite the inhumane and slave-like conditions that Filipino migrant women endure, there is much joy and celebration evident in the women's lives. They have struggled to survive and resist the system which exploits and oppresses them. The women's strength and creativity is shown by their many acts of asserting themselves with their employers and the system which the employers represent.

Bernadette: I was working for 12 people. I didn't allow them to use me. Even if the work is not finished, as long as they have finished eating — I leave them. My working hours end at 9:00 p.m. Beyond that, I leave them.

Aurea: When I renewed my contract, I said to her — If there's anything you don't want, please tell me because I can't meet your expectations. Your mentality is different from mine.

Ruby: Before I don't complain. But my employer knows because he is a lawyer. And then they can see my papers in my room, "Nanny's Rights and Roles." I just put it there where they can see it.

An even greater form of resistance is taken by those women who have recognized the need for collective action through building and sustaining a grassroots community organization.

Myrna arrived in Canada in May 1995 to earn money to support her family, particularly her mother who had had a stroke. For six months, she worked as a domestic worker for a salary of \$350 per month. This is well below the minimum wage set by British Columbia law. Myrna describes the impact of meeting other empowered women:

Myrna: I am alone. It is a small house...I

was overworked...I stayed for two months at the Philippine Women Centre. I was so depressed before because I thought I might be deported. They talked to me and helped me and made me strong. I gained confidence. The three cars [with members of the PWC] accompanied me to pick-up my stuff. My employer can't do anything. They said, "I have no 'utang na loob' [sense of gratitude or



Kalagin ang ating Tanikala, CWR, 1994

obligation]." I said to myself, I already paid my debt because my salary is only \$350 a month!

Marlyn needed money to support her sister who had undergone a kidney transplant and her mother who had contracted Hepatitis B. She came to Canada in 1994 after working as a domestic worker in Singapore for more than two years. Marlyn's second employer had two children, aged two and four.

Marlyn: While I was doing the laundry, I fell on the stairway. I missed some steps while bringing down the laundry. I slipped....

However, even if I could not work [my employer] forced me. I said, “No way. I’m sick, I can’t work.” She questioned the doctor who issued the medical certificate. She doubted his credibility. She kept calling me and harassing me. So, finally I quit.

I claimed WCB [worker’s compensation benefits]. It came out that she did not pay [the] WCB [assessment], [employer’s contributions to] income tax and UIC. I was able to get WCB, but she challenged it. There was a case, but she didn’t win.

I am involved with the Philippine Women Centre. I feel strong because I have some support.

Through the support and sharing with other women, the women’s determination to resist is strengthened. By becoming involved in a grassroots community organization, there is also a recognition that the roots of their oppression lie in the system and, therefore, collective action toward genuine structural change is needed.

Yolly: I hope all the domestic workers will unite and help each other!

Dina: I feel so much support from the women here at the Centre. After the weekends I really don’t feel like going back to the isolation of my employer’s house.

Conclusions

1. The socio-economic violence that Filipina immigrant women experience must be placed within the context of the continuing internationalization of capital, and capital's endless search for profit. Global capital's relentless penetration and distortion of other countries' economies are forcing women to migrate from the underdeveloped countries of the South to the industrialized countries of the North.

The conjoining of the Philippines' Labour Export Policy (LEP) and Canada's Live-in Caregiver Programme (LCP) is not a mere coincidence of two separate policies making a perfect fit. It is in fact, a typical North-South relationship where a poor country of the South supplies cheap labour to a "rich" country of the North for jobs that people of the North are reluctant to take. This is but another form of the commodification and trafficking of women.

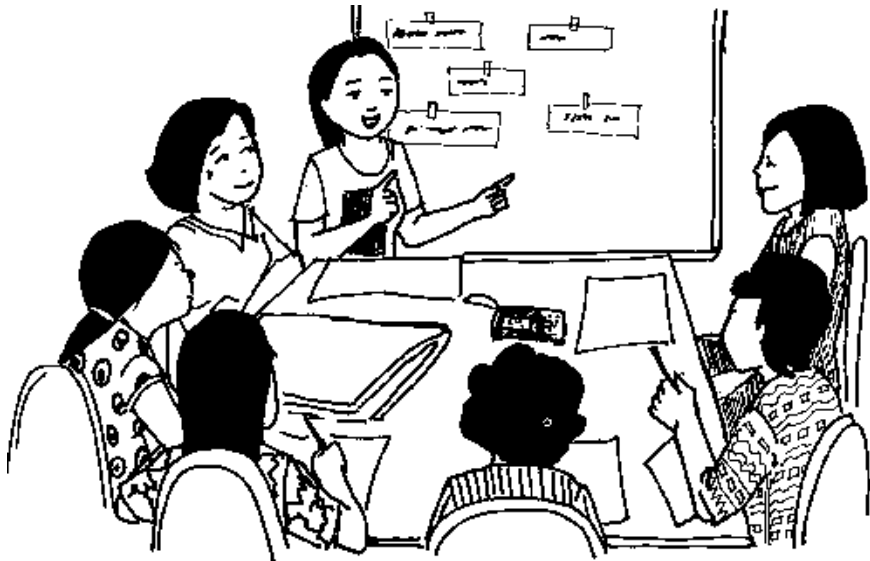
2. This violence from a socio-economic perspective begins long before the Filipina immigrant arrives in Canada. By the time she gets accepted abroad, she will have already spent huge amounts of money and/or gone into debt for her education/training (which is not recognized in Canada), and preparation of necessary papers and documentation.

