



THE Migrant Watch

quarterly newsletter of the Philippine Migrants Rights Watch

Vol.5 No.4 • December 2006

www.pmrw.org

Manila, Philippines

Migrants' Voices

In the celebration of December 18, International Migrants Day, the Philippine Migrants Rights Watch organized a forum entitled, "Migrants' Voices" which featured three OFW returnees sharing their personal lives as migrants. The event was held at Bayview Park Hotel, Manila. A total of 60 people attended the forum.

Mike Bolos, CMA member of the board, shared his quarter-of-a-century journey through the desserts of Saudi Arabia. A migrant "by accident," he left for Saudi in the 1980's with very little preparation for himself besides what he knew of the people around him in Pampanga who left for abroad for greener pastures. He experienced the typical ups-and-downs of a typical OFW, such as discrimination, non-recognition of his skills, and prolonged separation from his family. His two children were 4 and 5 years old when he left them the first time. He missed their growing up years.

Now back in the Philippines, Mike reflects on his 25 year-journey abroad — "Based on my experience, I would enjoin the OFWs now to exert everything possible to preserve their

families at all costs. Knowing then what I know now, I would have done things differently to preserve my own. Despite the distance, the OFWs should try to be as close to their children as possible so that they will not be "*manghiwaga*." It appears to me that the risk is high and the probability is great that the children may not grow up like those with both parents around them most of the time. In which case, is the social cost worth it? But other OFWs would say they had no choice."

Mike continues his involvement in the migrant advocacy as a member of the board of CMA. He is CMA's resource person on OFWs and Saudi Arabia/Middle East. He is also active in the overseas absentee voting campaign.

The other OFWs who willingly shared their tears and triumphs abroad were Mary Joy Barcelona, who went to Japan to make her dream of becoming a teacher come true. But it brought her only miseries and more tears. Being an entertainer in Japan was not what she expected it to be. She signed a contract that she will be working as a dancer in a hotel but she was brought to a club to work as a hostess, an experience she never dreamed of having. She was shocked to see how their Japanese customers behaved in the clubs. "It was a baptism of fire for me," she says. Life was in Japan was difficult but the thought of her family and her dream of finishing her studies kept her there.

She came home battered but not beaten. She pursued her studies

Ellene Sana - CMA

M. Celeste A. Marasigan - PMRW



Migrants' Voices

despite the odds. Perhaps, she was not meant to be a teacher so she shifted to another course. This month, she graduated from PUP with a degree on BS entrepreneurial management. May Joy says: "God is really good. At the proper time, He will put everything in its proper place. I may have had lots of difficulties in achieving my dreams but all those difficult experiences have helped me become a stronger person. Through these experiences, I learned to value myself and the people around me. I saw the beauty of life. I owe all of these to the people, who allowed themselves to be God's instruments to help me become the person that I am today...I may not become the teacher that I dreamed of, but I know that I will continue teaching, helping, and inspiring others to make the most of what they have and can do."

Mary Joy is the coordinator of Sikhay, an organization of returned migrants from Japan. Sikhay does advocacy and livelihood projects.

Nelson Pastor Ajos was the last speaker. He thought of going abroad after he resigned from Coca Cola Bottlers. His



salary as a Supervisor in Coca Cola Bottlers and the salary of his wife from teaching is enough but they still struggled as a new family. They decided that working abroad is the best solution to provide more for the family. He landed a job as a Material Specialist at Bechtel Company in Papua New Guinea where he stayed for 11 years. He left in 1982.

Financial success was upon him but with this came the downfall of his values. Work and money caused pains to his wife and his family. When he came home, he brought home millions of dollars from his earnings. It was at this time, he said, that he became

the most arrogant person. With his millions, he thought he had everything already and did not need anybody else until everything started to disappear, one by one, until he had almost nothing. It was a humbling experience for him. He picked up the pieces of his shattered life and started again with his family. He and

his wife are now active in developing the Migration Desk of the Archdiocese of San Fernando, Pampanga.

DAWN's Teatro Akebono sang Christmas carols for everyone before the Open Forum. The reflection gathered from the speakers is: "Is migration worth it?" In effect, some of the participants shared their own migration experiences.

All three speakers gave a clear message to all the participants, that migration should not be a forced option for Filipinos. If there was way, people will prefer to stay in the country for the cost of migration is too much.

