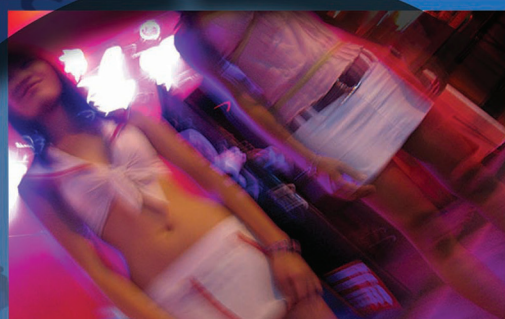


Going Home, Making Good

*Stories of triumph and hope
as told by Filipino women migrant workers
returned from the European Union
and neighbouring countries*



International
Labour
Organization



Regional Office for Asia
and the Pacific

**Economic and Social Empowerment of Migrants, Including Victims of Trafficking
Returned from the European Union and Neighbouring Countries**

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By Paul M. Icamina

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Foreword

The world has become one community, seemingly without borders.

People move from village to village, country to country, continent to continent. At no time perhaps has this mass movement opened opportunities and freedom with such ease and great expectations. About 10 million Filipinos, and counting, now work abroad, on land and in the seas.

They provide the engine that drives the village and the national economy, multiplying the fruit of their labor to the education they guarantee their children, the comfort they provide their families, spreading their prosperity across the land.

In unstable economic weather, they provide anchor to the country with their steady and ever-increasing remittances, solid as a rock amid the global turmoil. More important, these workers assure their families with peace of mind, the security in knowing that they will be well provided for.

Behind the numbers, hidden in disgrace and reproach or simply by the shamelessness and brutality of it all, is the flipside. Countless other Filipino men and women suffer the dire consequences of migration. Promised green pastures, they find instead the gray landscape of unpaid and unworthy wages, unholy working hours, indecent and heavy labor, prostitution and what could only be called modern-day slavery. And all throughout, the fear and the loneliness, the isolation from children, loved ones and families, and the apprehensions of strangers in strange lands.

Many of the working Filipino migrants are the best and the brightest, with college and technical degrees, and they find themselves in work for which they have not been schooled or trained. Many, in turn, learn from their jobs abroad the skills and the knowledge they can bring home.

The International Labour Organization and the European Union, together with their Filipino partners, hope to tap into this asset to encourage those who want to reclaim their roots and ease them into productive livelihoods. We want to nurture their aspirations back home so that, when they so decide, they can continue to pursue their dreams for their children and families and provide them with a better future.

The narratives we present here reflect the sustenance of these dreams and aspirations. Our message is that Filipinos now working in foreign lands are and will be going home. And they, and those who are already in the Philippines, must feel at home with their families, comfortable with their neighbors and communities, decently employed, and stewards of their own enterprises.

And making good.

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Executive Summary

Filipinos, men and women, suffer the dire consequences of migration. Promised green pastures, they find instead the gray landscape of unpaid and unworthy wages, unholy working hours, indecent and heavy labor, prostitution and what could only be called modern-day slavery.

Many of these migrants are the best and the brightest, with college and technical degrees, and many work in fields for which they have not been schooled or trained. Many, in turn, learn from their jobs abroad the skills and the knowledge they can bring home. Returning migrant workers have acquired knowledge and skills that can be transferred and used productively upon their return. They could fill the gap left by departing highly skilled workers. Or they could use their savings for productive investments such as setting up businesses which could generate employment in their communities.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Union (EU), together with the Project implementing partners, hope to tap into this asset and encourage those who want to reclaim their roots and ease them into productive livelihoods. All to continue pursuing their dreams back home. Filipinos have worked overseas for over 20 years and are either approaching retirement age, or are no longer physically or psychologically fit to continue working abroad. Returning home is becoming a more imminent option for many of the estimated 10 million Filipinos now working abroad.

The Department of Labour and Employment is tasked to help returning workers find or start jobs and livelihoods. The Philippines has one of the most developed migration systems in Asia, with policies and programs from pre-departure to return. And yet, reintegration remains the weakest link.

Research commissioned by the ILO-EU shows that overseas Filipinos generally return between three and six years after migration, and are significantly affected by the unemployment situation back home. The Filipino migrant worker is less likely to return home the higher the unemployment rate is in their home towns.

The return may be involuntary due to crisis situations such as wars and forcible deportations. Voluntary returns may be due to the completion of a work contract or the achievement of the migrant's goals. Or intolerable working conditions and family issues compel them to return. Distress due to labor exploitation and other welfare issues are the primary reasons for the return of an overwhelming number of workers. Seven out of every 10 returnees in distress are women. They also return when they have saved enough money and when livelihood opportunities back home are attractive enough.

With support from the ILO, reintegration is being placed on the agenda of local governance, starting with the medium-term plans of Nueva Ecija and Ilocos Sur provinces. Further, through the ILO-EU Project, the country's first- ever Migration and Development Strategic Action Plan is now in place. Hopefully, this initiative will provide a template for replication nationwide.

Most often, when exploited migrants decide to go back or are forced to return, they come home empty-handed. Many are heavily indebted, some face the scorn of their neighbors, others are stressed out in mind and body – with little chances, if any, of earning a living.

With funding from the EU, the ILO provided returning workers with assistance before and after their return to the Philippines, through the ILO-EU Project, "Going Back - Moving On: The Economic and Social Empowerment of Migrants, Including Victims of Trafficking, Returned from the European Union and Neighboring Countries".

It is part of an overall Asia Regional Labor Migration Program that covers Thai and Filipino migrants returning home from the European Union and nearby countries. The ultimate goal of the ILO-EU Project is to provide returning workers with adequate livelihoods to encourage them to stay and not go back, and risk hard labor and sexual assaults again and again.

The ILO has partnered with Philippine authorities and non-government organizations (NGOs), with counterparts in Europe and neighboring countries to bring better options for returning workers. In the Philippines, the ILO is working – among many others – with the Department of Labor and Employment, through the Overseas Workers

Welfare Administration and its National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers; the Kanlungan Centre Foundation, Inc.; and the Batis Center for Women, Inc.

The ILO-EU initiative has started with 1,000 return migrants who have experienced labor and sexual exploitation, including victims of trafficking, in the EU and its neighboring countries.

The identification of beneficiaries, provision of direct economic and social interventions and follow-up work on strengthening local capabilities continue in Nueva Ecija, La Union and Ilocos Sur provinces, as well as in Metro Manila and nearby areas.

The narratives in this book reflect the message that Filipinos now working in foreign lands are, and will, be going home and need to be decently employed, and be stewards of their own enterprises. As many of them are now doing.

Acronyms Used

BTLU	Bannuar ti La Union
DOLE	Department of Labor and Employment
NGO	Non-government Organization
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development
EU	European Union
ILO	International Labour Organization
LUIMCO	La Union Inter-Agency Council for Migrants Concerns
NGO	Non-government Organization
NRCO	National Reintegration Center for Overseas
OFW	Overseas Filipino Worker
OWWA	Overseas Workers Welfare Administration Filipino Workers
PESO	Public Employment Service Office
POEA	Philippine Overseas Employment Administration

CHAPTER 1

Age is changing the movement of Filipino migration

Expect migrant workers home

“**F**ilipinos have worked overseas for over 20 years and are either approaching retirement or are no longer physically or psychologically fit to continue working abroad,” said Stella P. Go, an Associate Professor at the Behavioral Sciences Department of the College of Liberal Arts, De La Salle University, Manila.¹

“On the horizon, returning home is becoming a more imminent option,” said Go, who has observed the wave upon wave of workers leaving home since the 1980s when she led pioneering research on the effects of the diaspora on the Filipino family.

On the flip side, the young are itching to get their feet moving. A study commissioned by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Union (EU) showed that two-thirds of migrant workers in La Union province are in their 20s and 30s, reflecting the national average. Many are college graduates and they leave vital gaps in the labor pool when they leave.

They join about 10 million Filipinos – and counting – who now live and work abroad. Nearly 4,000 Filipinos leave the country every day, observed Go. Some 3,386 actually left the country each day in 2008, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) estimates, putting the number of Filipinos abroad that year at 1.236 million. The next year, the number increased to 1.423 million.

Go observed that most of these Filipinos come from the country's better-off regions, probably because going abroad requires funding that those in the poorer provinces cannot afford.

“The well-off regions presumably get a larger share of the remittances that impact on local economic

development,” said Go, who also heads the Philippine Migration Research Network. “This contributes to greater regional disparities.”

Using the 2008 figures, Go estimated that 8.2 million Filipinos were living permanently or working temporarily in 222 countries and territories that year.

Asia was the second important work destination

Nearly half (47.7%) were permanent emigrants and about the same number (44.3%) were temporary overseas workers. Nearly one of 10 (8%), largely in the United States and Malaysia, were not properly documented migrant workers.

Most (68.2%) emigrants lived in the United States, while the bulk (49.7%) of the temporary migrants worked in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

From the mid-1980s to the first half of the first decade of this century, the Middle East was the primary destination of land-based Filipino workers; most went to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait. They are also in Libya and Israel.

All the money they earned went back to the home country, making the egg basket vulnerable to uncertainties. So much so that the Gulf Wars, the 1997 Asian financial crisis and other dire situations sensitized the government to the need for migration management and preparing for the return of migrant workers.

The 2008 global financial crisis had minimal impact on international labor migration from the Philippines. The crisis affected mostly those in the electronics, metal works and semi-conductor industries in Taiwan and in the construction and service industries in the United Arab Emirates.

Only a small number of workers in Europe, mostly domestic workers and caregivers, were displaced by the crisis. Many returned to the Philippines.

¹ “*The Philippines and Return Migration: Rapid Appraisal of the Return and Reintegration Policies and Service Delivery*,” by Stella P. Go. Research study commissioned by the International Labour Organization (ILO), through the ILO-EU Return and Reintegration Project, Manila, Philippines, August 2010.

Even then, in response to the global financial meltdown of 2008, Administrative Order No. 247 issued in December of that year spelled out government countermeasures against potentially massive job losses. It continues to require the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) to draw a global employment map to identify “Code Green” countries aggressively recruiting foreign workers.

It directed the POEA and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) to establish provincial help desks to match the skills of retrenched or aspiring migrant workers with available jobs in the country and abroad.

At about the same time, Administrative Order No. 248, providing for the Filipino Expatriate Livelihood Support Fund, tasked the Department of Labor and Employment to set aside P250 million from OWWA funds to help returning workers find or start jobs and livelihoods.

Assistance centers at international airports even provided information on redeployment, retraining or livelihood assistance options. Advance reintegration teams were sent to Taiwan and Dubai to assist workers who lost their jobs or were expected to be retrenched. The workers were provided repatriation assistance if they wanted to return to the Philippines or job placement assistance if they wished to continue working abroad.

“The Philippines has the most developed migration system in Asia, with policies and programs from pre-departure to return,” said Go. And yet for all that, she observed, returning workers have been of less concern to the government over the years.

“For the longest time, the Philippine reintegration program remained the weakest link in the overseas employment program of the government,” she said.

Never mind that the return of migrants can benefit economic development. Returning migrant workers have acquired knowledge and skills that can be transferred and used productively upon their return. Or they could use their savings for productive investments such as setting up businesses which could generate employment in their communities. They could fill the gap left by departing skilled and highly skilled workers such as doctors and nurses.

All these, Go said, depend on why migrant workers return; the relevance of their acquired skills; the countries they come from; and the ways the

government and social networks help reintegrate them into society.

Go’s study provides a glimpse of return migration in the Philippines. It cites a number of studies using data from the National Statistics Office that yield interesting insights: Overseas Filipinos generally return between three and six years after migration and are significantly affected by the unemployment situation in the region where they come from.

Who wants to return?

The Filipino migrant worker is less likely to return home the higher the unemployment rate is in their home towns. A one percent increase in unemployment decreased the probability of return by 12 percent to 20 percent; immigrants with permanent residence visas have lower rates of return.

Filipino workers abroad are less likely to return home when the currency exchange does not work in their favor. On average, a 10 percent improvement in the exchange rate reduced the 12-month migrant return rate by 1.4 percentage points. Moreover, those who have been overseas for the shortest (less than two years) and longest (more than three years) periods were less likely to return when there were improvements in the exchange rate.

The return may be involuntary due to crisis situations such as wars and forcible deportations. Voluntary returns may be due to the completion of a work contract or the achievement of the migrant’s goals. Intolerable working conditions and family issues compel them to return.

In a survey of 100 women migrants who returned, six percent said they went back because they had achieved their goals. Most (38%) were back because their contracts had ended; about the same number (32%) cited family reasons, including family problems; 10 percent had work problems.

Distress due to labor exploitation and other welfare issues were the primary reasons for the return of an overwhelming number of workers. Seven out of every 10 returnees in distress were women.

While the number of returnees in distress assisted by OWWA over the last five years is very few relative to the number of workers deployed each year, it is not an accurate picture of the magnitude of the labor exploitation and human trafficking, especially those affecting undocumented workers.

Data since 2005 from the Task Force Against Human Trafficking of the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) reveal victims are women; more cases of abuse occur in Asia (32.2%) and the Middle East (11%) than anywhere else. Interestingly, 76 percent of the women in the study wanted to work abroad again.

Another study shows that between 20 percent and 50 percent of migrants in industrialized countries leave within five years of their arrival, either to return home or to move to a third country in a phenomenon called secondary migration.

They return when they have saved enough money and when livelihood opportunities back home are attractive enough. These are the ones more likely to contribute to the development of communities back home.

Whether they are able to invest their skills and savings and maximize the benefits of migration largely depend on the level of preparedness and the existence of policies at home that facilitate their access to these opportunities.

US\$22.7 Billion by 2015

This is the amount the country should prepare for. And that is just through banking channels, not to say of the cash they bring home in person.

There is a lot more to the remittances that 10 million Filipinos abroad send home; they give families the economic clout to drive the domestic economy. And spread a ripple up and downstream.

Foreign currencies generate 10 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product, the top driver of consumer spending that speeds up national growth and stabilizes the economy in stormy global weather.

The pesos that they send through e-banking, the Internet and the mobile phone expanded 7 percent to \$20 billion in 2011, increasingly going up from \$18.76 billion in 2010 and \$17.35 billion in 2009.²

Most of the money will go to Luzon (P514 billion), the largest island, followed by Mega Manila (P222 billion), Central Philippines (P164 billion) and Mindanao (P100 billion), according to a forecast made by a Manila bank.

