Susan McClelland on nannies from the Philippines: Suffer the caregiver [1]

Author: McClelland, Susan
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Full article [2]

EXCERPTS

Every morning, Zeny Delmando rises at six, dresses quickly and leaves her neat North Toronto apartment, its walls lined with religious portraits and framed photographs of her family. On weekdays, she heads to her job as a nanny for a seven-year-old girl, often not returning until eight in the evening. On weekends, to earn extra cash, she cleans at another employer's house. Sunday mornings, the devout 53-year-old Christian stops off at the Saint Paschal Baylon Church for mass. What does she pray for? "That my employers are happy with me," she replies. Anything else? "To be given health," she adds, "because I'm the one earning money to support my husband and two daughters."

Delmando's family remains in the Philippines. When her husband, Nestor, a haberdasher, was laid off from his factory in the mid-90s and Zeny lost her bookkeeping job soon after, the couple struggled. It became clear that, like many of her friends and family, she would need to leave the country to find work. "It was the most difficult decision we ever made," she says. "But we couldn't even put food on the table. There was no other way."

Since the 1970s, the Philippines has pursued aggressive labour-export campaigns, more so than any other country. In 2012, according to the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration, nearly 1.5-million Filipinos left the country to work abroad. That figure, however, includes only those with documented work permits. Unofficially, the figure is likely double. Experts argue these campaigns have enabled the Philippines - a country still undergoing the slow transition from an agrarian-based economy - to stay afloat. Overseas Foreign Workers (OFWs) send back about US$5-billion every year, and are so revered that when Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was president she declared OFWs national heroes.

Delmando moved to Israel in 2002, where she looked after two families (first, a widower and his children, second, an elderly couple). Then, in 2007, she applied to come to Canada as a nanny in the immigration initiative called the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP). Canada is the first choice of many Filipino women thanks to higher-than-average salaries under the LCP, and better work conditions as compared to the Middle East, where many Filipino caregivers suffer physical and emotional harassment.

But the biggest draw is the chance at citizenship. If nannies in the LCP can demonstrate two years of full-time employment over the three-year period they're in the LCP, they can apply for permanent residency. No other country offers Filipino caregivers the opportunity to emigrate. "All my friends said Canada was the best place," says Delmando, who was sponsored by a two-parent working family in North Toronto with two children under the age of 5. "There are good opportunities for work, and soon I would be able to bring my family to live with me."

As many as 100,000 Filipino women have been accepted into the LCP since the early 1990s. This represents nearly 90% of any nationality in the program. At its high, more than 10,000 Filipino women were arriving in the LCP annually, but that figure has dropped to about 6,000, a decline mostly attributed to a lack of need, says Filipino-Canadian activist Cecilia Diocson, founder of the Philippine Women's Centre of B.C. There are now many former Filipino LCP caregivers with citizenship occupying the jobs their foreign worker counterparts once took. "The entire Filipino community in Canada numbers about 400,000. Most can trace their immigration to the LCP, either as direct applicants or family," says Diocson.

But the LCP comes at a heartbreakingly high price: separation from family. According to Diocson, as many as 90% of women in the LCP are mothers. Until they receive permanent residency, they can't apply to bring along their husbands and children.

The process for permanent residency can take years. In Zeny's case, she completed the LCP in 2009 and immediately filed for permanent residency. She's still waiting.

It's a situation typical of many in the LCP, though Zeny considers herself luckier than most. She left her daughters when Marjory was 10 and Rubalyn was 13. Her husband agreed to devote himself full-time to their care, waking up at 4 am to iron school uniforms and prepare lunches. Filipino public schools are among the most overcrowded in Asia, with many students rotating days. But Zeny managed to send home enough to put her kids through private school (inadequate schooling has, in part, pushed many women to move abroad). As a result, the girls have done well. Marjory recently finished a nursing degree, while her sister is completing a master's in business administration.

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And while it's true that Zeny has been forced to follow her daughters' progress by telephone, she's grateful that the LCP has helped spare them from living in a shantytown home made of tin and cardboard, or running around barefoot, scavenging for plastics and glass to sell at local markets for a few pesos.

For many families, this separation can take a terrible toll. Infidelity runs high, with husbands often finding new partners. Tina Andrada was happily married - or so she thought - when she joined the LCP in 2006. Her husband didn't want her to go, but the 39-year-old argued it was the best thing for the couple and their two children.

Not long after Andrada left, her husband abandoned the children in the care of her mother. Distraught, Andrada debated whether to quit her job in Toronto and return home. But her family begged her not to. As a single mother, she would never be able to pay for her children's upkeep and her parents would not be able to help. So Andrada stayed in Canada. But for many years no one knew where her husband had disappeared to, until a family friend spotted him at a Manila shopping mall. The family tracked him down and discovered he had started a family with another woman.

It's no surprise that many neglected children are forced to grow up quickly. Rhea Gamana, 27, lives in Canada and works in a tearoom. Her mother was accepted into the LCP and left for Toronto in 2002, leaving Gamana, 15 at the time, and her brother, 13, under the watch of her mother's older cousins and aunt (their father deserted them when the children were young). When Gamana realized a year later that her relatives were frittering away the money her mother was sending home, she kicked them out and took over raising her brother.

As far back as 1996, the Philippine Social Welfare Department reported that the long separation and absence of foreign workers from their families was causing a vast crisis. The report noted that 40% of migrants' families faced social problems, including high drop-out rates from school, unwanted teen pregnancies and drug use - the longer the mother is away, the report concluded, the more serious the problems the family faces.

In the shantytown tin homes, single mom Karen Marita, 19, says she speaks on behalf of children across the country living in the slums. "We had no childhoods. Our moms were looking after other people's children in countries we couldn't even visit."

Teen mom of two, Jocelyn Cabigas, whose mother was also a foreign worker, jumps in: "Our mothers left for money, so we could have better futures. It's how this foreign migration is sold. But we have no futures here," she says referring to the Barangay Catmon area in Manila where she is forced to live with her two young children in an apartment that floods with water during the rainy season.

Diocson alleges "the export of labour is the Filipino government's policy to resolve its economic problems, but it's also an instrument in the trafficking of Filipino women. By design, Canada's LCP is part of this trafficking by receiving the goods. There's no thought to the consequences."

In 2009, MP Olivia Chow put forward a motion in the House of Commons to treat caregivers entering the country like entrepreneurs so that permanent residency can be issued upon arrival, thus allowing their families to come as well. The motion was never voted on and died during the last federal election. So far, there's no sign of it returning. "We can't have it both ways," she says. "We can't take the talents of others and force them to leave their children behind. We need to see workers as not just economic units, but their families. It's how we build healthy communities."

Chow also argues that by dangling citizenship in front of the nannies - knowing full well the wait the women will need to endure before the they have any hope of being reunited with their husband and children - the government is guilty of exploitation.

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Region: Canada [3]
Tags: federal programs [4]