This activity is a prelude to PMRW's upcoming publication where the stories of Mike, Joy and Nelson are included.

Happy migrants day.

PMRW Publication:

Migrants' Stories,
Migrants' Voices

Early in 2007, PMRW will be launching its publication entitled, "Migrants' Stories, Migrants' Voices." This book is a compilation of various experiences of OFWs and their families left behind. It presents 12 stories written by migrants and members of their families.

Many Filipino nowadays are enamored by the opportunities brought about by migration, yet oblivious to its many challenges. The different accounts in this book show the different facets of migration, their impact on their lives, and how they responded to the challenges of migration.

It aims to express what our migrant brothers and sisters go through abroad and how their families left behind coped with the absence of their family members. Writing or sharing their own stories empowers them as they reach out to a wider public.

THE
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ECMI Organized OFW Family Christmas Solidarity Day

By Edwin Corros
CBCP-ECMI

"Welcome: OFWs and their Families," was written in a banner hanging at the gate of Christ the King College in San Fernando City in La Union, greeting participants who were entering the school's large multi-purpose hall. That was Saturday, December 9, 2006 when the whole afternoon, families of OFWs gathered for a rare activity. Such was billed OFWs' Christmas Solidarity Day dedicated to the OFWs and their families organized by the diocesan ministry for migrants and supported by the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People or ECMI. It was a gathering of more than five hundred people from various parishes of La Union. They were mostly students of various ages and parents or grandparents. The gathering was simple. There were messages delivered mainly by the relatives of OFWs whose goal was simply to share their experiences, and in return, to gain moral support from their listeners. "We need to help each other, we have many problems too as family members of OFWs" echoed by one of the participants who came to volunteer in the animation of the Eucharistic celebration. "I have learned many things from the sharing of the family members," remarked Madel, a former OFW herself. "In fact, we could always relate with the stories of the children," one high school student added. The youth in their cultural presentation expressed the usual sentiments of children left by their parents who are still working overseas in order to send them to private school for better education. The young could easily identify with the drama presented by their fellow youth, who are mostly striving to get used to live with relatives because their parents are working abroad. The celebration was an occasion for the students to showcase their talents in singing, dancing and acting, but most importantly enjoying the company of their fellow family members of OFWs.



That day after, it was December 10, when the Archdiocese of Manila held its own OFW's Family Solidarity Day. It started with the celebration of the Mass at the Daughters of Charity Convent "Asilo de San Vicente" in United Nations Avenue, with no less than Auxiliary Bishop of Manila, Bsp. Jabillo, presiding. Fr. Tem Fabros, the diocesan minister for migrants, led the families and participants in the social activities where fun games and singing were held. Edmund Ruga, the ECMI-Luzon coordinator, volunteered to be the master of ceremony on that rainy morning. Unlike last 2005 when the OFW Family Day was held at Clam Shell of the Department of Tourism, ECMI was able to gather almost one thousand people; this year, the Archdiocese of Manila instead was able to bring to-

gether families of migrants for the activities of fun games, songs and dances. The raffle draw added more fun and excitement to all participants. For the usual participants from the Holy Trinity Parish in Balik-balik to win an award for their cultural presentation was truly fulfilling. "The experience of having been proclaimed winner for the best stage presentation gave them great joy even if it was only a simple competition of talents among participants," Carlos reported. It is from these little comments that keep ECMI happy to conduct the annual OFW Family Day. The first OFW Family Christmas Solidarity Day took place within the compound of CBCP more than ten years ago and participants were looking forward to hold it thereafter.

On December 17, the Diocese of Calocan likewise celebrated their first OFW Family Solidarity Day at St. Mary College Gym. Almost five hundred family members of Filipino working overseas from various parishes came to participate. Parish leaders took turns in animating the whole day celebration where Bishop Deogracias Ineguez presided the Eucharist in the morning. Lunch and merienda were supplied by generous sponsors from corporate partners. Just like the other OFW Family Day held in other dioceses, the highlight of the celebration was the awarding of the prizes to the winner of various contests like the parol making competition and best cultural presentation. Some city councilors came to grace the occasion.

