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## **Beyond the Economics of Overseas Employment: The Human Costs**

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## Notes and Comments

### **Beyond the Economics of Overseas Employment: The Human Costs**

PATRICIA B. LICUANAN

Carling was the success story of his small Pampanga community. He had learned his trade from his father and was considered a highly skilled carpenter. He was also a mason and a licensed plumber; as foreman of a team composed of his younger brothers, he accepted small building contracts which seemed to come his way with little effort on his part. Last summer in the middle of a remodelling job he left for Saudi Arabia, leaving his wife and four young children.

Nelson was a duct fitter for central airconditioning units. He seemed to be able to find jobs at regular enough intervals to support his growing family. Often, however, his earnings were not enough and he had to rely on the additional income earned by his wife, a seamstress. His big economic opportunity came in the form of a job in Iraq; when he left Manila recently, Nelson, his pregnant wife and his three daughters all thought he was very lucky indeed.

Nando was a family driver. He was happy enough at his job but he had heard about the good opportunities for Filipinos in the Middle East. He inquired at a recruiting office and was told that there was a little demand for drivers but that there were openings for wallpaper hangers. The determined Nando took a crash course in paper hanging and was hired soon after for a job in Saudi Arabia.

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## OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT

One does not have to look very far for examples of the thousands of Filipinos who have joined the increasing numbers of temporary migrants to the Middle East. Filipinos leaving their homeland in search of better paying jobs overseas is hardly a new phenomenon. But with the opening up of the Middle East as a market for Philippine manpower, the numbers have increased markedly.

Today there are more than 100 countries all over the world utilizing the services of Filipino workers. Workers have been sent to countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, the Americas, the Trust Territories and Oceania; in 1980 alone, the overseas employment program recorded the outflow of 199,959 contract workers and seamen. With about 1.3 million Filipino emigrant workers overseas prior to 1975 and the rapidly increasing numbers of workers sent by the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB), the Bureau of Employment Services (BES) and the National Seamen Board (NSB), it is estimated that the number of Filipino contract workers and emigrants now reaches more than two million.<sup>1</sup>

Filipino workers overseas belong to various occupational groups. Of the workers processed through the OEDB from 1975 to 1980 the three largest groups are: the professional and technical workers which at the end of 1980 comprised 25.31 percent of the total; service workers, 18.72 percent; and finally production process workers, transport equipment operators and laborers, 48.34 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the Filipinos employed abroad, especially those in the Middle East, are contract workers. These are workers who leave the country under temporary work contracts with foreign employers for specific periods of time and are then expected to re-enter the home country after contract termination. The Philippine government has a strong preference for this temporary form of emigration, the intention being that in the near future these workers will be re-absorbed into the national economy.

1. *Overseas Employment Development Board, 1980* (Manila: OEDB, 1980).

2. *Ibid.*

The impact of overseas employment on the national economy has been discussed in papers by Abella and Jayme.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this paper is to go beyond economics and discuss overseas employment as it affects the lives of the individual worker and his family. Attempting a psychological analysis of a phenomenon usually viewed mainly in economic terms, this paper will discuss three main areas: (a) the decision to go overseas; (b) the period spent overseas, and (c) re-entry into the Philippines. The psychological pluses and minuses will be discussed and finally some recommendations will be made.

This paper draws mainly from interviews with families of overseas workers, and with government and private groups involved in the recruitment of workers for overseas. Workers home on vacation were interviewed and letters sent by workers from abroad were also used as data. The paper will focus on blue-collar male workers in the Middle East and their families.

The typical Filipino worker in the Middle East is between twenty-six and forty-eight years old. He is a family man coming from metro Manila and the surrounding provinces in Luzon. He is a high school graduate and can handle spoken and written English. Coming from the lower and lower middle class, he is usually a skilled or semi-skilled worker who has a relatively secure job in the Philippines. He usually has had several years of work experience.