In 2011, the World Bank estimates, the Philippines received \$23 billion from Filipinos working abroad.³

²"Remittances seen to hit \$22.7B in 2015." *Philippine Star*. <http://www.philstar.com/Article.aspx?articleId=766346&publicationSubCategoryId=74>
³"Remittances seen to reach \$23B in 2011." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. <http://business.inquirer.net/33159/remittances-seen-to-reach-23b-in-2011>

More than one million Filipino and Thai migrants currently reside in Europe

They are attracted to Europe by the increasing labor demand in services, especially as caregivers and maids or in domestic work.

The Commission on Filipinos Overseas estimates that 954,000 Filipinos live and work on the European continent. Of those, 285,000 are permanent residents, 556,000 are temporary and 113,000 are undocumented migrants.

In many European countries, Thai and Filipino women are among the largest group of women migrant workers, and they are heavily concentrated in the services sector, working as waitresses, in entertainment venues and as domestic workers.

Given their occupational profile and the irregularity of their employment status, it is not surprising that many Filipino and Thai migrant workers have experienced some of the worst forms of exploitation in Europe.

In Southeast Asia, Thailand and the Philippines are major senders of migrants seeking foreign employment.

Since the mid-1980s, Europe has emerged as an increasingly attractive alternative destination for Filipinos.

Filipinos in Europe constitute one of 10 (10.9%) of Filipinos overseas. They are mostly in Italy and the United Kingdom.

Out of every 10 Filipinos in Europe, six are temporary workers, three are permanent emigrants and one is an irregular migrant. France has the highest number (39,000) and proportion (82.8%) of irregular Filipino migrants in Europe, followed by Italy, the United Kingdom and Ireland. Filipinos elsewhere in Europe are mostly in Greece and Cyprus.

Not all have work permits and as many as one in 10 Filipinos in Europe work in an irregular employment status. Most of them are women who are more vulnerable to the worst kind of labor and sexual exploitation.

They escape and seek refuge in embassies or women's shelters, often through the underground for fear of attracting authorities and face deportation and of retaliation from recruiters and traffickers.

Worse, assistance is unavailable or unknown to many, especially undocumented migrants who work in isolation, for example, in cases of live-in domestic work or in-home caregiving. They are unaware of their rights and the assistance they may seek legitimately.

Those in North America and the Middle East were, and remain, the major sources.

Filipinos in Canada and the United States, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates share a big slice of the pie, followed by Germany, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom in Europe, and Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan in Asia.

Less than a fifth comes from the 350,000 Filipino seafarers, a fourth of the world's sailors; their deployment, many of them women in cruise ships, is increasing (over 14 percent) faster than hiring on land (5 percent).

Huge as it is, Philippine remittances are just behind Mexico's (\$24 billion) and barely half of India's \$58 billion and China's \$57 billion. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Vietnam, Egypt and Lebanon are also major players.

The global remittances of \$406 billion in 2011 are forecast by the World Bank to reach \$515 billion by 2014.

It was the first time that remittances to developing countries grew since the global financial crisis of 2008, the World Bank said, although the Philippines was an exception as it continued to experience rising remittances even at the height of the global turmoil of 2009.

It's payback time

Putting the diaspora on the mindset is what it is all about, if you ask Beryl Grace Cruspero who, as a social worker for the Batis Center for Women, has seen the plight of returning workers on the ground.

"It's now our turn to give back, to ensure that returning workers, many who have had bad experiences, do not find themselves hard up and unemployed when they settle home," she said. "Filipinos who have worked abroad had given so much to the country. It's time to pay back."

With support from the ILO, social workers like Beryl are putting the issue of returning workers where it belongs: on the agenda of local governance, from village councils up to provincial governments.

"The good thing is, we are not just focused on identifying potential beneficiaries as before," she said. "Now, in addition to development work, we encourage local officials to put reintegration on their agenda, for the migration agenda to be included in their budgets, in putting provincial and municipal Help Desks for returning workers."

"It's difficult to sink in, but we need to put migration and reintegration into the development plans

of provinces," she continued. "In reality, no one is focused on migrant workers at the local level, including the special needs of reintegration. Local governments may be concerned about women's issues, with disability and the like, but not with reintegration."

With ILO technical assistance, the Batis Center for Women is putting the migration agenda on the medium-term plans of Nueva Ecija and Ilocos Sur provinces and – hopefully – provide a template for replication nationwide.

Going back is a last option

Returning home is often taken when conditions are completely untenable or when deportation is inevitable.

When exploited migrants decide to go back or are forced to return, they usually come home empty handed. Many are heavily indebted, some face the scorn of their neighbors, others are stressed out in mind and body – with little chances, if any, of earning a living.

Like putting food on the table, putting the return of the return of workers on the agenda is the gist of "Going Back, Moving On: The Economic and Social Empowerment of Migrants, Including Victims of Trafficking, Returned from the European Union and Neighbouring Countries".

The ultimate goal of the ILO-EU's reintegration program is to provide these workers with adequate livelihoods in the home country and to encourage them to stay and not go back and risk hard labor and sexual assaults again and again. This way, hard labor and sexual exploitation abroad is reduced and prevented.

As it is in the Philippines, many of those who have gone abroad outside official channels are not reached by existing help lines; many are unaware at all of the help from government and NGOs; many refuse help of any kind. Successful reintegration is undermined and many chose to leave again and risk exploitation and trafficking.

Many victims decline assistance because it is unaccessible. They need to accept assistance with dignity since social stigma is a chronic obstacle to successful reintegration. Authorities abroad and in the Philippines need to coordinate more in providing assistance even before the first step back home is taken.

The ILO has partnered with Philippine authorities and NGOs with counterparts in Europe and neighboring countries to bring better options for returning workers.

In Europe, the ILO is networking with organizations that provide services to migrants

and victims of trafficking. Philippine embassies, international organizations such as the La Strada Czech, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and NGOs have been identified and mobilized.

In the Philippines, the ILO is working with OWWA; Department of Social Welfare and Development; Department of Foreign Affairs Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs; Philippine Overseas Labor Office; Kanlungan Center Foundation; and the Batis Center for Women.

The ILO-EU Project has started with 1,000 return migrants who have experienced labor and sexual exploitation, including victims of trafficking, in Europe and neighboring countries.

At the other end, the ILO-EU Project, has supported work with a few local governments that has raised the migration and return agenda on a higher level.

The identification of beneficiaries, provision of direct economic and social interventions and follow-up work on strengthening local capabilities continue in Nueva Ecija, La Union and Ilocos Sur provinces, as well as in Metro Manila and nearby areas.

Ultimately, labor and migration issues are put right there in local development planning and the creation of local support for the successful reintegration of returning migrant workers.

“Success is relative,” said Leth, or Carmelita Raquiza of the National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers (NRCO). “Our measurement is that they have income every day.”

“The problem with economic integration is that oftentimes it is a one-shot deal, with limitations such as a time frame, from one to at most three years,” said Ande, or Andrea Luisa C. Anolin, Executive Director of the Batis Center for Women. “Then the funds run out.”

“With the ILO-EU Project, we want to redefine the concept of success beyond a profitable enterprise since business is very challenging among returning workers when compared to those with no migration baggage,” she continued. “Even if at some point the business stops, we stress what the women have learned.

“It was most probably their first venture in setting up enterprises,” she said, pointing out that most people are trained as employees and not as entrepreneurs.

“You can measure success right away, in terms of the business profits, but we'd rather gauge it with what they do with what they learned when another opportunity comes around.”

Citing the case of enterprising women in Magsingal, Ilocos Sur, Ande said they are now more disciplined in financial management, aware that profits do not come easy.

“It was part of their learning experience and an opportunity for us to point out that in business, it is important to ensure that the earnings go back to the business and not to personal needs, or at least 50 percent of the net income goes back to the business, the rest to the family or to pay forward like giving 10 percent to the church,” she said.

For the Magsingal women, the process from identifying to setting up a business took about eight months. “In our experience, it was fast,” Ande said. “Business is even part of the therapy. They need to engage in business so they don't think about their bad experiences.

“Because it is difficult for them to get past their psycho-emotional feelings, we use livelihood projects so they get busy with their hands, not their minds. They are busy as a group, they talk with each other.

“It's very real, in terms of the challenges these women face,” she said. “The amount of the capital does not make a difference. It's not a guarantee of success. It's more on the character and the discipline, like bookkeeping and recording, which are essential in actual business.”

Where possible, reintegration starts immediately, as in the case of the Filipina seamstresses who were put under the care of the Philippine Overseas Labor Office in Romania. Repatriation was managed by the OWWA and the Department of Foreign Affairs. Upon arrival, they were given temporary shelter at the OWWA halfway house in Pasay City. The women had no money and were heavily indebted because of unpaid placement fees, in turn caused by the shortened work duration because of wage issues.

The cycle goes on

“This is just part of a huge picture,” said Ching Burgos who coordinates the ILO-EU Project for the Department of Labor and Employment's NRCO.

“For some, it's as if the world has crashed on them,” she said, citing the case of one Filipina who was

maltreated and tied with plastic strips from grocery bags. Upon coming home, the worker discovered her husband was living with another woman. And her 15-year-old daughter pregnant. Caught between a rock and a hard place, she stayed for good anyway.

Others find it hard to settle down, fleeing for a good reason at the very start. "Some are trying to escape from problems," said Leth of the NCRO. "At the end of the day, they decide. We only guide."

Then there are money matters. "They decide to go back and work abroad," she said. "We're trying to make them aware that there is life here, they can find jobs and livelihood here and be with the family."

One woman who returned to Ilocos Sur suffered a bone fracture after she jumped out of a window to escape from an abusive employer. Back home, she was beaten up by her abusive husband; this, after working for five years in Jordan. She went back to Jordan, again to escape domestic violence, and is now employed by an Iraqi.

Even the compensation is not all that matters. "Wages for domestic workers that can be as low as \$100 a month in Libya and Lebanon are not pull factors that are attractive compared here where they can work and stay with family," Leth pointed out. There are more pressing reasons why they go, she said.

Legal action, advocacy

Abroad, the list of grievances is long: Prostitution, debt bondage, forced labor, even abductions.

"In many cases, it's modern-day slavery, without salary and subjected to inhuman treatments like detention and food deprivation," said Erwin Puhawan, the Paralegal Advocacy Officer of Kanlungan (the Filipino word for refuge) Centre Foundation, a legal advocacy group.

Even when recruited by licensed agencies complete with contracts and job descriptions, the workers end up unpaid and suffering from sexual abuse and other indignities.

Erwin pointed to a group of Filipino women who went to South Korea as a music band but forced to strip and do sex acts. When they refused, they were sent home after only two weeks – together with their dreams, the investments they paid to the recruiter down the drain.

At no cost to the victims, Kanlungan is handling their court case. The relationship is equal, a partnership,

Erwin said. "What we want is to empower victims and make them responsible for their cases."

The struggle is uphill. Almost all trafficking cases filed are dismissed. And only about 20 convictions have resulted from about 1,000 trafficking cases filed since the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act was enacted in 2003, he pointed out.

One reason for the low conviction rate is that complainants most often work again in other countries, said Rose Bayan, a social worker who is on top of Kanlungan's outreach program in La Union province. "Justice should be borderless because these are international crimes by nature," she said.

"Some don't leave just because of poverty. They travel again to escape from personal or family problems," she said. "The abuse might be verbal in their overseas jobs, but here they may be physically beaten up by their husbands."

It's not an acceptable rationale, she conceded, "but these people know the pain, it's not for us to say it's better to stay home."

Rose pointed to a study which indicated that 5 percent of more than 1,350 women interviewed said they left because of domestic violence. She said the number could be more because some are hesitant to say the truth, citing poverty instead.

"If it's poverty alone, it's hard to rationalize as some leave at an exorbitant cost, for example paying a P100 thousand placement fee by getting into huge debts," she pointed out. "There are things left unsaid."

Then there are community pressures to go back abroad, she said. "You have to have dollars, you are expected to maintain your financial status."

One must look at the background "more than the surface," she said, citing the case of a young woman in Baguio City who was sexually abused first by her four brothers, then by an uncle. She had good scholastic records but, thinking no one would want her anymore, she went to work abroad instead.

"It's better to have a broken heart than a broken marriage," she told Rose. "The healing process depends on self-concept," Rose said. "If the self-concept is high, and the frustration tolerance is low, the longer the healing process."

Those who have had hardships, who have undergone different levels of difficulties, are better adjusted to healing, she said. "They are much realistic in a sense and have a higher frustration tolerance. Whether they have been raped, molested or just

harassed, it makes no difference, it depends on self-concept.”

And self-concept it is.

The dream of going abroad has almost always been on the consciousness of many Filipinos, in villages and in cities, among the unemployed in city sidewalks and the idle in rural farms, from professionals in offices to academics in universities.

And yet, despite the pervasive influence of migration on life in the archipelago, somehow it remains on the side, a footnote.

With “Going Back, Moving On”, the footnote has been elevated to the national agenda and, hopefully, consciousness.

BATIS CENTER FOR WOMEN

Despite best efforts, psychosocial and counseling services need to reach more communities, especially because of the distance involved, and the limited time for interaction.

With financial support from the ILO-EU Project, Batis Center for Women and its peer counselors go to communities in Ilocos Sur and Nueva Ecija provinces for periodic follow-up sessions with other survivors who were identified under the ILO-UE Project but who could not continue with their sessions.

It uses a popular education approach, developed by Batis peer counselors, that encourages the sharing of experiences to build up self-esteem. The peer counselors are former trafficking survivors who were trained in 2000 to better prepare in dealing with the distressing experiences of newly-identified survivors. Their training sessions centered on leadership, public speaking, management, organizational development, life skills, women’s rights and gender sensitivity.

They now hold sessions that are progressive, with the trafficking experiences of the clients as the starting point for healing, followed by acceptance and coming to terms with the negative outcome of their migration. Life skills workshops are held to help the women learn to make decisions that will have a more positive impact on their lives, strengthen their self-esteem and develop trust in their judgment.

Eventually, the women begin to share with each other their successes in reintegrating back within their families and communities. The group sessions provide a venue for trafficking survivors to begin a road to recovery. New clients receive individual

Channels and Partners

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Union (EU) are putting on track the economic and social empowerment of migrants – including victims of human trafficking – who are returning to the Philippines from Europe and neighboring countries.