The neighboring dioceses like Novaliches and Antipolo had their own special celebration of OFW Family Day where similar activities of games, music and lots of fun remained the at-

ECMI Organized ...

traction aside from the powerful sharing of Filipinos' experiences in other countries as migrant workers. In Pampanga, the diocesan ministry for migrants sponsored a movie called, "Ina, Anak, Pamilya," an advocacy film meant for family members affected by the Filipino of migration. The special showing of the movie was the first joint venture project made by the film producers and ECMI. It was reported that over 2,000 high school students went to see the movie at SM-San Fernando. Students were also made to submit reflection paper based on the movie as part of the information dissemination activity of ECMI. The organizers found this approach as a good venue for the migration awareness campaign.

Starting 2006, every diocese had a unique celebration of the OFW Family Solidarity Day. The dioceses were left with their creativity in celebrating OFW Family Christmas Solidarity Day. The dioceses of Antipolo, Lipa and Bayombong of Nueva Viscaya had celebrated its own family



day. Their bishops were always supportive of them.

For over ten years now, the ECMI of the CBCP has organized OFW Family Christmas Solidarity Day during the yuletide season. This tradition of bringing together the organized left-behind members of OFW families in the various

dioceses provide an avenue for them to feel the spirit of Christmas away from their absent OFW family member. This is ECMI's way of celebrating Christmas with migrant family sector.

Close to four decades now, the Philippines had systematically sent Filipinos abroad as part of its labor export industry. Filipino labor migration started sending manpower to the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries to combat the country's high unemployment rate during the Marcos regime. The policy of sending labor to Middle Eastern countries was extended to other countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and America including the Pacific. Philippine government has never left such policy of sending workers overseas. The Philippines in fact has been hailed by international community as a model country that manages very well its labor export industry. Undeniably, Philippines was chosen as a model country because no other country in the world could

beat the Filipinos' presence in over 150 countries working in all kinds of profession. From the few highly skilled professions like scientist and consultants, medical and health professionals to non-skilled workers such as those employed in the households and entertainment circuits in Japan, the Filipinos are considered as the "Most Preferred Workers" in all continents. Beyond the material success projected by society and government are the social costs painfully OFWs and their families have to pay for. ECMI would like to accompany the victims of the social costs, hoping that their sufferings may be alleviated and future migrants could avoid the tragedies and pitfalls of migration. Despite the high social costs brought about by labor migration, unfortunately the government has chosen labor export as one of its means to fulfill economic development.



Is Overseas Migration Worth it?

EDITORIAL

by Lisa Garcia (DAWN)

Who is a successful migrant? How can we gauge an OFW's success? These were some of the issues taken during the December 18 Forum of the Philippine Migrants Rights Watch (PMRW) entitled "Migrants' Voices".

Three former migrants were invited during the forum to speak about their migration experiences. The three speakers worked abroad at different times and in different places, and were engaged in different professions. One worked as an executive in Saudi Arabia for 25 years, another worked as an enter-

tainer in Japan for six months, and the other worked as a Materials Specialist in Papua New Guinea. They shared one thing in common though. They all ask whether migration is really worth it.

Working abroad was financially rewarding for the two male speakers who left in order to improve the lives of their families. They were both able to send their children to good schools and were able to provide for all the needs of their families and more. Family relationships were affected though. Being absentee fathers took their toll on their relation-

ships with their children. It became difficult for them to reach out and connect with their children. In the case of one of the speakers, he ended up separated from his wife. The other one almost suffered the same fate. Materials things could not compensate for the long absence of the husband.

In the case of the entertainer who had high hopes before going to Japan, she ended up frustrated. Aside from having been exploited and abused in her work, she was not able to earn enough and therefore did not accomplish what she hoped to.

The decision to go abroad is not always an easy one. It means separation from your loved ones and treading unfamiliar territory. But still, many would rather take the risk because they say that there is no opportunity for them here. Many would go abroad to work because they want to uplift the lives of their families. But in some cases, it is this very decision that has also caused the breakdown of families and the separation of spouses.

Was working abroad worth it? One of the speakers said he does not know. He knew what he had achieved—financial gains, professional success in his career, good schools for his children, and frequent travels abroad for his family. His family life suffered though. He became estranged from his wife and children. The social costs were just too high for him.

The social costs of migration are difficult to measure. We do not have statistics on the number of spouses who have separated because of migration. We do not have statistics of the children whose parents were not there to witness their triumphs and despair. What we have is the amount of dollars being remitted by Filipino migrants. Perhaps, it would be easier to answer the question "who benefits from migration?" rather than "is migration worth it?".