### THE DECISION TO GO OVERSEAS

The main motivation for working overseas is, of course, economic — a low paying job, the high cost of living, children who have to be educated, the insecurity of not owning the land on which their home stands. Most workers and their families know or have heard of people already overseas whose lives have improved as a result of a dollar salary and they dream that they too will soon live a better life.

The typical answers to questions like “Bakit mo napiling mag-trabaho sa napakalayong lugar?” (Why did you choose to work in

3. See M. I. Abella, *Export of Filipino Manpower* (Manila: Institute of Labor and Manpower Studies, Ministry of Labor, 1979); and R. B. Jayme, “A Study on the Effects of Temporary Worker Outflows from the Philippines” (MA thesis, University of the Philippines, 1979).

such a far place?) are:

Ang mga anak ko ay halos tapos na ng elementary. Mayroon na akong isang mag-aaral sa kolehiyo, ang iba ay maghahaiskul na. Kailangan kong kumita ng mas malaki sa sinasahod ko upang mabigyan ko sila ng pagkaka-taong makatapos ng pag-aaral. (Most of my children have finished their elementary schooling. I have one entering college and some entering high school. I have to earn more in order to give them the opportunity to finish school.)

or

Mas mabuti na ang nagtatrabaho sa Middle East dahil ang sinasahod ko ay halos triple ng sasahurin ko sa atin. Dahil lumaki na ang aking kinikita ay maaari ko nang ipaayos ang bahay namin, madagdagan ang gamit namin, makapag-ipon para sa aming mga anak at magkaroon ng mas mabuting buhay sa hinaharap. (It is much better working in the Middle East because I am earning about three times what I would be earning at home. With my increased earnings I can now fix up our house, buy more things, save for our children and have a better future.)

In letters sent to wives and friends some said:

Sabihin mo sa mga bata na mag-aral ng mabuti dahil iyan ang dahilan ng pagtatrabaho ko rito. . . . (Tell the children to study well because that is the reason I am working here.)

or

Mahirap man ay maganda naman ang kabuhayan natin kaysa noon. Siguraduhin mo na mahusay ang paggasta mo, huwag kang magastos at nang tayo ay may maipon na at maipaayos na natin ang bahay. (Although it is difficult our life is much better now than it used to be. Be sure that you spend your money carefully and are not extravagant so that we can save and fix up our house.)

Malungkot dito at napakainit pero hindi bale na, makapal naman ang bulsa. (It is lonely here and very hot but I don't mind it really since I have money in my pocket.)

In general, education of the children, buying land and building a respectable house and starting a business e.g., "magtayo ng sari-sari store" (to set up a small store); "makapag-ipon para mag-buy and sell" (to save in order to go into buy & sell) are the more specific economic reasons given for the decision to work overseas. Buying modern appliances such as electric fan, refrigerator, TV, gas stove, is also mentioned. It is important to note that the decision to

work overseas is a joint decision of the worker and his wife, with the wife showing equal and at times even more interest in her husband's overseas job.

There are, of course, anticipated difficulties and at times the fear of the hardships actually keeps people from applying. Some fears are:

(a) homesickness and loneliness:

hindi ko matiis na malayo sa pamilya (I would not be able to stand being so far away from my family), ang lungkot daw doon kasi napakalayo sa sibilisasyon (They say it is very lonely there because it is far away from civilization); mahirap naman para sa pamilya ko. Ang liliit pa ng aking mga anak. Baka tuloy hindi na nila ako makilala pagbalik ko (It is difficult for my family. My children are very young and they may not recognize me when I return); nalulungkot na nga ako ng isang beses lang sa isang linggo kami magkikita ng asawa ko, paano pa kaya pag taon taon na kaming hindi magkikita? (It is lonely enough seeing my wife only once a week; what would it be like being separated for years?);

(b) difficulty of the work:

Ang bigat daw ng trabaho doon (They say the work over there is very heavy); ang susungit daw ng mga supervisors doon (They say the supervisors there are very grouchy); and

(c) problems with re-entry:

mahirap maghanap ulit ng trabaho pagkatapos mag-overseas (It is difficult to find another job after returning from overseas); sayang yong trabaho ko ngayon (It seems like a shame to leave the job I have right now).