3. This violence from a socio-economic perspective takes the form of chronic de-skilling and slave-like conditions among Filipina and other immigrant women. At the economic level, this is manifested in low wages as a result of taking on menial, unskilled and dead-end jobs. This is further compounded by double taxation and other onerous fees related to their status in Canada. At the psycho-social level, this results in low self-esteem, loss of self-confidence, social isolation and other related attitudes of shame, social inferiority and alienation.

For those who have families with children or have partners, the social impact of long separation exacts a tremendous psychological price. There are family problems, divorces, and neglect. The general effect is continuing marginalization, desperation, silencing and social control of these women.

In the end, immigrant women are trapped in a system they thought would liberate them. They find the system has deceived them. It has kept them in perpetual bondage facing marginalization, exploitation and oppression.

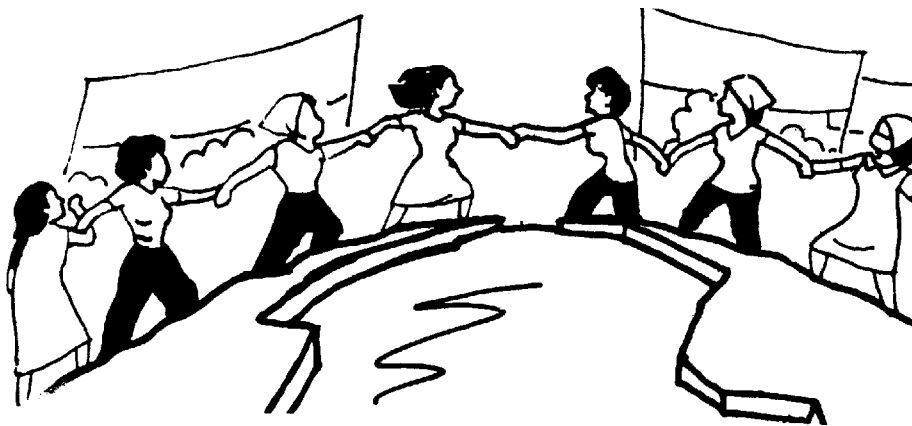
Despite this violence, Filipino women bravely continue to collectively struggle for their freedom and that of future generations of Filipino people.



Kalagin ang ating Tanikala, CWR, 1994



Kalagin ang ating Tanikala, CWR, 1994



Kalagin ang ating Tanikala, CWR, 1994

Actions and recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the women and the PWC have formulated the following actions for change and recommendations:

Actions for change

On education —

1. Further study the impact of de-skilling and other forms of socio-economic violence among Filipino women and the Filipino-Canadian community.
2. Examine and study the issues affecting Filipino-Canadian youth and other members of the community.
3. Conduct regular seminars/workshops to deepen the understanding of the marginalization of immigrant/migrant women and its roots.
4. Review, study and understand the federal and provincial government policies (immigration, employment and other) which contribute to the marginalization of immigrant/migrant women.
5. Deepen the understanding of how to promote and protect the rights and welfare of immigrants/migrants.
6. Develop educational tools/materials that are truly reflective of the situation of marginalized Filipino women. These include publication of the PWC's newsletter and other research projects.

On outreach and campaigns —

1. Conduct community information sessions (including Filipino-Canadian youth) on the following issues/concerns:
 - South-North migration as an inherent component of the internationalization of capital.
 - De-skilling and other forms of socio-economic violence against immigrant/migrant women.

- Racism and other issues affecting the community.
2. Conduct campaigns and mass activities in the community based on the above issues.
 3. Establish links with other Filipino migrant organizations, both inside and outside Canada.
 4. Connect with other marginalized immigrant/migrant women who also experience similar socio-economic violence.
 5. Link up and build alliances with progressive individuals, groups, institutions and other agencies on the basis of mutual respect and cooperation.

On community building and development —

1. Conduct studies/seminars on the skills/methods of grassroots organizing and leadership.
2. Enhance collective and community life by developing various mechanisms (such as peer counseling and regular discussions), where individuals and groups can support each other.
3. Develop cultural programs and activities that express the women's creativity and reflect on their experiences.
4. Develop programs to enhance the self-reliance and empowerment of immigrant/migrant women and their community. This includes seeking support from various organizations and agencies that have access to resources.
5. Build a strong community by increasing the membership of grassroots immigrant/migrant organizations.

Specific recommendations to the federal and provincial governments

Federal government —

1. Address the root causes of socio-economic violence against immigrant/migrant women by

adopting policies which emphasize an equal relationship between countries of the South and the North.