The ILO-EU Project started with moves to improve referral mechanisms between the Philippines and two destination countries – Italy and France – and within these two countries. The Philippines already has existing mechanisms to assist migrant workers (in Rome, Milan and Paris, for example) and upon their return.

A faster and more efficient return and reintegration Program of migrant workers is expected as a result.

While abuse and exploitation exist in France and Italy, the number of cases reported to Philippine authorities is low. There are many cases, however, of distressed Filipinos with personal and family problems, including debt payments.

Trade unions in Europe confirm work-related cases involving Filipinos and have extended legal assistance to the workers.

While there appears to be channels where migrants can be assisted, there is inadequate coordination among the appropriate institutions and organizations in countries like Italy and France. And back home in the Philippines.

The ILO-EU “Going Back, Moving On” Project has partnered with Philippine institutions to ease the transition between working abroad and going home.

counseling with a social worker. If the client continues to exhibit psycho-social or psychiatric symptoms, she is provided with professional help from one of the Batis Center’s partners equipped to handle such cases.

The peer counselors closely monitor the new clients with home visits, phone calls or text messaging. At the same time, the Batis Center for Women provides economic reintegration services to migrants returning to Ilocos Sur. Prior to that, the women workers receive counseling and are assessed for personal entrepreneurial competency and career interest.

The women attend basic accounting seminars and, in partnership with UNLAD Kabayan, an NGO

that advocates business opportunities, Batis Center for Women guides and mentors them in developing group and individual business project proposals and feasibility studies.

The initiative has spilled over economic concerns. From individual homemakers who were idle most of the time, they are now productive and have formed a support group where they network and support each other on issues like domestic violence.

Batis Center has proposed the creation of a Provincial Task Force on migrant issues to galvanize an action agenda to support returning migrants. With the support of the ILO-EU Project, it is working to put migration issues and returning workers in the mainstream agenda of the Nueva Ecija provincial government.

KANLUNGAN CENTRE FOUNDATION

For many migrant workers who return home and begin a new life, the very reasons for leaving prod them to leave again. With little or no income, many are heavily in debt to a relative, bank or informal loan sources – or still paying accumulated interest. Leaving again seems like the only choice.

Many trafficking survivors would like to start a small business but they have little or no capital because they lack access to credit. Even if they had the access, they most likely do not have the necessary knowledge or skills to ensure success.

For trafficking survivors who want to stay home, achieving economic stability and independence after experiencing exploitation and abuse becomes a challenge.

With financial support from the ILO-EU Project, the Kanlungan Centre Foundation has developed a socioeconomic reintegration program for trafficking survivors that provides women with both seed capital (in the form of a grant) for a business. The grant goes with business training and psychological counseling needed to succeed in an enterprise.

The goal is to help women develop a steady flow of income for their family and to ensure the grants are used constructively. Kanlungan regularly offers counseling, legal services, training and seminars on illegal recruitment, orientation on international labor migration and human trafficking, gender sensitivity, psychological and psychiatric interventions and, when needed, medical assistance.

Kanlungan social workers promote entrepreneurship through the development of small enterprises. They help returning workers make appropriate decisions on choosing a feasible enterprise to engage in, help them with managing the modest funds they received, and to follow-up on the status of these ventures.

The first part of the training concentrates on the participants “discovering” their inner resources that they can tap to succeed in business and to help them realize their capacity to change their lives for the better. The second part introduces the concept of entrepreneurship and the requisites of a successful enterprise, including market research, business planning, pricing, knowing the competition, business management and financial reporting.

The final exercise involves making the participants produce a business plan for an idea they want to pursue and believe they could manage. The business plan serves as the basis for awarding the financial grant ranging from P6,000 to P15,000 (US\$125–US\$313).

Maximizing the gains

Most of the grant recipients have kept their capital intact. The women have realized and recognized that it is possible to earn money without having to go abroad. Kanlungan has identified migrants who have returned to La Union province who were formerly domestic workers in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Cyprus. It has provided the distressed workers among them with legal counseling and recourse.

Kanlungan provides capital assistance of about P12,500 to assist returned migrants to embark on individual livelihoods ranging from hog and goat raising to retailing, from running small restaurants to establishing hairdressing salons. A couple completed computer training and English proficiency courses at the regional office of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority in San Fernando, the capital city of La Union.

Prior to the release of the grants, beneficiaries receive individual coaching and mentoring from Kanlungan social workers. They attend seminars on decision-making, financial management, savings plans and health insurance.

The families of the returned migrants attend family reorientation and values formation programs.

NATIONAL REINTEGRATION CENTER FOR OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS

The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) is mandated to protect and promote the welfare and well-being of Filipino migrant workers and their dependents.

Even though many workers migrate abroad through proper and legal means, some of them are deceived and exploited during the recruitment stage and by their employers once they enter the country of destination.

With support from the ILO-EU Project, the OWWA developed case management procedures and guidelines for step-by-step return, recovery and reintegration interventions. It makes clear what the provisions of services are abroad when a trafficking case comes to light, and then upon the person's return. The assistance continues until the trafficking survivor is reintegrated back to the community.

Training is conducted for case managers from all OWWA posts – overseas, home office and regional welfare offices – to understand the human trafficking issues. A referral and documentation system, developed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development and the ILO, is undertaken.

The interventions start with OWWA overseas posts that coordinate with the Philippine Overseas Labor Offices, Philippine embassies and consulates and local authorities in the host country. At this point, rescue operations, psycho-social assessment procedures, medical assistance, legal assistance, temporary shelter, repatriation services and preparation for reintegration begin.

Upon return to the Philippines, the well-being of the trafficking survivor continues to be evaluated. Psycho-social interventions – such as stress debriefing, counseling, skills assessment and other related activities – are intensified at this level. Counseling sessions even continue when they return to their communities, many of these in distant villages.

Legal counseling is available along the way, in both the destination country and back home. At home, the OWWA staff includes lawyers and social workers. Legal assistance is provided immediately, especially if requested by clients. This includes filing a case against the local employment agency, when appropriate, and referring the case to appropriate authorities. Cases are filed against the perpetrator or employer abroad, in coordination with the OWWA overseas posts.

OWWA offers a variety of programs and benefits: capital or credit assistance for starting a business, skills training, scholarship grants for children and help in finding employment.

Its National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers (NRCO) is implementing the ILO -EU reintegration program. It pays for legal services and provides psycho-social counseling and case references, as well as livelihood and skills training.

The NRCO has extended capital to return migrants to start them on livelihood and businesses. Many continue sewing, the skill that qualified them for work abroad. To add to this income, they sell variety items, food, rice, cellphone accessories, toys, gifts and fruits. Some even ventured into the buy-and-sell trade, others an Internet cafe, barber shop, spa and saloon and hog-raising.

Before the grants were given, the women were assessed for their career interest and business acumen. Then they attended livelihood training courses on starting a small business; lessons included financial literacy, basic accounting and recording.

After embarking on their individual enterprises, the returning workers decided to group into an association; they initiated a fund build-up out of their income and from their respective businesses.

The share of each member is equivalent to the amount of the capital assistance given them. In turn, the fund will be loaned to members as additional capital for their businesses. In a sense, the group is a savings and loan association to raise capital and generate more income.

Maximizing the gains

The NRCO's National Reintegration Program enables returning workers to maximize the gains of overseas employment, ease the social costs of migration, and cushion the impact of forced repatriation due to unexpected events.

Beneficiaries include those who have decided to return permanently; those who have returned but still desire to leave for overseas employment; distressed returnees, or victims of human trafficking, illegal recruitment or with employment- and health-related problems; and their families.

Counseling involves values formation, family support and the importance of preparing for their return and the realization of their family goals; re-

entry options such as wage employment, livelihood, entrepreneurship and business; and savings, financial planning, money management and investments.

Capability building covers skills training, retooling and upgrading; financial literacy and money management; and entrepreneurship training.

Entrepreneurship is complemented by micro-enterprise development, assistance for business capital (or starter kits), help in obtaining business loans and access to credit facilities, and technology and product development and marketing.

Jobs search assistance for local or overseas employment is made available.

The reintegration program provides rescue and temporary shelter as well as legal, medical, repatriation, airport transfer to residence, and economic assistance.

CHAPTER 2

Pinakbet: A Vegetable Delight

Gilda Genovea sits amid piles of vegetables in all colors, many of them essential ingredients in *pinakbet*, a national favorite.

Pinakbet never tastes better anywhere else but in Ilocano country where the dish originates.

Simple *pinakbet*, the best, requires only vegetables in season with generous portions of tomatoes and garlic, a dash of salted anchovy sauce, and (the secret) heaps of ginger to taste. The requisite vegetables to go are, almost always, string beans, bitter gourds and eggplants.

And Gilda, 36, has them all. Eggplants, bitter gourds and stringbeans are her standard greens; she either grows them or buys the vegetables from neighboring farms.

We are at Naguilian (population: 45,232), a very old town thriving for nearly three centuries in the La Union settlement that the Spaniards built on the west coast of Northern Luzon.

Naguilian is famous for expertly brewed *basi* or sugarcane wine, a potent concoction that spawned a brief revolt in 1807 against the Spanish colonizers when they expropriated the manufacture and sale of *basi*, effectively banning private manufacture of the wine.

Just 42 kilometers away, the town remains a major route to Baguio City, the Summer Capital of the Philippines. It is a part of the famed Naguilian Highway used by the Japanese Army during World War II to transport looted treasures which, legend has it, included the Golden Buddha, the holy grail of treasure hunters in these mountains.

The 8,740-hectare town sits at the fork of two rivers, dominated by the public market and a church constructed by friars in 1739. It was already a hundred years old in 1839, preceding La Union as a province by 11 years.

Naguilian embraces several valleys planted with rice, corn, tobacco, sugarcane and vegetables. Rivers pass through rolling hills. Forests, that form a watershed, provide wood and bamboo for a thriving furniture and crafts industry. Farms (97% of the land) provide food and livelihood for a hard-working people.

So much so that Naguilian, just below the Cordillera Highlands, the country's Salad Bowl, is a major supplier of vegetables.

The Iloko meaning of Naguilian is “where people stay.” And it is in these foothills where Gilda placed a stake, where her modest garden is growing.

Cultivating a dream

From a pile on the sidewalk in the Naguilian Public Market that grew to a stall heaping with greens, Gilda is cultivating her dreams to fruition. “I left because of my ambition for the children to go to school,” she said. “Me and my husband, we never finished high school.”

She left with her dreams to work in Singapore as a domestic helper. Gilda worked for four months; the first month she received no compensation. She then moved to another employer who, again, did not pay her. Not long after, she went back to the old country. “I didn't receive anything, even until the day I went home,” she said.

She left with nothing, and when she returned, she was deprived of everything, even the small refrigerator that remained at home, taken away by the recruiter who was fearful that her return dashed any hope of payment.

Before going to Singapore, Gilda was already vending vegetables in the market. When she got back, she earned a little money to raise corn. From the little profit that she made, she bought vegetables to begin a buy-and-sell vegetable business.

It started with 25 kilograms of vegetables, just enough to fill a big plastic bag, that she displayed on the market sidewalk.

Then came the P15,000 grant from the ILO-EU Project to start a vegetable trading enterprise. Today, she sells two tricycle loads of vegetables twice a day here at the Naguilian Public Market, about P5,000 worth of vegetables per tricycle when prices are right, about P3,000 worth when low.

The business is expanding, Gilda said. At the Naguilian Public Market, the vegetables are either paid for in cash, or in installments for a maximum of one month. She even sends a jeepload of vegetables for sale in Baguio City every day, on a cash basis or payable upon the next delivery the following day.

Gilda is now into contract growing with 10 farmers. She buys the seeds and finances the fertilizers and pesticides. She is paid for in kind, in cash or in installment. She has one carabao or water buffalo, two goats and six cows – all raised by partners in an arrangement where she gets the first offspring, the partners get the next, then she in turn, and so on.

Now she wants to buy a tricycle of her own; a tricycle is a passenger cab attached to a motorcycle, a popular way to get around. Buying a tricycle is not a bad idea, considering that it costs P100 each time a trike hauls vegetables to the town market.

The market, and life, is good. “It’s a little bit easier now, we don’t borrow money from neighbors anymore,” Gilda said. “It’s just enough for our needs.” What’s important, she added, “is that we don’t think anymore where we will get our next meal.”

No, she wouldn’t want to go back to Singapore or anywhere else, saying: “Not anymore, I will stay here.”

There are many vegetable traders in the public market who used to work in foreign lands, she pointed out. Abroad, she said, “you can’t do what you want to do, you can’t move as you wish, you have to follow your employer’s every single whim.” Here, she observed, “as long as you’re industrious, you can make it.”

“If you can find a profitable livelihood here, stay put,” she continued, “You never know what will happen abroad, you don’t know the habits of people there.”

The attraction of other shores is not so easy to break. Perhaps unwittingly, she wishes her children would finish college and “use their education abroad.”

As quickly as she said that, she added: “It’s hard to be a servant in other countries.”

All for the family

All the savings of the Genovea couple “are for the children’s future.”

“I have a refrigerator now, a washing machine, television but no cable TV yet,” Gilda said. “The blessings that we got back are more than enough. It just took hard work.” She is satisfied enough not to contemplate bringing charges against the recruiter who sent her abroad.

Gilda and her husband Erwin, 35, have other plans. Their daughter, Wendel, a junior at the Naguilian Science High School, has a promising future. She has free tuition and gets a P1,300 monthly allowance. For college, Wendel wants to enroll at the Philippine Military Academy, the elite military school in Baguio City. Their son, James Daryll, is a freshman at the same high school where he also gets free tuition.

When we met Gilda, she was pregnant. And crying most of the time, in sorrow when she recalls her pains abroad, and in joy when she relates her life today.

“My dream is for all my children to finish school,” she said. “This time, I don’t know. Vegetable prices fluctuate, sometimes good, sometimes not so. “We don’t hold life in our hands, we can’t promise them anything.”

“Still, as the Lord wills, I am able to breathe easier now.”

CHAPTER 3

A Bittersweet Adventure

*“You are immortal and never fades,
but bloomed forever in renewed youth.”*

Rose to Amaranth, **Aesop’s Fables**

The amaranth was sacred in ancient Greece, believed to have special healing powers, a symbol of immortality that adorned images of the gods.

The Greeks called it amarantos or “unwithering” and, because the deep pink-red flower does not fade easily, it symbolized immortality.