CMA Organized the 4th Dr. Alfredo J. Ganapin Advocacy Series 2006 The Needs of Families Abandoned by OFWs

The 4th and last AJG Advocacy Forum for 2006, *A Round Table Discussion on Social and Legal Remedies to Address the Needs of Families Abandoned by OFWs* was held last December 15, 2006 at the University Hotel, UP, Diliman, Quezon City.

The round table discussion (RTD), organized by the Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), had thirty-three participants representing the Government's Executive and Legislative branches; the local government; NGOs on migrant concerns; OFW families, particularly wives who had been abandoned by their OFW spouses; and, the academe.

The RTD sought to:

1. Better understand and address the family abandonment issue *vis-a-vis* labor migration;
2. Know how the various migration-related Government agencies approach and address the problems;
3. Identify the gaps in existing laws, policies and practices *vis-a-vis* OFW family abandonment and financial support, and;
4. Come up with concrete and practical, social and legal remedies to family abandonment by OFWs, as well as with concrete support programs particular to abandoned women parents and spouses.

Ms. Ellene Sana, RTD moderator, in her backgrounder, noted the existence of laws specific to the family, women and children, adding that Family Courts are "part and parcel of the commitment to preserve the integrity and autonomy of the Filipino family." However, it is the Government's own "continued promotion of labor migration that negates its commitment and efforts to protect the family, the women and their children. Migration breaks apart Filipino families and members must endure prolonged separation from each other. Children of migrant parents grow up under the care of their grandparents and/or of their extended families. Migrant parents become absentee parents to their children, spending, at most, only a few months in a year with them." Thus, despite their noble intentions, current laws and policies "do not sufficiently respond to situations of migrant families."

Ms. Sana also noted cases where families left behind complain of irregular, inadequate and even total discontinuation of financial support from the OFW family-member, a common reason being the founding of another family by the OFW family-member. Still, the abandoned families choose to pursue their cases, both for the children's sake and because of the abandoned spouse's inability to get a job, not for lack of skill or perseverance, but due to domestic and financial constraints.

The Round Table Discussion had two resource persons. The first was Attorney Farah G. Decano, Chairperson, Committee



on Children, Women and Family Relations, *Sangguniang Panlungsod*¹, Dagupan City. Atty. Decano urged attention on challenging questions relative to the acquisition of jurisdiction over the person of the OFW; absence of OFW properties from which the abandoned family may derive alternative support; availment, despite poor implementation, of legal benefits provided by various laws, and; extra-legal remedies available to an abandoned family who, otherwise, cannot afford the legal costs. The second was Attorney Henry S. Rojas, CMA Legal Counsel and Founding Member, Lawyers' League for Liberty (Libertas). Atty. Rojas urged the audience to make continuing studies to explore the magnitude of the abandonment problems and use them as bases for future policy recommendations.

Participants from the various sectors shared their own views in response to the inputs, challenges and recommendations by the two resource persons. Mr. Mar Dumia, Executive Director, Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA), explained OUMWA's mandate and programs. Ms. Lucille Ronda, from the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO), explained CFO's work, which includes regular counseling programs. She also admitted that Government agencies like CFO cannot address all the needs of Filipinos migrating to other countries. Ms. Victoria Navida, from the Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD), mentioned their study on the social cost of migration in Region 1. The study resulted in a protection and prevention module to be pilot-tested at the *Barangay*² levels. She also cited the absence of a multi-agency task to specifically address the social costs of migration. Atty. Arnulfo Maminta, from the Bureau of Immigration (BI), said that the watch-list and the "hold-departure" orders issued by the Secretary of the Department

of Justice are premised on a valid complaint filed in court. He proposed that focal persons should be identified in various Government agencies to address this issue. Atty. Naty Roma from the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC) said extra-legal remedies should include counseling.

Rep. Mayong Aguja, from the AKBAYAN Partylist, recommended the:

1. Establishment of a One-Stop Center for abandoned families, not necessarily a physical center, but with a clear inter-agency referral system;
2. Deployment of more social workers in the posts abroad;
3. Involvement of Local Government Units (LGUs);
4. Harmonization of the national budget to reflect the One-Country-Team-Approach policy, and;
5. Conduct of public hearings by the House Committee on Overseas Workers Affairs on Article 22 of the Labor Code.