## THE CONTRACT PERIOD

Overseas, the living conditions of workers vary depending on the type of company they work for. Larger companies generally provide airconditioned housing with two workers sharing one room and bath. Smaller companies have more people in a room with bunk beds and common washrooms. Electric fans, not air-conditioners, protect the workers from the intense heat.

Recreational facilities in large companies include facilities for tennis, basketball, squash and sometimes even swimming. Billiards and betamax are part of the facilities. However, in smaller companies, these are non-existent. With old favorite past-times such as drinking, gambling and women prohibited by law, workers spend much of their leisure time chatting and exchanging news from

home. Letter writing and letter reading is a great source of pleasure.

All told, however, when asked about their recreation, most workers say that there is very little to do in the Middle East but work. It is obvious that Filipino workers do have their problems overseas. Some have been known to lie, purposely break rules and commit crimes just to be sent home. Of the workers processed by OEDB, for instance, forty-two workers came home between January and June 1980 and twenty-six between July and September of the same year, before their contracts expired. Private companies with projects in the Middle East have their share of workers breaking contracts. One company which has the largest number of workers in the Middle East has averaged fifty-four workers breaking contracts every month since they started operations in October 1977.

As anticipated, loneliness seems to be a main problem leading to breaking of contracts. Loneliness includes: missing home and loved ones; difficulty in adjusting to a seemingly unfriendly and unjoyful alien culture; and worry about one's family — more specifically, jealousy caused by rumors and gossip.

Another problem overseas is the working and living conditions in some companies. Lack of drinking water and sanitary toilet facilities, in addition to the intense desert heat make life difficult for the Filipino workers.

Illness is also mentioned as a reason for breaking contracts. When ill, workers would rather go home and be with their families. The workers sometimes distrust the medical personnel if these are not Filipinos. In some cases, medical facilities are often inadequate.

Also mentioned as a problem is a discrepancy between the salary promised in the Philippines and that actually given in the country of employment. Often, however, this happens when workers lie about their qualifications.

The families left behind are not without their share of problems. Ironically enough, the main problem is financial. Usually a worker's family has to spend a large amount of money preparing for his departure. They usually have to sell property (if they had any), or borrow from family, friends or money lenders, to pay for the legal (not to mention the illegal) expenses that are part of

leaving the country. The financial burden on the family worsens during the first few months that the worker is overseas because it takes about three months before part of the worker's salary is received by his family – "Matagal bago makuha yong suweldo kaya lumaki nang lumaki yong mga utang nila." (Their salaries took so long in coming that they got further and further in debt.) So for a certain period wives are really left to fend for themselves and the children. Even after the salary starts coming, remittance is often delayed and unpredictable.

When the salary does come, there are cases where the worker's wife, his mother and his mistress begin to fight over it, thus causing tension in the family and in the community, not to mention the pressure on the worker overseas. There have been many cases where the worker's parents or relatives write him and make up vile stories about his wife so that in his anger he will send his salary to them.

Being a temporary breadwinner and sometimes being maligned by her husband's relatives and mistresses are not the only problems a woman faces when her husband is overseas. Many women report that they worry about their responsibility of raising the children alone, of playing the role of both father and mother. They are particularly anxious about the problem of disciplining older children.

Not all wives are virtuous, however, and one hears stories of women spending their husband's earning on their lovers, neglecting their children in the process. Some go on extravagant shopping sprees, leaving very little money for the things that really matter.