Known locally as *kulitis*, cooked as soup or stew, the leaves and grains provide Vitamin C, dietary fiber and minerals.

“Noodles Fortified with Pulverized Amaranth Leaves” is the research paper that was awarded Third Place by the Department of Science and Technology during a regional invention and innovation competition.

The research was made by Crystel Claro, 16, a consistently Honor Roll student, and submitted to the Naguilian Science High School where she studies.

An elder sister Claredhine, 18, should have graduated from college by now but stopped schooling for lack of resources. Instead, she took a vocational course in hotel and restaurant management and has won in an inter-school culinary contest with her recipe for squash leche flan (milk custard).

Sibling Camille is also in the Honor Roll as a First Year high school student in the same school. Emil Marc is in Grade 5. Jesylle Jane, the youngest, is still breastfeeding.

They are the children of Sally and Jerry Claro of Dalipawon village, Naguilian town.

And thereby hangs a tale of a family brought close together by a bitter-sweet adventure, sometimes culinary, sometimes arts and crafts, many times harrowing – and all the time their story immortal, like the amaranth, in their never-losing hope.

Sally came back from Lebanon in 2007. She went to Beirut in March 2006 just when tensions were about to boil into war. She stayed through the thick of the conflict and left for home in early January the next year.

Her contract said she was to work as a hotel receptionist, but the paper was signed by another person whom she did not know and never met. Arriving in Beirut, Sally was asked to sign another contract and the \$200-plus-overtime she was promised in the Philippines became \$150.

“I was a slave,” Sally said.

After three months, when fierce fighting erupted between Israeli forces and Lebanon-based guerillas, her first employer fled to Saudi Arabia; Sally said she was sold for \$2,000, supposedly the cost of getting her out of an agency contract. After a month and a half, the original employer returned and “bought” her back.

She ended as an all-around maid, nanny, caregiver to a bedridden grandmother, and janitor in a hospital owned by her employer’s family. She did manicure and pedicure in their beauty salon and at times did accounting work as a bookkeeper in the family-run school.

On top of that, she had to take care of a special needs child and gave tutorial lessons to another girl. She received no overtime and her wages were not remitted

back home. The money was supposed to be transferred through Western Union and confirmed by telephone but Sally was never allowed to go out and call home. “I was hidden from my family,” she said.

Another Filipina got through to her parents in Naguilian; upon hearing of her condition, they raised and paid P60,000 to pay the recruitment agency so Sally can immediately return home.

But locating her address in Lebanon was almost impossible. Meanwhile, Kanlungan Centre Foundation, a legal advocacy group, filed a case against the Beirut agency although Sally was actually recruited by a Philippine affiliate agency. The Beirut employer asked \$2,000 for her release, an amount pared down to \$1,800 and paid for by Sally’s sister-in-law who was working in Switzerland.

When Sally asked for her salary, she was told the money was going to the recruitment agency first. She sent a text message to her sister-in-law in Switzerland from whom she learned the agency had been paid in full a long time before.

The sister-in-law faxed the receipts to the Philippine Embassy in Geneva where the ambassador initiated Sally’s recovery. She then sought help from the United Nations and from Caritas, a Catholic relief agency. Meanwhile, the embassy contacted Sally’s Beirut employer who was told the family has been looking for her for a long time.

It was then that Sally was accused of stealing money and jewelry; her former (second) employer testified this was not true. She was put in an immigration holding cell.

“I was made the culprit,” Sally remembered. “I couldn’t take it anymore. I was afraid I was dying, that only my name would reach the Philippines.” The family never received a single dollar for all of Sally’s troubles, not even her wages from the second employer.

When immigration authorities went to get Sally’s things, the first employer had left for Saudi Arabia and was never charged. Sally did not recover her belongings either.

The immigration holding cell in Beirut was so full of Asians who were suffering from varying degrees of mistreatment, they had to make do with whatever provisions were available.

“I received a pair of pants that looked like rags, a piece of cloth that was tied into a bra,” she recalled.

“I looked like a homeless person, unwashed and with greasy hair.”

And then it was time to leave.

When the airline pilot announced they have entered Philippine air space, the repatriated workers all jumped and shouted in joy. “Even if you’re still up in the air, you suddenly realize that nobody could hurt you anymore,” Sally said. “We were like new-born babies seeing the light for the first time, we were all crying.”

Upon arrival, they were wailing. (The word she used, “*hagulgo!*”, is emotionally deeper.)

“When we arrived in Manila, we were so hungry and had no money,” she said. “One of my companions was raped in the Middle East and had to suffer abortion there. Another was physically disabled.”

“I got home looking so deranged my husband didn’t recognize me,” she said. “My rubber flip-flop sandals were mismatched. My hair had gone white and it has remained white since.” Then she collapsed. “Whatever strength and courage I had left, gave in.”

After a week, she was approached by a Kanlungan staff member and a legal officer in order to continue the case against the Beirut and Manila recruiters. She won the case and was paid with P40,000, paid for in installments.

Fighting for humanity

“It’s not the money that we fought for, it’s our humanity. We were treated like pigs. So many Filipinos who suffered like us still remain there.”

In February 2011, Sally received a P13,000 grant from the ILO-EU Project administered in La Union by Kanlungan Centre Foundation.

That was after she joined in late 2010 a series of counseling, livelihood and peer-support seminars organized by the ILO-EU Project for women who worked abroad and wanted to settle down.

“It was therapeutic, we were taught how to let go, shared our experiences, and those who came from Beirut were called the Lebanon Run-away Beauties,” Sally laughed. “I thought I was so lucky, I had the full support of my family, of ILO and Kanlungan, and of my church.”

(She belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints or Mormons as they are called here.

“Our church believes that we all have talents, we just need to look at what we have and develop them,” Sally said.

“However we felt bad inside and financially cheated, with our own family problems, the counseling sessions were therapeutic,” Sally said.

In some of the seminars, the women learned how to make feasibility studies and market research, where to source materials, who the competitors are. They realized that getting a grant, let alone putting up an enterprise, was easier said than done.

She chose to open a small store because a piggery would have been a no-no in her crowded neighborhood; and there was no vacant land available to raise goats. The idea for a store was approved and Sally quickly learned that all receipts must tally as specified by the grant.

“Prior to the approval of her business proposal, a screening process was done by Kanlungan to see to it that environmental factors such as pollution are considered aside from the market potentials,” said Rose Bayan, a social worker who supervises Kanlungan’s activities in La Union province. “Sally and her family were made aware of this, right from the very first day.”

“Her proposal was approved because Sally was assessed to have the capability and capacity to create a market for her store,” Rose continued. “She is a very enterprising woman, with a knack for cooking, sales and marketing.”

Sally had to suspend operations when her mother-in-law got sick and nobody was able to tend to the store.

To make ends meet, she started selling packed meals at the Naguilian Science High School and the nearby Cabaritan Elementary School, about 1.5 kilometers from the town center.

Her Mormon Church group taught Sally how to make bags and was trained on how to be self-reliant. It so happened that the previous year, the town regulated the use of plastic and banned plastic straws used for soft drinks. Sally, with the help of her children, started making the plastic straws into accessory bags.

The bags project started in November 2011. By December, she was selling the bags at P100 (small) to P350 (large); by Christmas time, she had one order for 15 large bags. It takes one person about a day to craft 90 pieces of straw into a large bag.

At the same time, Sally does manicure, pedicure and hairdressing services in the neighborhood, skills that she learned in the seminars organized by Kanlungan for the ILO-EU Project.

In between all these, she was a “sales consultant” for a cable TV company. She peddled cable connections from house to house – and sold customers to channel surfing.

A viable venture

In 2008, she befriended a cable TV client who invited Sally to a birthday party. There were so many visitors that there was not enough food, so she helped cook extra dishes. The lady friend found Sally’s cooking delicious and proposed a catering business - the friend as capitalist, Sally as chef, both equal partners.

To hone her skills, Sally enrolled in a six-month culinary course at a local college. Then they did baptisms, weddings, school affairs, seasonal events, birthdays, the rounds. They even catered to some of Kanlungan’s seminars.

The profit depended on the customer’s budget. A typical P3,000-menu for 20 people included morning snacks (rice cakes, instant juice), lunch (fried fish, pork stew, fresh pineapple desserts) and afternoon snacks (stir-fried noodles, instant juice). Deducting the expenses (about P2,000), they shared what was left (P1,000).

A wedding in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, had a P150,000-budget for the whole village: a whole cow roasted; five pork dishes, mostly stews, from three pigs; and more dishes from 25 chickens.

They do a lot of catering in Vigan – 165 kilometers north of Naguilian – almost once a month, many of them for expatriate workers on vacation from Italy.

In 2010, even before the ILO-EU grant, the partners earned P20,000 each.

“The dishes are family recipes,” Sally said. “We like to innovate on the food we eat.” Like cooking pasta at home with minced eggplants to substitute for expensive ground meat, table milk instead of tomato sauce, and chopped peanuts instead of cheese toppings.

It’s not surprising that the culinary streak has caught up with the children who help in the catering when they can. And that Crystel’s prize-winning research focused on noodles fortified with amaranth leaves and that Claredhine cooked up a squash custard in a culinary competition.

“You really have to work, with all the children and the increasing prices of things,” Sally said.

Given the experience she suffered abroad, she still hesitated, when asked, if she would ever go away again under more favorable circumstances. You can’t blame her. After all, she has a sister and two nephews working in Canada and a niece in Singapore.

Family first

“I saw the trauma that the children suffered,” Sally said. “They saw how their father was so depressed, they had to hide a rope and the kitchen knife to prevent him from thinking about suicide.

“They were ashamed that their mother was abroad for a long time and yet the family was still poor; the neighbors were whispering I might have partnered with another man,” she added.

“And I had a hard time winning back my children’s trust, it was providential we were in our church group, I united my family back again, slowly, slowly,” she said. “I won back my husband as well.”

“Sally used to cry because she felt alienated from her children as a result of the prolonged separation,” Rose related. “But Sally is fortunate because her husband Jerry took good care of the children the best way he can. The couple is among the few who have the strength to keep the relationship work.”

Rose said that reintegration becomes difficult for some because they not only have to adjust with the children but had to attend to marital concerns because the husband may be engaged in another relationship and may have neglected the children.

Jerry doesn’t drink nor smoke, as befits a Mormon. For work, he drives a jeepney, the Philippine public transport workhorse.

“We don’t have much money but are contented with life. We have no fear, and we have realized one need not leave this country to earn. To preserve the family is more valuable, even if we are poor, even if sometimes we don’t have much for a meal, just canned sardines.”

“We play at night, we study the Bible, we’re happy,” Sally said. “When I come back from catering, my children ask how much money I made, whether I brought food home.”

At these moments, Sally realized her family members were like close friends bonding and sharing, feeling as if she was not a mother but a sibling and an equal.

The Christmas table would be meager this season. The treats the family is expecting from her sister in Canada is not coming as she had other urgent financial needs.

“As my mother put it, what do you need money for when you are dead? When one is alive, one can look for money again,” Sally pointed out. Ever hopeful, and enterprising, she plans to open a small store again.

“With the Lord’s help, my sister will be stable enough to help in my children’s schooling as Crystel enters college,” she said. “We have recovered.”

Sally is now being groomed by Kanlungan Centre Foundation to lead the support group for trafficked women in La Union province.

CHAPTER 4

It's a Girl Thing

From a trickle of 14,000 people in the 1970s to 1.5 million in 2009, the stream of migrants moving out of the Philippines to seek better paying jobs abroad has grown in leaps and bounds, with a conservative count of 8.5 million Filipinos who now work in 194 countries.

More than half of them are women.

One of the largest founts is La Union province, where one of every 16 residents works abroad. In this province, the proportion is even higher: over six of 10 are women.

In all 19 towns, women outnumber the men in seeking better opportunities in other countries. Their number far exceeds the males in the upland towns of Burgos, Santol, San Gabriel and Bagulin, places where opportunities are severely limited.

In all, nearly 30,000 people in La Union are working abroad. These are the ones registered with the government. The number is way high if the undocumented ones are included.

A landmark study of migration in La Union – made by Kanlungan Centre Foundation, a legal advocacy group that helps returning women – shows that migrant workers from La Union are more likely than most to be female and married.

“La Union reflects the global trend on the feminization of labor migration,” the study observes. “The mother's absence is deeply felt in the very closely-knit Filipino family. The scars are more than deep and are permanent, especially among children.”

This hampers the development of stable, cohesive and productive communities. And it fits the profile of Virgie Cariaga of Baracbac Este village, Balaoan town, La Union. Virgie is trying to break away from this mold. And she is succeeding.

Balaoan is about 40 kilometers from San Fernando City, the capital. Less than an hour away, the sleepy

town is light years away from the city bustle. This is rice and tobacco country around which the lives of farmers revolve, day in, day out, year in, year out. Virgie would like to tap on this life cycle.

She has a small store and one of her best sellers is rice. She sells the grains at P32 per kilogram. Because rice is a staple that no self-respecting family would do without, come rain or shine, Virgie always stocks up with two 50-kilogram sacks of rice.

Wet and dry

“Come the rainy season, milled rice is a lot more expensive compared with rice that is newly harvested,” she said

Economics 101 is not necessary to grasp the simplicity of Virgie's math. For that matter, meteorology may be more appropriate. That's because there are only two seasons in the Philippines – the wet and the dry. Here in Balaoan, the dry months stretch from November to April; it is rainy for the rest of the year.

It is during the wet season that Virgie would like to do a killing, when it is planting time for rice.

Her husband, Alejandrino, used to be a rice farmer until a mild stroke slowed him down to helping in the family store. So the couple knows exactly what they are talking about.

It is currently the dry season for planting tobacco and corn. Balaoan is essentially a tobacco town, produces among the best leaves in the region.

“Tobacco is difficult to grow, from seeding until harvest,” Virgie said. “It is hard labor, especially the weeding part. It might be a cash crop but risks putting farmers deep in debt with financiers and buyers.”

Which is why, given enough capital, Virgie is interested in rice trading. Look at her math: She buys

unmilled rice right after harvest at P10/kg. Add P3/kg. after drying the rice openly in village plazas, school playgrounds, paved highways or basketball courts.

It gets better during the rainy days when the husk of unmilled rice turns slightly dark and sells even cheaper. "It really doesn't make a difference, the coloration only affects the husk," Virgie said. Mill the rice and sell it for P17.50 a kilogram, and one can see what it is all about.