2. Re-examine the LCP and address the negative impact it has on the lives of Filipino domestic workers:
 - a) Scrap the temporary working visa which is issued to them. Domestic workers should be allowed to enter Canada as landed immigrants.
 - b) Scrap the live-in requirement under the LCP. Domestic work can still be done even if the domestic worker does not live in the employer's home.
 - c) If the above points are not changed, the basic exploitative nature of the LCP will not change. Therefore, as an alternative, we recommend:

Remove the two-year live-in requirement under the LCP. At least this would make domestic workers less vulnerable to the extreme abuse which the present working and living arrangement perpetuates.

- d) Abolish the head tax and other exorbitant fees relating to domestic workers' status in Canada. These women have been contributors to the Canadian economy without receiving the rights and full benefits of Canadian citizenship.

- e) Monitor and establish regulations for recruitment agencies. This will reduce the illegal recruitment of migrant/domestic workers.

Provincial government —

1. Review, clarify and enforce current provisions of the *Employment Standards Act* relating to migrant/domestic workers.
 - a) Employment standards regarding hours of work, minimum wage and overtime rates must be strictly enforced.
 - b) Include a provision for sick leave for domestic workers.
 - c) There must be a clear definition of required work duties for domestic workers.
 - d) Enforce break times. One problem is that domestic workers have no definite break times from their work duties. (For example, having the children sleep in the same room as the domestic worker means that she is still responsible for them and is therefore working. She must be correspondingly paid for these working hours.)

Both levels of government —

1. Recognize/accredit immigrants' prior education obtained in their country of origin. This would diminish the impact of de-skilling and help facilitate their integration and settlement in Canada.

Endnotes

- 1 Antonio Tujan, Jr. "The Crisis of Philippine Labour Migration." *IBON: Special Release*, May 1995, p.4.
- 2 Ibid., p. 5.
- 3 "Filipino Migrant Workers: The Price of Labour Export." *IBON Facts & Figures*, 18, 9 (15 May 1995): 3.
- 4 Ibid., p. 5.
- 5 Ibid., p. 8.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Alan B. Anderson and James S. Frideres. *Ethnicity in Canada: Theoretical Perspectives*. Toronto: Butterworths, 1981, p. 223.
- 8 Ibid., Chapter 9, "Racism."
- 9 Ibid., p. 162.
- 10 Canada, Citizenship and Immigration. *A Profile of Immigrants from the Philippines in Canada*, 1996. Available at: <http://cicnet.ingenia.com/english/pub/profile/9608phie.html>
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- 12 Emmanuel Sayo. "History of Filipino Migration to Canada." Unpublished paper. Vancouver, BC: Kalayaan Resource and Training Centre.
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- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Genevieve Leslie. "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920." In *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930*, ed. Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard, 104. Toronto, ON: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974.
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- 18 Audrey Macklin. "On the Inside Looking In: Domestic Workers in Canada." In *Maid in the Market: Women's Paid Domestic Labour*, ed. Wenona Giles and Sedef Arat-Koc, 36. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 1994.
- 19 Ibid., p. 16.
- 20 Ibid., p. 17.
- 21 Ibid., p. 21.
- 22 Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1980.
- 23 Both of these publications are available from the Philippine Women Centre, Vancouver, B.C.
- 24 Antonio Tujan, Jr. "The Crisis of Philippine Labour Migration." *IBON: Special Release* (May 1995): 9.
- 25 *IBON: Facts & Figures*, 7, 1 (June 1996): 3.

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Appendix

Economic Violence Against Filipino Migrant/Immigrant Women Focus Group questions guideline

A. Experiences in country of origin

1. Background: Place of birth; members of family, source of income? Who was the breadwinner in the family?
2. Education: degree or profession: schools attended, cost of education? Why did you choose the course you did?
3. Work experience: Where? (city or province); office; field; school; other agencies. How long? Salary?
4. Did you have any involvement in the community?

B. First country of migration (if not Canada)

1. Year left country of origin?
2. Reason for coming?
3. Steps and procedures you went through?
4. Expenses to travel?
5. Experiences as a foreign worker:
 - a) Nature of work?
 - b) Enjoyable or not?
 - c) How were you treated?
 - d) How did you react?
6. Did you practice your profession?
7. Were you able to study?
8. What law applied to your study?
9. What role did the consulate or embassy play, if any?
10. Did you have any involvement in the community?
11. Did you experience any discrimination?
12. How was your salary?

C. Canada

(Same questions #1-12 as above in the first country of migration.)

13. Where is your present work?
14. What has been your experience looking for a job?
15. Is your salary adequate?
16. Did you know you could not practise your profession here?
17. How did you feel working as _____? (domestic worker, etc.)
18. When you qualified for an open visa, did you pursue your profession?
19. Did you study?
20. Your opinions on: mandatory live-in care programme; six months training requirement for nannies; training programs for immigrants; government agencies such as Status of Women Canada and the Ministry of Women's Equality?
21. Family relations?
22. Any involvement in community organizations? Why did you join?
23. Do you think the status of women of colour is equal to that of white women?
24. Do you think the status of women is equal to that of men?
25. Are there barriers between people of colour and white people?