#### RETURNING TO THE PHILIPPINES

Re-entry into the Philippines usually entails readjustment by the worker. The major readjustment is to a peso salary and a low one at that. After coming from overseas local salaries seem even lower. Some workers do not even have that as they go for long periods looking for a job. Discouraged by these conditions many workers re-apply for overseas and the cycle continues. As one neighbor puts it:

Pagbalik galing overseas walang trabaho na naghintay para sa asawa rito, kaya kailangang magpunta na naman sa overseas. Palagi tuloy na maiwanan yong pamilya. Siguro yong ibang bata ryan hindi na makakilala sa



mga ama nila. (When they arrived from overseas there were no jobs waiting for them so they had to go back overseas leaving their families again. I am sure there are many children in the community who would not be able to recognize their fathers.)

Re-adjustment to the family is usually not a problem except for some difficulty with children between the ages of one and three. They do not remember their father and therefore are initially quite shy and distant. Some report problems between husbands and wives over the issue of re-applying for overseas. Often the husband does not want to go but his wife, fearing the economic repercussions of staying home, insists that he re-apply.

The returning overseas worker is quite conspicuous in his community. With his cassette tape recorder, his stereo and his appliances, he is a symbol of success — “Umaasenso na talaga kasi nakabibili na ng mga kasangkapan sa bahay, mga laruan sa mga anak, at magagandang damit.” (He is truly successful because he is able to buy appliances, toys for the children, and nice clothes.) Another observation of neighbors: “Makuwento na kaya mas mapapel na tuwing inuman o kuwentuhan.” (He has a lot of stories to tell so he shows off more during drinking and chatting sessions.)

Sometimes because of increased income, workers from overseas return to drinking and other vices with a vengeance. This, along with their conspicuous consumption, quickly deplete their hard earned income and the workers and their families wind up not much better off than before. Although the horror stories are many, many workers do spend their money on the education of their children and on a house and lot. In the words of a community member “nakapag-ipon yong iba, ang iba naman nagbabayad pa ng utang.” (Some have been able to save, others are still paying their debts.)

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem of overseas employment is a complex one. There are definite problems with families being separated for long periods of time. There are problems with adjustment to a harsh alien culture and difficult working conditions. There are problems of re-adjustment to the Philippines — a country familiar and loved but because of economic structures, also harsh and sometimes better loved from a distance.

While there are definite psychological costs to overseas employment, the economic gains are not without psychological benefits. One cannot underestimate the psychological rewards of decent wages. The increase in self-respect, the decrease in anxiety about earning a living, the ability to dream and the realization that now perhaps one's dreams might come true — are some of the psychological perks of an overseas salary.

With the increasing demand for manpower in the Middle East and with the present inability of the Philippine economy to offer workers better alternatives here at home, it looks as if overseas employment will be with us for some time. It is necessary therefore that steps be taken to make overseas employment less costly in human terms. Some preliminary recommendations are:

1. More research should be done on the human as well as economic aspects of overseas employment, particularly the long term effects. This paper is the product of a preliminary study leading to a more thorough research project which the Ateneo Department of Psychology is undertaking.
2. The process of screening workers for overseas should be given more attention. Better psychological preparation for the difficulties overseas should be attempted along with improved monitoring of workers overseas.
3. The objective working and living conditions for blue-collar workers should be investigated to make sure that they do not fall below accepted standards.
4. Psychological services should be made available to workers as well as to their families. Facilities should be set up in the job sites abroad as well as in the communities back home, providing such services as individual or group counseling for workers and their families. Community centers with psychological services placed in low income communities will be able to assist women and children to cope with the problems of separation from husbands and fathers. These centers may also assist the worker in his re-adjustment to the Philippines.
5. The government and private companies should attempt to set up placement services for returning workers to help them find jobs back home.

6. Investment counseling services should be available to the workers and their families so that they can invest their earnings more profitably for longer range pay-offs.

These are but some measures that will make overseas employment a truly profitable experience in economic as well as psychological terms — at least until the time comes when socio-economic conditions in the Philippines improve and more Filipinos will consider their home a place where dreams do come true.