One has to trust her numbers, because this is one calculating lady. Virgie is a graduate of St. Louis University-San Fernando with a degree in Political Science (she had subjects in social work as well before shifting courses).

Escape

It was less than a year after returning from Lebanon when Virgie applied for a grant from the ILO-EU Project that provides livelihood to returning workers and administered by Kanlunan. That was in February 2011.

She left in September 2008 and came back in November 2010. She applied for a grant from Kanlunan and was given P15,000 to start the small store. But that is getting ahead of the story.

Her travels and travails started a long time before that. In 1989, she worked as a domestic helper in Bahrain for nine months using a passport in another person's name. She went home for a few months then proceeded to Qatar for three months in 2004, also as a domestic helper, but legally this time. She served a household of 17 persons and was on call for 10 children, their parents and grandparents – as well as the parents' siblings.

She then worked for two years in Lebanon. She remembered having allergy from her elbows down to her fingers – due to the detergents she used in cleaning glass windows.

"There were CCTV cameras everywhere except in the toilets," she recalled. "There was even one in the kitchen, so how do you eat without being conscious about it?"

Sometimes, when served with fried chicken, salad and soft drinks, her employers would take photos of her enjoying the meals as "evidence" that she was being treated well, she said.

She wasn't receiving any wages for about a

year, having sent money home three times only. The last remittance went to the agency; before that, three months' worth of salary went to pay for her air fare (instead of two months as agreed).

"Even then, we have already paid P11,000 to the recruiter who came from my very own village," Virgie recalled.

She escaped from Lebanon, she said, particularly because of one thing -- she barely ate.

When she renewed her passport, the employer wanted it extended to seven years. A Philippine embassy officer took one look at her photo and refused to renew it. The official said: "What's on this passport is no longer your face. You better go home before you die here."

After one month, after intensive interviews at the embassy, she was told to leave. She grabbed the chance when her employer was out and was tasked to take the garbage out. Virgie hitched a ride with a gravel truck manned by Pakistani migrant workers. Pleading for them to bring her to the Philippine Embassy, she was told to take a taxi halfway to her destination.

She didn't have any money and was unable to pay the taxi fare. "The Lebanese driver was angry but shrugged it off, saying he couldn't do anything," she recalled.

Virgie went straight to the embassy with only two sets of clothes. She spent two months inside the embassy before finally going home with 159 other Filipino women workers, "many of whom were nearly out of their minds."

Moving on

A year later, Virgie was moving on – with a little help from the small store that the ILO-EU Project helped set up. It is the only one serving 50 households in the immediate neighborhood. The next store is about 500 meters away, in another village.

With the small profit she has raised, Virgie has bought a second-hand refrigerator for softdrinks, ice and frozen products like hotdogs and dressed chicken.

Every other day, she replenishes the groceries in town, about P2,000 to P3,000 worth. There are days when all her merchandise are sold out.

"I always have stocks on hand so I can roll the money to get goods again," she said, adding that sales had been increasing, especially with the special credit

Relatives, for example, get a credit limit of P500. For others, it is considerably less.

Neighbors, friends and relatives are ready markets for a direct-selling scheme for shoes, handbags, lingerie and bathroom products that Virgie sells. “I earn 25 percent for each item,” she said, “and yes, my clients pay faithfully.”

These clients now number around 100, many of them across the river from her village, and some as far as San Fernando where she sometimes buys some of her store items anyway.

On the side, Virgie sold two free-range pigs for slaughter. With the profit, she bought another pig and a goat, “This is okay,” Virgie sighed of her life back home. “Abroad, you're in the grip of employers, there are no day-offs. Here, you can eat what you want,” she said, referring to the sandwich she was given once a day in Lebanon. “We were not allowed to open the refrigerator, which was always locked anyway,” she remembered.

“Most of the food we had came from restaurants, it was rare when we cooked. And there were heaps and heaps of dishes to wash.”

Virgie, who worked in a six-storey house, cleaned two floors every day, including the stairs, which she counted had exactly 120 steps. “That's every day,” she said. “My chores started from 6 in the morning to midnight, even 1 a.m. or 2 a.m., then it's time to work again at 5 in the morning.”

Sometimes, her employer forgets to send her meals. All meals and drinking water came from the offices upstairs.

Virgie now refuses to go abroad, although she might just change her mind if it is the United States. But never, she said, if the destination is the Middle East. Which is puzzling since her daughter Eden Joy, 22, now works as a nurse in Dubai. Perhaps the job description changes it all.

Eden Joy was just an infant when Virgie went to work in Qatar. A sister who works in a bank financed the college tuition. Eden Joy now sends text messages to Virgie every night, sends money regularly to tide the family over, and has postponed a planned vacation just so younger sibling Florence, a sophomore in college, can pay tuition.

Florence, now 19, was a second year college student when she had to stop school when money from Virgie was not coming from Lebanon.

Virgie admitted her children can save a lot when they work abroad – provided one is treated well and the salary is reasonable.

“But if it's hardships that they will encounter, it's better here, where you can rest anytime and go where you want to go,” she said. “If you can earn it here, it's better that you stay.”

Every day, Virgie saves P50 as a matter of routine. “It's really for the rainy days, for emergencies,” she said. “I haven't tried saving in a bank yet, the rest of what I earn I re-invest in the store.” So that, her reasoning goes, she has tuition money.

Her priority remains the education of Florence. “Nothing will happen if we depend on the store alone,” she said. “It's not even enough for her transportation, not to say of the tuition.”

Florence needs anywhere from P17,000 to P22,000 per term to study Information Technology in a private university. A government school offers the same course for P3,500 a semester, but then it means putting Florence in a dormitory, which would mean that her sister Eden Joy must help, and that she must live in the city, and so on and so forth.

Decisions that she must make in a hurry.

“If she doesn't study, Florence will end up pulling weeds in the rice fields,” she said.

“As long as she finishes school and gets a good job, then everything's fine.”

CHAPTER 5

The Union of Towns

La Union is truly of the Ilocos. It was carved by Spain's Queen Isabela in 1854 from the Ilocos provinces -- nine towns from Pangasinan, three of Ilocos Sur and then the villages of the eastern Pais del Igorotes (The Land of the Igorots) in the Cordilleras.

All of 1,498 square kilometers, the smallest of four Ilocos provinces, it is a major provider of the Filipino scattering. Although this may not be too obvious from a distance, overseas migration shapes the provincial economy.

About two-thirds of workers from La Union are in their 20s and 30s, roughly similar to the national average and that of the Ilocos region.

This is likely to be an underestimate. More than one of 10 (12.9%) of all college graduates in the province work abroad. Indeed, almost a third of workers from La Union who now work abroad are college graduates.

In a profile of migrant workers made by Kanlungan Centre Foundation, 56.5 percent of them work as domestic workers, seven percent as laborers, 3.5 percent as factory workers, 2.8 percent as seafarers, and 2.7 percent as caregivers.

These workers are skilled and better educated, with many having college degrees. Twenty-three percent are college graduates, 35 percent are college undergraduates or vocational graduates, and 32 percent have finished high school.

The exodus of better-educated workers will cause gaps in local skills when these workers leave their jobs. Because majority work as domestic helpers, their employment abroad leads to their “de-skilling”.

On the other hand, sending young workers abroad, especially if their work is related to their professions, allows them to gain more knowledge and experience. When these workers return to the province for good, they are an asset to their communities.

What? Majority of workers from La Union belong to the rich and the middle class: nearly a quarter (24.5 %) are from the richest tenth of the population. Only 5.1 percent belong to those considered to be the poor income groups.

This imbalance hampers the government's effort to narrow down the income gap between economic classes, further worsening inequality. It may indicate the inability of low-income groups to satisfy the requirements of getting a job abroad.

There is a notable inflow of migrants from other provinces into La Union, which further strains the province's capacity to meet the growing requirements of its own residents.

At least 7 percent of migrant workers surveyed by Kanlungan left the country with tourist – not working – visas. This limits the ability to track and provide them assistance when needed. This prevents a migrant worker from seeking protection abroad.

There is plenty of ground for which to seek protection. Problems encountered by migrant workers from La Union include maltreatment (4.45%), contract violation (2.3%), health-related problems (2%), and non-payment of wages (0.9%).

Nine of those surveyed admitted they experienced sexual abuse while working overseas. This may be the tip of a larger problem; based on the case management experience of Kanlungan, migrant workers seldom report sexual abuse due to the stigma that follows.

Sensitive and complex cases add to the many social concerns that need to be addressed by local governments. Add to that the findings of the National AIDS Registry of the Department of Health that shows more than 30 percent of those who have been infected by HIV are Filipinos who have worked abroad.

Where? The most common destinations are Asia and the Middle East.

The Survey on Overseas Filipinos from 1997 to 2003 shows that anywhere from 70 percent to 90 percent of workers from La Union go to other Asian countries and to the Middle East and North Africa.

The same survey shows that the most common countries of destination are Hong Kong-China and Saudi Arabia. In comparison, about 7.4 percent go to the U.S. and Canada and 1.9 percent to Europe.

A Kanlungan “mapping” of migration reflects these trends, with Saudi Arabia (where 18.6% of Filipino workers go), Hong Kong-China (16.3%), Singapore (10.7%), United Arab Emirates (7.3%), Taiwan (5.8%), Canada (5%) and the United States (4.5%) as the most popular destinations.

In the future, job prospects may be diminishing. Jobs for Filipino workers in Saudi Arabia will soon decrease as the looming implementation of a new labor

policy known as “Nitaqat” or Saudization compels companies to limit the number of their foreign employees.

The political turmoil and economic slowdown in a number of Middle East countries may force Filipino workers to return home prematurely.

The global economic slowdown that has weakened the U.S. dollar has lowered the exchange rate to the disadvantage of Filipinos sending dollars home.

Why? The Philippines is relatively better off in terms of the Human Development Index which ranks it 84th among 178 countries. However, it is a bottom performer in narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor; in terms of income inequality (Gini index), it ranks 42 among 130 countries.

La Union in 2006 had the 10th highest human development level among all provinces. It scored

Helping Hands

The Provincial Government lends its support through the work done in the Regional Inter-agency Council Against Trafficking.

The provincial arms of the Philippine National Police, Department of Justice and the Department of Social Welfare and Development pitch in with other agencies and NGOs at the La Union Inter-agency Council for Migrants Concerns, co-chaired by the Governor and the Diocesan Desk for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People.

The provincial government supports the Bannuar ti La Union (BTLU), an association of migrant returnees and families of migrants still working overseas, by providing free office space and financial assistance for micro-lending projects.

It now partners with BTLU to reach out to families in need of financial assistance such as micro-lending.

Law student associations want to serve as paralegal officers in migration-related cases.

The Public Employment Service Office (PESO) is linked to the regional office of the Department of Labor and Employment, and hosts the OFW Help Desk for Migrants.

Some municipalities have adopted the same arrangement with PESO which is more known to the public for providing employment opportunities. It can provide a centralized mechanism to organize legally-compliant employment and recruitment information and assistance to job-seekers.

In Naguilian (a town with a high number of residents working overseas), BTLU is currently engaged by the municipal government to handle the Migrants' Desk. This

arrangement demonstrates an innovative partnership consistent with the provisions of the Local Government Code to provide specific public services directly to target groups.

The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) has one of its three regional centers in San Fernando City. It conducts pre-employment seminars to help departing workers avoid illegal recruiters and traffickers. It allows workers returning to their jobs overseas to have their documents verified and processed in San Fernando, instead of having to go to the POEA main office in Manila.

The POEA Regional Office attends to the grievances of workers who are victims of illegal recruitment and trafficking. It has forged memoranda of understanding with 16 of the 20 municipalities regarding the prevention of illegal recruitment

The regional office for the Ilocos Region of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), based in San Fernando City, hosts all government regional offices, including the Department of Foreign Affairs consular office which attracts passport applicants from Northern Luzon.

Several government agencies provide services to overseas workers and their families: Department of Trade and Industry, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Public Attorney's Office, Commission on Human Rights, Department of Justice, Bureau of Immigration, National Bureau of Investigation, Philippine National Police, Department of Science and Technology, Department of Health, and the Department of Agrarian Reform.

They can be tapped to join and contribute to a province-wide program on migration and development.

Top to Bottom

A number of international instruments and regional declarations provide adequate legal and policy frameworks on migration.

The international instruments include: international covenant on civil and political rights; international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights; convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; convention on the rights of the child; convention on the protection of the rights of all migrant workers and their families; ILO forced labor convention; ILO migration for employment convention and migrant workers convention; ILO convention on child labor; and protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons.

The ILO Decent Work Agenda provides a globally-acceptable framework to craft employment and migration policies at the national and local levels.

The regional instruments include the Association of Southeast Nations declaration against trafficking in persons, particularly women and children; and declaration on the promotion and protection of the rights of migrant workers.

Bilateral agreements address a wide range of issues in international migration. Under the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement, conditions for the entry of Filipino nurses and caregivers to Japan in the initial two years of the agreement are specified, including a quota of 1,000 individuals.

The proposed Philippines-European Union Partnership and Cooperation Agreement contains migration-related provisions.

In Asia, the Philippines has been the most successful among the labor-sending countries in negotiating bilateral agreements.

Since the overseas employment program began in 1974, it has successfully forged 44 bilateral labor agreements with 22 countries on employment, welfare and general labor cooperation, 12 social security agreements with 10 countries, and 44 agreements of the recognition of seafarers' certificates.

Bilateral agreements with Norway, the United Kingdom, Papua New Guinea, Taiwan, South Korea, Switzerland and Spain are largely recruitment agreements.

The agreements with Norway, the United Kingdom and Spain specify the terms and conditions regulating the recruitment of Filipino health professionals. An agreement with Sweden specifies the terms and conditions for the exchange of Filipino professionals and technical trainees.

The agreement with Papua New Guinea details the terms and conditions for the employment of Filipino

workers under a non-citizen employment contract.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the Philippines and Taiwan implements a special hiring facility that allows employers in Taiwan to directly hire Filipino workers without the intervention of manpower agencies. The agreement includes the commitment of both parties to advance the interest of both the employers and the Filipino workers.

A Memorandum of Understanding between the Philippines and the government of British Columbia in Canada has a specific provision on enhancing the reintegration of Filipino workers returning home.

The labor, employment and manpower agreements with Libya, Jordan, Qatar, Iraq, Kuwait, and the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas Islands promote cooperation in labor, employment and manpower development.