Kanlungan Center Paralegal Adviser Erwin Buhawan said the filing of a case should be a last resort as it is tedious and expensive.

CMA Board Member Mike Bolos cited some practical concerns in regard to the implementation of Article 22, particularly for domestic workers who, more often than not, receive low wages at irregular intervals but have to cope with stiff bank remittance charges.

Unlad Kabayan advocacy office Ms. Bernice Roldan urged Government agencies to be creative and pro-active in addressing the problems of migrant workers and their families.

The abandoned wives of seafarers and land-based OFWs drew particular attention to their problems in locating and getting regular and substantial financial support from their husbands



who have settled with and support other women.

In his closing remarks, Gus Cerdena, Programme Officer of Friedrich Evert Stiftung, challenged everybody to pursue the advocacy work for families abandoned by OFWs.

The RTD participants and resource persons recommended the:

1. Study the possibility of including in bilateral agreements the establishment of mechanisms for both the:
 - a. enforcement of court judgments, and;
 - b. implementation of provisions for support to the families left behind by OFWs.
2. Study the feasibility of extending:
 - a. legal assistance to the families of migrant workers and their exemption from court fees;
 - b. legal assistance to Filipino women abandoned by their foreign spouses;
 - c. Government assistance in both respects.
3. Harmonization of the national budget to reflect the One-Country-Team Approach policy.
4. Deployment of more social workers in the posts abroad.
5. Establishment of a One-Stop Center for abandoned families - not necessarily a physical center, but one with a clear inter-agency referral system.
6. Establishment and strengthening of administrative support and other non-judicial mechanisms.
7. Expansion of conciliation and mediation processes and options.
8. For POEA, or other appropriate Government agencies, to:
 - a. study the conditions of the OFWs in terms of their salary ranges, per capita expenses of families left behind, and the quality of life in the country where they work *vis-a-vis* Article 22 of the Labor Code on mandatory remittance arrangements, and;
 - b. base remittance on consensus between the workers and their families.
9. Greater involvement of Local Government Units.
10. Conduct of a public hearing on Article 22, Labor Code, under the auspices of the House Committee on Overseas Workers Affairs.
11. Filing and passage of necessary legislation to further protect the families abandoned by OFWs.
12. Strengthening of socio-cultural values.

Ellene Sana - CMA

Footnotes

¹ City Council.

² Smallest local Government political unit.

Scalabrini Lay Association - SLA

The Scalabrinian Lay Association Inc (SLA) is a communion of Lay people that shares a common vision, in partnership with the Scalabrinian Congregation, committed to the human and spiritual promotion of would-be migrants, their families, and the people on the move.

On July 13 2003, in New Manila, Quezon City, the *First Gathering of Scalabrinian Lay People in the Philippines* was held. In the following 12 months, regular monthly meetings of formation were held. In September 2004, the group took the name of *Scalabrinian Lay Association* and defined its objectives and priorities for the following years.

The SLA being enthused by the Scalabrinian charisma, and following Christ's call to share in His mission to live prophetically, it envisions a society where migration is a free-will decision of every individual and that the self-respect, the human rights and the dignity of migrant workers are protected and advanced from the pre-employment stage up to their return. Specifically, the SLA works

1) To promote and advance the rights and welfare of migrants and their families

2) To raise public awareness on migration phenomenon and related issues

3) To lobby and advocate for the protection of migrants and their families

4) To collaborate with the Scalabrinian Congregations (male and female) in their endeavors in their ministry to migrants and in their vocation-promotion.

In July 2005 the Scalabrinian Lay Association Inc. (SLA) was registered as a non-profit organization at the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and has recently accepted as member of the PMRW.

At present, SLA develops relevant teaching modules on migrant issues and concerns for the conduct of Pre-Employment Orientation Seminars (PEOS) to would-be migrants especially in colleges and universities. The group is in the process of validating the modules, and establishing networks with schools for its pilot programming of PEOS. This PEOS



in school will commence during the first quarter of 2007. SLA coordinates, and participates in conferences, workshops, forums, and trainings.

Sustained formation programs for the regular members are being undertaken, supplementing their actual works with, and for the migrants and their families through various migrant organizations where most number of SLA members are working for.

The SLA office is located at #48 8th St, 2nd floor SCPM Admin. Bldg., New Manila, Quezon City.

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