A significant development in 2003 is the signing of a bilateral labor agreement between the Philippines and Indonesia, another labor-sending country. It was the first successful attempt by the Philippines to try to consolidate the efforts of other labor sending countries towards promoting the welfare of migrant workers and protecting their rights.

The agreement promotes the protection of the welfare and rights of migrant workers of both countries; training and certification of migrant workers; and legal aid for the protection of migrant workers.

The Philippines has forged bilateral agreements with Austria, Belgium, France, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom providing for mutual assistance in social security.

Covered members or beneficiaries may file their claims with the designated liaison agencies of the Philippines or the other country, which will extend assistance to facilitate the processing of claims. A Filipino covered by social security, including dependents and survivors, are eligible to benefits under the same conditions as the nationals of the other country.

A Filipino shall continue to receive social security benefits, whether a resident in the Philippines, in the host country or even a third country.

Bilateral maritime transport and merchant shipping agreements have been signed with eight countries.

Since 2000, the Philippines has signed bilateral agreements on the recognition of seafarers' certificates with 44 countries. In Europe, the Philippines has

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agreements with Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Isle of Man, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and Ukraine.

The European Union gives legal immigrants the right to reside in the continent and, when they wish, to return and be reunited with their families. They have the same rights as European citizens which entitles them the right to education and employment.

At the same time, each member state of the European Union retain the right to decide who is to be admitted into their borders, how many are to be allowed entry and what forms of integration they are entitled to.

A case in point is Italy which has the largest number of Filipino workers in Europe.

Italian immigration law allows foreign workers when there is a specific labor demand based on an economic need or in the case of self-employed individuals, when they can demonstrate sufficient resources and the necessary qualifications.

Foreigners who have residence permits of more than a year may apply for the admission of family members into Italy under the provisions of the law related to family reunification and residency permits for family reasons. This can be done provided that the applicant has housing that conforms with the standards of public housing and an annual income equivalent to the minimum set by social services for the number of family members petitioned for reunification.

Over the years, large numbers of migrants have entered without residence and work permits. Consequently, Italy has focused on stopping irregular migration as well as taking a lead in Europe in enacting regularization programs for migrants.

Italy wants to allow the entry of foreign nationals to meet the demands of the domestic labor market and, on the grounds of security and public order, to prevent undocumented migration.

Many amnesties and regularization programs have not reduced the inflow of undocumented migrants. Legal immigrants constitute less than five percent of the population. Since 2009, Italy has criminalized illegal migration.

especially well in terms of life expectancy at birth (74.6% in 2006), at which it ranked first among all provinces.

It was above average in terms of education and mean income. This rank, if sustained, places the

province in a good position to promote the province as a desirable destination for investors and tourists.

Though slower than the national average of 2.6 percent, La Union has the highest population growth rate (1.9%) in the Ilocos region in 1960-2007. With its very limited resources, the province is hard-pressed to cope with the growing demands of an increasing population for social and economic services.

Poverty affects a third of its residents (30.6%, or higher than the national average of 26.5%). It is the poorest province among the four provinces in the Ilocos region.

Nearly half (43% in 2010) of local employment is provided by agriculture which is highly seasonal and limits the income potential of residents. Farms, for example, are mostly idle during summer because irrigation is not extensive enough.

At a glance, the employment rate is high at 95 percent; more than half of employment is in agriculture. However, to many of its 721,000 residents, farming is not a viable option. The average farm size is half a hectare per family.

And so it is that poverty is rising; it is already the highest in northwest Luzon.

Since there is very limited off-farm employment, many are forced to look for jobs outside the province and even outside the country.

Local Laws

The amended Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act mandates the creation of a Migrants' Desk in all towns to provide "information to their constituents on all the processes and aspects of overseas employment", including information on overseas job orders and a list of licensed recruitment agencies – obtained from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration – in good standing.

The law provides the legal basis to create formal structures and deploy government resources to handle migrant concerns on a regular, more focused manner.

The **Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act** institutes policies to eliminate trafficking in persons – especially women and children. It criminalizes acts of trafficking and establishes institutional mechanisms for the protection and support of trafficked persons.

Under this law, local governments are mandated to monitor and document cases of trafficking; cancel

To date, the NRCO has focused primarily on economic reintegration: Counseling on Re-entry Options; Skills Training, Retooling and Upgrading; Wage Employment; and Livelihood, Economic, and Social Enterprise Development.

Apart from the different government agencies, such as OWWA, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, the NRCO has partnered with banks and other non-government organizations in the delivery of its reintegration services.

The **Dual Citizenship Retention and Reacquisition Act** promotes the return of overseas Filipinos. Those who reacquire their citizenship can own land and other properties as well as engage in business.

The **Philippine Labor and Employment Plan (2011-2016)** under the Philippine Development Plan addresses key migration issues and challenges such as the protection of the rights of migrant workers and reintegration assistance.

The **Office of the President** directive to enhance the reintegration program for returning workers can serve as the impetus to upgrade the Public Employment Service Office to give equal priority and attention to the reintegration of returning workers regardless of their being successful returnees or in distress.

The **Social Security System** has established the Flexi-Fund, a provident fund that provides a retirement protection scheme for Filipino migrant workers.

The **Local Government Code** authorizes local governments to float bonds for its development projects. It allows local governments to enter into partnerships with NGOs in the implementation of socio-economic projects.

One encouraging initiative is the Provincial Development and Framework Plan of La Union which proposes to provide referral and placement services for local and overseas as well as private and civil service employment through job fairs and employment facilitation programs.⁴

This item provides the basis in the development and institutionalization of a “referral and placement” mechanism in the province.

The Provincial Board has passed a resolution seeking to set up a migrants’ desk and appoint a migrants’ officer in all municipalities in the province. And it enacted the La Union Investments Code to

encourage potential investors to do business in the province.

The passage of these migrant-related resolutions indicates strong legislative and political support that can be harnessed to push for more substantial and concrete initiatives to address the concerns of migrant workers in La Union.

A number of municipalities, however, still have no full-time staff to operate Migrants’ Desks. This limits their capacity to respond appropriately to migrants’ concerns. Often, programs and services between the government and NGOs overlap.

There are reports indicating the presence of illegal recruitment and human trafficking in the province. Online recruitment sites are increasingly becoming popular to jobseekers so much so that monitoring recruitment activities requires a more sophisticated and coordinated approach.

A better way to refer trafficking cases to the **Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)** needs to be worked out. The DSWD has access to more resources to help trafficking victims redress their grievances and help them get back on their feet. It is the main agency responsible for implementing the National Referral System for victims and survivors of trafficking.

Many victims of trafficking do not seek assistance for many reasons. The main reason given is that some of the trafficking victims wish to maintain their privacy, perhaps because of the social stigma, and this is more difficult to avoid if they seek government help.

If they need assistance, victims approach **NGOs** – such as Kanlungan Centre Foundation and Bannuar ti La Union – that have established reputations in helping trafficking victims and have a more extensive network on the ground.

NGOs in the province work to address the needs of migrant workers, especially the “hard to reach” groups such as those who migrated illegally and those who work in the entertainment industry.

Kanlungan is the only NGO in the province focused solely on migrant workers. One of its partners is the 1,600-member Bannuar ti La Union, an advocate for the rights and welfare of Filipinos working overseas.

Participation in the livelihood/business training for overseas workers is quite poor. In 2010, only about 960 workers (or their families) availed of training on entrepreneurship in the regional office. This is less than one percent of the number of overseas workers registered with the OWWA in the region.

⁴ “Situation Report: Overseas Migration from La Union”, by Geoffrey Ducanes. Research study commissioned by the International Labour Organization (ILO), through the ILO-EU Return and Reintegration Project, Manila, Philippines, 31 December 2011.

CHAPTER 6

Brain Gain

Tapping prosperous migrants to invest in the province of La Union should ease the way for returnees who want to settle in the old country for good. It is part of the P49.1-million, five-year La Union Migration and Development Strategic Plan (2012-2016).

By 2016, it hopes that many workers returning from abroad have sufficient income here to support their families and are fully integrated in the local economy either as employed workers or as entrepreneurs. It sees the drastic reduction in illegal recruitment and exploitation.

The twin goals will be measured by the 80 percent increase in the number of returning migrants who gain local employment or running local enterprises; and an 80 percent decrease in illegal recruitment cases and the number of reported cases of abuse and exploitation.

The ambitious and laudable Plan was conceived in a series of public consultations and workshops.

Consultations with migrants, their families or dependents, as well as their associations or organizations were held. Local officials – from the provincial down to the city, town and barangay (village) – were involved. Public, non-government and business entities linked to migrants and their families participated.

They identified imperatives that will shape the migration and development agenda in La Union in the next five years.

The Plan provides for the successful reintegration of returning workers to their families and communities and calls for them to be economically active when they settle down. That is, they are financially independent, employed or engaged in enterprises, regardless of their experiences abroad.

Coupled with these imperatives is getting rid of predatory and exploitative practices of recruiters and employers.

A community-based monitoring and reporting system – involving the police, labor and justice officials and NGOs, among many others – will be set up against illegal recruitment and human trafficking. It includes a reward and incentive system from local governments, as well as a credible, effective and fast-response case-finding and case-handling system.

The case identification and management system of Kanlungan Centre Foundation will be replicated to cover the entire province. Case management protocols will be institutionalized in all town-level help desks for migrant workers returning from abroad.

In partnership with the Bannuar ti La Union, Help Desks at the city and municipal levels will serve as information centers and as quick-response units.

The bottom line: The promotion and protection of the well-being of migrants and their families, especially women who comprise majority of Filipino workers abroad.

The nature and reach of existing entrepreneurship development programs will be expanded to include livelihood trainings, seminars on financial and investment management, business facilitation and linkaging – all tailored to the needs of migrant workers and their families.

Migrants who are successful in their enterprises will be made role models. Local government officials and development planners will be trained in “mainstreaming migration into development” using tools developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Global Migration Group.

The current development planning and budgeting framework, guidelines and protocols across all local governments will be streamlined to accommodate migration issues in the crafting and development of investment plans.

The La Union Investments Code will include innovative ways to better manage the significant inflow of remittances and channel these to develop the local economy.

Investment opportunities abound. An international seaport has been improved; an economic and free port zone prospers; an extension of the Metro Manila to Central Luzon toll way extends to the Tarlac-Pangasinan-La Union Expressway; a railway system is being planned; and the closure of the Baguio City airport to commercial flights will make the newly-refurbished international airport in San Fernando more viable.

Yet one more strategy is for education and awareness campaigns on migrants' welfare, rights and entitlements. It will use traditional and online media platforms like social networking sites.

Internet sites and accounts offer the possibility of creating a virtual platform to create an online community of workers abroad who come from La Union. Already, a popular Facebook account is the "Ilocano Ako, Proud Ako" created and administered by a native of Bacnotan, La Union.

The annual funding of P9.82 million for the La Union Migration and Development Strategic Plan will be sourced mainly from local governments and from the budgets of national government agencies.

It will be coordinated by the La Union Inter-agency Council for Migrants Concerns (LUIMCO) to be renamed the Provincial Migration and Development Council and co-chaired by the Governor and a representative from the Catholic Church.

LUIMCO is currently a social partnership group organized by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines and the Diocesan Desk for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People in the Diocese of San Fernando.

When transformed into a Council, one of its tasks would be to administer a P3-million special revolving fund to assist migrant workers.

Optimizing Remittances

The La Union Migration and Development Strategic Plan (2012-2016) was crafted after the Provincial Government and other key stakeholders recognized the importance of migration in the overall development of the province and realized that overseas workers and their remittances are under-utilized.

Remittances from abroad contribute roughly a fifth of total household incomes in the province of La Union. La Union has the highest share of households in the country that are highly dependent on remittances; at least 50 percent of their income is from remittances.

Most household savings – about P6 billion in 2009 – come from households receiving foreign remittances. This huge household savings should spur the government to design investment instruments and approaches to channel the resources to high-value projects that supplement the income-earning capability of overseas workers.

Overdependence on remittances gives a false sense of economic security. Remittances, as it is, are underutilized, mismanaged and not spent wisely. While remittances are generally used to send children to school, build houses and support the daily subsistence of families left behind, some remittances find their way into gambling and other non-productive uses.

This unwise use of remittances limits the family's ability to either save and/or set-up alternative sources of income that will then enable the worker to easily return and settle.

Among overseas workers from La Union, nearly eight out of 10 sent remittances in 2003, higher than the national average of seven in 10.

Nearly all (95 %) reported sending their remittances through formal means, either through banks or door-to-door services. Only 2.6 percent reported sending their remittances through friends or co-workers.

The money is diverted from the province by national banks and money transfer agencies. This limits La Union's capacity to optimize the benefits of the financial inflows.

All these show that despite their importance, overseas workers and their money are under-recognized and under-utilized locally. For instance, the fact that remittances are sent through banks based in Manila means that a substantial amount, if not most, of the money is sent, paid or spent elsewhere.

To channel remittances locally, the local government should craft mutually beneficial arrangements with financial institutions.

The Development Bank of the Philippines, Land Bank of the Philippines and other banks have lending windows for overseas workers at concessional

rates of up to P2 million. The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration and its National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers (NRCO) has an allocation of P2 billion for reintegration programs.

These funding and lending windows may be tapped to assist workers who have returned home for a visit or have settled for good and want to go into business.

While there are systems in place for supporting and protecting workers abroad and in their return, in many areas these remain inadequate despite some noteworthy efforts. Workers continue to be vulnerable to unscrupulous recruiters and traffickers.

Despite its potential advantages, migration is rarely acknowledged in development planning tools, and even when links are made they tend to remain at a conceptual rather than at a practical level.

The provincial government and other key stakeholders – with the support of the ILO – decided to formulate the Migration and Development Strategic Plan.

It recognizes the importance of migration in the overall development of the province as well as the need to address persistent problems.

It is intended to make the best out of the current migration and development situation. It will serve as a blueprint in easing the risks and adverse effects of migration, and in ensuring that migration benefits the province and its people.

Brain gain

The Provincial Migration and Development Strategic Plan will serve as the blueprint to put migration money to stimulate the local economy as well as a check list to prevent the adverse effects of migration.

It recognizes, for example, that 6.2 percent of La Union's population 20 years and older are working overseas. These are potential assets, a brain gain with the experience and financial clout when they return and settle down; they must be encouraged and assisted to ensure a smooth transition to a new life with their communities and families.

A "brain gain" system will be developed to harness the wealth of knowledge and experience of returning migrants. Those with highly specialized skills in specific academic, technology or industry fields will

be tapped and a skills and experts directory will be published online.

The Migration and Development Strategic Plan hopes "to mainstream into the collective consciousness of the province the dreams and aspirations of migrant workers, the challenges and hardships they continually face and the fruits of their labor."

Source: La Union Migration and Development Strategic Plan (2012-2016)

CHAPTER 7

A Tapestry of Women

The ocean was smooth as it touched the shores of Puro Centro where fishing vessels were anchored at high noon. Fishermen huddled in the shade, huge styrofoam boxes strewn about. Dina Tabucol opened one of the chests, revealing a huge blue marlin deeply covered in ice.

“That’s P110 a kilogram, dockside,” she said, “easily P130 downtown.” Not a bad mark-up, considering the central market in Vigan, the capital of Ilocos Sur, is about 30 minutes up the highway. Dina reckoned that the mark-up rises as the commodity travels further.

“If we get a second hand mini-truck, we can even sell the fish as far as Laoag,” she said of the capital of the next province, Ilocos Norte, about an hour north of Puro Centro.

“We” refers to a group of enterprising women who regularly meet to discuss the business opportunities open to them. The women know each other very well – simply because they share a common experience.

All have worked in Lebanon from where they were repatriated by the government when war started in 2006 and it was deemed too dangerous for Filipinos to stay. In Lebanon, there are no local laws protecting migrant workers. The right to leave the household for a day-off, for example, is the prerogative of employers.

Except for two members – Conchita Taal in Cagayan province and Norma Tarangco who lives in a nearby village – the women all live in the same village of Puro Centro and are, thus well positioned to start a fish vending business – with help from the Batis Center for Women and the local government.

The women’s stay in Lebanon ranged from three months to five years; their experiences were a study in contrast, from one woman who was barely given food by her employer, to another who was very well treated, to the point that her employers still call to ask her to come back and so she can greet “happy birthday” to her employers’ children.

Some of them witnessed the bombings in Beirut; others lived far from the war zones. Five went to work abroad because of financial pressures; others wanted to send their children to school or to save in order to build a house.

This day, Dina is updating them on the progress of a project proposal they have submitted to the municipal government. They want to avail of funding to kick-start a buy-and-sell venture in the fishing community, actually an island village in the town of Magsingal, Ilocos Sur.

Dina is the president of “Romadilachinie,” the whimsical coined acronym for the first letters of the names of its eight members, a budding group of women entrepreneurs who were in the business of buying hogs and selling pork. With the little profit they have saved, they now want to catch the bigger fish.

Romadilachinie, the name, perhaps portrays how these women have come together in this tapestry of hope and aspiration. Prior to their partnership, the women – except for Dina and her sister, Conchita – did not know each other.

Today, one thread binds them together: They have all worked abroad – as domestic helpers in Lebanon. Now home, they are tied to the same dreams, of giving their children the education so highly valued by Filipinos. To do that, they are looking forward to make it in buying and selling premium fish caught near the island village.

At sunset, a fiery sun dips as the lights go on aboard vessels getting their gears ready to go deep sea fishing.

Dina’s husband works as “captain” of one of the big fishing boats that will leave around midnight, to return at dawn to unload the catch in time for the morning market. Those who leave at dawn return in mid-afternoon, again in time for the trading at day’s end. In between, the catch is stored in styro boxes and ice chests, waiting for the occasional walk-in traders.



With the ocean in the background as mute witness to the colorful life stories of the fishers in the village, the anchored bancas also seem to be silent spectators to the untapped potentials of Puro Centro. ©ILO/M.Duran

Fish business

Puro Centro village is a major *bagsakan*, literally “dumping ground”, of fresh fish for which buyers come from as far as Manila and neighboring provinces. It is one of the region’s major landing ports for fish catch.

Dina and her group are contented with selling to neighbors but have their eye on the whole village, and hoping eventually to reach traders at the central market in Vigan. And, who knows, even beyond.

It is not far-fetched. Puro Centro is not only where most of the provincial catch is landed, it has the most number of fishermen in all of Magsingal town. The maritime networking is extensive in the community, and that includes the women’s group, now renamed the Romadilachinie Fish Dealers.

In the morning, fishers arrive with the squid. By noon, fish dealers are already in line for the arrival of round scad, blue marlin, yellow fin tuna, dorado, tangigue and squid.

There are about six village-based fish dealers; Romadilachinie will be the seventh and will position itself in a carpark where buyers converge.

“We will sell only fresh catch to protect our reputation,” Dina said. “Fishermen friends will help promote our business to buyers.”

While there will be no labor cost, capital will be needed – mostly to buy the fish and squid – and then some more for the municipal permit, a substantial

amount for ice and styrofoam containers, a thatched-roof business stand made of bamboo, and weighing scales. The most expensive item in the budget is money to buy the blue marlin and round scad.

Dina wants a better future for her three boys, all out of school, all staying at home and idle. The eldest, a girl, is already married. Now 43, Dina stayed in Beirut for seven months in 2006, experiencing the most intense part of the war that broke out that summer.

The 34-day conflict, called the Israel-Hezbollah War, saw at least 1,200 people, mostly Lebanese citizens, killed; one million Lebanese and 500,000 Israelis were displaced on both sides of the border.

“I was always hungry, there was no food most of the time,” Dina recalled. “I told my husband at home to prepare a death certificate for me, the hardship was so unbearable.”

At work, she recalled, “the first three months were okay, after which differences with my employers started. There was a lot of work to do at all times of the day. And it was always bread and pasta, she pointed out. “They should realize that Filipinos are rice eaters.”

“They even counted the apples inside the refrigerator, fearful the fruits might be stolen,” Dina said. One time, a sympathetic Filipina from across the street, a domestic helper, gave her some food; Dina had to eat it inside the toilet to avoid from being seen with the meal.

In the confusion of war, when it finally came full blast, Dina was able to flee to the Philippine Embassy for help. She left Lebanon without a passport, which remained with her employer. She was issued a travel document instead.

This was a time when the Philippine government decided to evacuate Filipinos from Lebanon. Many workers availed of the chance to escape the conflict and go home. It was the end of the expatriate road for Dina who earlier spent two years and eight months in Kuwait in the early 2000s as a domestic helper. She went home and then tried Lebanon, where her sister Conchita was working for five years.

"I thought it would be better there, but it turned out bad," said Dina, who still shudders upon remembering three jets droppings bombs at the same time. "We were so scared to die," she said. "It was so ironic, we went to Lebanon in order to live a better life here, not to die there."

Today, to augment her income in buying and selling fish, Dina is into the direct selling of Sara Lee cosmetic products. Her sister, Conchita, has since returned home, too, selling garlic and onions farther north in Tuguegarao City; she is a member of Romadilachinie.

Another member of the group who does not live in the village of Puro Centro is Sally, or Rosalie Riambon. She comes from San Juan, about an hour's ride away to the south. Because she is breastfeeding, Rosalie, 35, brings her infant child to Romadilachinie meetings, both riding the scooter driven by her husband.

Sally left for Beirut in 2005 and returned in 2007, surviving the war and just two months short of her two-year contract. The employer, insisting it was for three years, withheld wages for six months. Rosalie was never able to recover this, although her Manila recruitment agency paid her with P11,000.

"The work was hard, the chores numerous," she recalled. "We slept at 10 p.m. and woke up at 6 a.m." Although the food was okay, Sally wanted to go home at the height of the war. She was not given permission. Instead, she was promised additional wages if she stayed – a promise that never materialized.

Unlike most of her Romadilachinie mates, Sally is not into buying and selling fish – yet; she operates a variety store instead. "It helps, at least in our daily needs and the school allowance of my children," she said.

Again, like her group mates, education is foremost in her mind: her sons are in Grade 4, and in second year high school.

To make ends meet, she and her husband plant rice and tobacco on one hectare of land in a "percentage" share tenancy system. Out of eight portions of rice harvested, two shares go to the landowner, and six shares go to Sally and her husband.

ROMADILACHINIE

The group was organized by the Batis Center for Women in late 2010 under the ILO-EU Project. It started with a series of seminars given by the non-government group that works with migrant women workers.

According to Batis, women are particularly vulnerable as domestic helpers or entertainers to sexual assault by employers or to exploitation by employment agencies. While jobs overseas are highly prized, their experiences often do not match with their expectations, and they are abused, underpaid or mistreated.

They are deceived with promises of decent jobs, only to end up sexually and financially exploited and mistreated. Batis Center is helping these women realize that there is life after migration – and that they have rights, and there are procedures, to apply for support or compensation for mistreatment.

Since 1988, the Batis Center for Women has been working with distressed women migrant workers in Manila, Bulacan, Nueva Ecija and Ilocos Sur. Working with the ILO, Batis Center identifies and supports women who have returned from distressing situations and are in need of support in rejoining families and communities.

Common bond

With Romadilachinie, Batis Center was looking for a group of women who have worked in Europe and Lebanon; it was referred by the provincial government to the fishing village. From there, Ate Guy and Beryl organized the group.

Ate Guy is Nora Lat Guillermo, Batis outreach worker, and her partner was Beryl Grace Cruspero, Batis social worker.

They organized seminars that included skills development; one was on hairdressing and cosmetology that Batis Center, the provincial government and a high society hair salon conducted for the women. They learned hair rebonding and coloring, foot spa, makeup, manicure, pedicure, haircut and the like – skills the women now use to earn extra money.

Each now charges P1,000 for a hot oil treatment and P200 for a hair rebond (straightening); a manicure-

pedicure costs P80 (or P100 if these include painting designs on nails, a current village fad).

Puro Centro was in an “uproar” of sorts when the women returned from their graduation rites all dressed and made up from head to toe with what they have learned.

A series of peer support seminars was particularly helpful; first, it was among the Romadilachinie group. Then in late 2011, they met women returnees from other provinces and shared experiences and life stories with them, easing the strains of adjusting to life back home.

“You all listen to your problems so you understand each other,” Dina recalled. “We use the same process in our group today, even when talking business. Talking about our problems, we help each other. When we have to do something, we all talk about it first.”

They learned basic bookkeeping – and writing business proposals. In late 2010, the women chose buying live hogs and retailing pork.

In all, it took about four months from the first orientation seminar until Batis Center decided that the group was ready to go into the pork business. With a grant from the ILO-EU Project administered by Batis Center, the P22,000 venture started with two pigs procured in the village. After being quartered and weighed, the pork was sold on credit – to be paid after one week.

“We were so happy,” said Dina of that first venture. “We were feeling rich. To us, it was a real business.” She remembers the group going out together to procure a pig, bringing along husbands, sons and daughters to help in the butchering and marketing.

“We never seemed to get tired, we were enjoying the venture,” said Dina. “After the pigs were slaughtered and then sold, we had extra food to take back home, at least one kilogram of pork for each. With the profit we made, we put it back to the bank.”

The grant came in three tranches, explained Ate Guy; the first was for two pigs and related expenses. The agreement was that all earnings would go to the bank. The same was true for the next four pigs and so on.

After six months the women were able to recover the capital. They decided, as a group, to go into individual businesses. Many chose to buy and sell fish individually. Now they want to work together again, as the Romadilachinie Fish Dealers, in buying and selling fish – in bulk this time. Because many who went into fish trading found it profitable and doable, they are now interested on the venture as a group.

“Each of us got equal share of what was left of the grant money after the original capital was put in the bank,” said Enie Florida, the mother of four children.

“If the new enterprise makes good, perhaps I can send all of our children to college,” Enie said.

The eldest has a college degree in Information Technology, another son has graduated from high school “and won’t probably go to college because I have yet to save for that,” she said. A third child, a girl, will graduate from high school this year; her sister will graduate from primary school in the next school year.

“With the new business, who knows?” she said.

Prior to college, public education in the Philippines is free. A major out-of-pocket expense for most families, like the Floridas, are school supplies, class projects, transportation and daily personal allowances.

Enie, now 39, also worked in Lebanon. It was a hardship post, she said. “We only had one meal a day, mostly thin bread, pasta, salad, and served as late as 5 p.m. or 6 p.m.” Rice was served once a month.

She left the Philippines in 2005 and, after surviving the 2006 war, returned in 2007 after two years and five months; she wanted to flee but was not allowed by her employer. She was told her wages were deposited in a bank where the employer worked.

By the time Enie decided to return home, the wages her employer refused to pay was worth more than two years. “Almost every day we had arguments over my wages, until I was finally able to approach the Philippine Embassy,” she said.

The embassy persuaded the employer to pay for Enie’s air fare back home. She was given back her passport, but not the little belongings she had. Nor the unpaid salary she yet has to receive.

Not exactly a bed of roses, but not all are heartbreak tales. Two members of the group – May Ugalde, 32, and Rosemarie Tab, the youngest at 25 – have had more pleasant memories of Lebanon, at least of their employers.

It was her first and last time abroad when May landed in Beirut in 2005. Because of the war, she would finish only one year and one month of her three-year contract but there was no bitter aftertaste to it.

“In the grace of God, my employers treated me very well, they did not skimp on food nor did they give me any difficulties,” she said. “The food was good and

sufficient and I was in possession of my passport which was not commonly the case with other Filipinas.”

Indeed, her understanding employers permitted May to go home to spare her of the increasing intensity of the war. They even accompanied her to the Philippine Embassy.

“It was so scary, the buildings were shaking from the explosions,” said May, who wants to put all that behind. She now wants only the best education for a son who is in Grade 5, and for the eldest girl, a high school sophomore.

Rosemarie spent barely four months in Beirut, from April to August 2006. She has no complaints, and she was treated well by her employers. She was in fact permitted to go home because of the war. “The explosions were just outside, the smoke was so thick you can’t see the neighboring houses,” said Rosemarie, who kept her mother informed of her situation by cellphone.

Her employers finally took Rosemarie to the Philippine Embassy and from there to a Catholic church group, and finally home.

Transitions

Today, with the little savings they have from the pork business, May and Rosemarie are into buying and selling fish in the village. The transition is easier for Rosemarie as her husband is a fisherman; just married, they have a baby barely two years old.

The husband of Laura Raras, 40, is a fisherman as well, so the transition from pork to fish is easy. As a sideline, she sells pork barbecue. As with the other members of the group, Laura could only think of education for her youngest, a 17-year-old girl, who is out of school. The eldest son, who graduated with a business degree, is a supervisor in a Manila chain department store. The second girl, who is married, finished first year college and is unemployed.

Laura arrived in Beirut first in 2003 when there was no war yet, went home, and went back when the war caught up with her.

“Because of the conflict, my employer seldom had wages himself, so I didn’t receive my wages too,” she recalled. “I let it go because of the difficult situation, thinking I will be renumerated later.”

This time, her stay was short. She was paid \$300 – but not for the four months of wages that were due her. Still, she is not bitter. With her employers, “there were no problems there, they were so good to me, even with the food,” she said. “Everything was given for free – personal needs, dresses, food.”

But there were no days off, and she only went out together with her employers.

Fast forward to 2010 when the Romadelachinie pork business started; shortly after, the members opened a bank account, a requirement if they are to avail of a loan for the fish business.

The municipal government has promised P100,000-plus in grants to start the fish business, less than the P219,000 the group was asking, which would have included a second-hand mini-truck and the budget for the diesel fuel needed to collect and deliver fish.

The group wants to tap the seed funds of the Reintegration Program of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) that are considerably higher. They are unlikely to avail of this as the OWWA Regional Office told them they need to put up a 20 percent equity.

All of the women are landless. Here in the fishing village, many families pay annual rents to landlords. “Without the ILO-EU grant, our situation would have been hopeless,” said Dina, who had no job nor livelihood in the period before Batis Center arrived in the village. “I was just sitting at home doing nothing.”

Some of the members were already retailing fish. Sally was planting rice and cutting grass in rice fields, chores that she still does when she needs the extra money.

“Right now, the group buys, in a small way, any fish we could afford, from yellow fin tuna to dorado, and mark it up about P20 a kilogram,” Dina pointed out. “There are plenty of fish here.”

The women sell the fish to nearby homes. “There are a lot of buyers even just in the village,” Dina said, “and even up to nearby towns, like the garlic capital of Sinait. Which is why we really need a mini-truck.

“And we can all travel when necessary, perhaps in rotation for different deliveries, even up to Laoag where the market is bigger than in Vigan.” Sans a mini-truck, the group will hire a van. They are excited over their proposed new venture and looks at its start with a longing. For many, it is a chance to raise a family and send children to school.

Like Sally, who doesn’t want to work abroad again “if the situation is just fine here.” It is a sentiment that Dina echoed, “especially with the new business we are waiting for.”

Still, Dina admitted that the lure of higher wages is especially strong. “It depends on the income abroad, if it is attractive enough, why not? Or perhaps we can use our new skills like working in a beauty salon in another country,” she said.

“Maybe,” she sighed.

The Push and Pull of Migration

by Freiya Reef MacNicol

(Freiya Reef MacNicol is taking up social work studies at the University of South Australia in Adelaide, and was an exchange student at the University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development while she was an intern at the Batis Center for Women).

I see the Philippines as having a very strong focus on collectivism, on community and family life, which I really admire. And I admire these women who work abroad for their families even though they do not know what to expect from the experience, and that the conditions are often not good.

Migration and working abroad have a marked influence on the Philippine economy and the viability of the nation, and the livelihood and lifestyle of its peoples. Those who get employment overseas are able to work for wages higher than they would have received in the Philippines. And they send these wages back to the family.

In Ilocos Sur, remittances have been steadily and significantly increasing since 1985, reaching over P4.5 billion in 2009. The Family Income and Expenditures Survey suggests that about a fourth of annual household incomes in the region comes from Ilocanos working abroad.

Indeed, working overseas is seen as a lucrative job and a good way of providing for the family. Seven out of 10 people in Ilocos Sur are in the working ages of 15 to 65. Over half are in agriculture; Ilocos produces rice, corn, fruits, vegetables and legumes, as well as tobacco and its famous garlic and onions crops.

Just under two-thirds are actually working or seeking employment. This would include those who study and those who do not need or wish to work. Employment is rather high at 91.2 percent. Only 37.3 percent are not in the labor force, and only 8.8 percent of those who wish to have employment are not able to find a suitable position; these may include those who seek better options abroad.

Some feel that wages for working on the farm is not enough to support a family; as such, farm work is not highly regarded or sought after although agriculture still provides 58 percent of employment; the service industry, where three of 10 people work, is the second biggest employer.

Personal opinions, attitudes and experiences might make working abroad like a good option. That is only part of the story. Family and community influences as well put pressures on the individual and his or her decision to work in a foreign land.

Current living conditions, the availability of other employment, cultural pressures to look after families

and the ease of promotion while working abroad – all are crucial push factors. For people in remote areas with fewer options for good wages and future prospects, working abroad may seem attractive indeed.

There are several reasons why Ilocanos seek work abroad. Filipinos are well known for having a strong family focus. And Ilocanos are known to be particularly hard working in order to support and look after the family.

Ilocos, in fact, is a major source of migration to other parts of the country, spilling over first to Hawaii as sugar plantation workers then as orchard workers in California in the early years of the last century.

Their success stories influence others to make use of the opportunities offered overseas. In addition to the deeply ingrained sense of obligation to support one's family, there is the fact that in Ilocos Sur, it is imperative to look for better paying jobs than you might have access to by staying close to home.

To support the family, gain ways to improve their living conditions and provide them better chances for an education, the better paying jobs overseas might look more appealing.

Poverty and housing conditions, for example, would impact on the choices that people make relating to migration. While most houses have access to water and sanitation, this is not necessarily the case for all households.

Electricity is available for most houses but over one of 10 of homes are not connected to the power grid. Just under a quarter of households do not have strong roof and wall materials. It is understandable why some Ilocanos might feel that going overseas to gain more money and better employment might earn them enough money to improve or build a house.

While there has been a rise in annual earnings by households in the years between 2000 and 2006, and the poverty incidence has actually dropped over the same period, many remain poor.

The annual per capita threshold of Ilocos Sur increased between 2000 and 2006 by some P3,000, from P13,515 in 2000 to P16,922 in 2006 – a rise of more than 20 percent. The poverty incidence went down by 3 percent during the same period. By 2006, however, poverty has again risen by 5 percent. This

could lead to a significant increase in those who wish to seek better employment and find opportunities abroad.

What is interesting is that the number of poor families recorded in 2006 was actually higher than that of 2000, indicating that despite the improvement for many individuals between 2000 and 2003, this has taken a reversal. More people in Ilocos Sur are now affected by poverty than previously.

While the annual average per capita income of the province has risen substantially, it has not been evenly spread across families and households.

Instead, the rise in wealth is not experienced by the poorer families and that there are, in fact, more people in poverty than ever before.

Profile

Conversations with women migrant workers show that perceived benefits to the family were the primary motivation for them to work abroad.

The focus group was held with six women who had worked in Lebanon but had returned due to the war and unrest there in 2006.

The women had worked in partnership with each other and the Batis Center for Women since their return to Ilocos Sur and were cooperating with each other to find employment opportunities and options for the future.

All women spoke of their desire to look after the family; those with children spoke of ensuring their child's access to better education that in turn assures them of better jobs and a better future. Those without children spoke of their desire to be prepared to raising a family by having a house built or putting savings in the bank to support themselves and their children.

The Filipino desire to see their family cared for and supported – combined with the success stories of other expatriate workers – combine to make the prospect of work overseas an enticing one. Still, many mothers who left their families behind often come back to find that their children do not remember them. The women spoke of the stress of leaving their families behind and then the pressure on them to find new work on their return to ensure that they can still support their families even without the remittances coming in from abroad.

The women often said that given their experiences abroad, they would choose to remain in the Philippines rather than leave their families and go through all the pain of separation and the confusion and difficulties of reintegration.

Then again, while damage to family structures and relationships is possible, it is generally seen that having a family member working abroad is a great

material support to the family itself. It became apparent that, for the most part, the biggest houses in a barangay were those belonging to families that had at least one member who is working or has worked abroad or has a steady job overseas.

In some cases, they even help and support other family members to gain employment abroad so they, in turn, can have a significant impact on the prosperity and livelihood of the family.

While Ilocos region has only 9 percent of the national figure of migrant workers abroad, Ilocos Sur sends out almost a fifth of this number. For a province with a population of just over 600,000 in a country of some 96 million people, to have over 1.5 percent of the total migrant workers originating from Ilocos Sur is a significant sum.

Most have graduated from high school, followed by those who have attended college. Only a fifth (21 percent) of Ilocanos have been able to graduate from college before seeking employment abroad. Migrant workers are twice as likely to be female: over two-thirds coming from Ilocos Sur are women. Workers from Ilocos Sur are more likely to be younger than those coming from the rest of the country and likely to be in their 30s rather than 40s.

About 24,037 Ilocanos emigrated from Ilocos Sur between 1988 and 2010, according to the Commission for Filipinos Overseas; 12,539 were women and 11,498 were men. The numbers do not include those who traveled on fake documents or as tourists and then found occupations once abroad – the very individuals who are vulnerable to exploitation and maltreatment and who cannot be traced or protected legally by the Philippine government.

Over half of them went to countries in Asia and the Pacific, the main destinations. Others found jobs in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. While jobs in Western Europe are the most sought after, more jobs are available in Asia and the Pacific.

The Ilocanos, like many Filipinos, are most likely to be employed in the service industry, usually as domestic helpers. These jobs are mostly available to high school graduates.

All these show that a typical worker from Ilocos Sur is most likely to be an unqualified young female high school graduate who is most likely to find work in Asia and the Pacific as a domestic worker.

Domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to mistreatment, with agencies and employers not necessarily paying them their full wages and leaving the worker without other options. Often, these workers are unsure about what options they have in seeking reimbursement or retribution until they have returned to the Philippines, by which time it may be too late to do anything about it.

CHAPTER 8

A Sari-Sari Story

The *sari-sari* store is the quintessential Philippine establishment. The wares that it sells are the embodiment of all things Filipino consumers buy on a daily basis, from sardines and instant noodles, comfort foods, and bread and butter to school supplies from paper clips to pad papers, to personal needs from tampons to over-the-counter medicines. Name it, it has it.

And the retail marketing has been elevated – or in this case, downgraded – to the most basic unit, one. One of everything: a piece of paper, a bun of *pan de sal* (bread of salt), a tablet of aspirin, a stick of gum, a bottle of soda.

In almost every nook and cranny where people reside, one can find a *sari-sari* store in these islands. On one street, there may be one, two, even five all in a row, a few houses from each other.

This is the *sari-sari* (variety, is the closest English word) store that Estrella Adolfo has chosen to start life anew. She left for Lebanon in 2002 and was back in Manila in 2005; a year later, the family decided to settle and build a house on husband Edgar's inherited property in Paratong village, 10 minutes away from the city center of Vigan, the capital of Ilocos Sur.

All the time that Estrella was away in Lebanon, the children stayed with the father, a security guard in Manila, under the care of a *yaya*, the all-around maid similar to a nanny and a caregiver. Since birth, the eldest, a girl, stayed with the maternal grandmother, 12 hours away, in Gattaran, Cagayan Province, where she was born.

The Christmas of 2011 that we visited, mother and daughter were together. And how like mother, like daughter.

Daughter Judy Ann was a feature writer in the elementary school paper. She joined writing seminars and was in a Special Program for Journalism. She graduated Second Honors.

Estrella herself was a valedictorian when she graduated from elementary school and was a scholar

in the first two years of high school in another town. To avoid paying for board and lodging, a luxury the family could not afford, she transferred to what is now the Don Mariano Marcos National High School, where Judy Ann presently studies.

Estrella was the Literary Editor in the *Gazette*, the high school publication. She composed poems, but not the romantic types. Reflecting the upheavals of the mid-1980s when a series of *coup d'etats* rocked the country, the poems were about politics and current events.

She graduated with a First Honorable Medal. To finance her college tuition, she then worked in the Dean's Office at the Cagayan Colleges Tuguegarao (now the University of Cagayan Valley). It was always, and still remains, a life of struggle (to get Estrella to work in Lebanon, her family had to use a property as collateral to raise funds to pay the recruitment agency).

Still, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree, Major in History. ("I was interested in all civilizations, what contributions they have made, what we have learned from them," she said. "During outings in Lebanon, I was always interested in the places we went to").

Judy Ann, of course, has her whole life ahead of her, not to say a life in high school. She already has her sights on becoming a writer or a journalist.

Estrella's focus today is on her children. The eldest, 15-year-old Julius, is in junior high school. The second is Judy Ann, for which the grandmother pays tuition in Cagayan. The third is 11-year-old Joshua, who is in Grade 6. The youngest is 3-year-old Jea who will start school soon enough.

"Edgar and I decided that I leave for Lebanon to earn more money for our children's education," Estrella recalled. "And we wanted to build a house."

She need not have gone abroad. From 1993 to 2002, she worked as a pre-school teacher in a middle class community in Makati, Metro Manila's financial center. She was in charge of 20 four- to five-year-old pupils per class.

This was a training that would serve her well in Lebanon and later in life, while settled down back in the home country.

Life was good but the salary was low. It so happened that the parents of a preschool student asked whether she was interested in a job in Lebanon – as a private tutor for the children of a family.

It seemed perfect--working as a teacher, a profession that she loved, and in a foreign land at that. It went all too quickly. Taking a day off, she went to a recruitment agency in Makati and was processed in a day.

Within a month, she was on her way to the airport. It was late at night when they left Manila's Harrison Plaza; the car park was unlighted, and the van she and nine others – all women – were riding in was dim. She could barely read the contract she was asked to sign, let alone see the fine print.

The teacher that she was, Estrella wanted to learn what it was all about. We are about to leave, unless you want to be left behind, she was told.

First time

It was almost midnight when they reached the airport, and it was all rush-rush from then on. Until now, she never knew what the contract said. Indeed, she saw and read her passport only when she returned to the country; at least, she found it had a working visa.

"I didn't know what I was supposed to do," she remembered. "It was all first time to me."

The recruitment agency promised a monthly wage of \$300, three times the equivalent of Estrella's peso salary as a pre-school teacher. It was a different story with the agency in Lebanon; she was told it was only \$200.

For which she should be grateful, Estrella was told, because her companions who were promised the same \$300 would receive only half of that. She complained to no avail.

Not only that, for three months after, she received no pay at all. She was told her salary went to other expenses, like travel and documents processing. The wages came on the fourth month. When her male

employer asked what she would do with the first salary, Estrella said she would send it immediately to her family.

By the fifth month, it was the Lebanese agency that remitted Estrella's wages. She was told that the currency in her wallet should only be Philippine money at all times to avoid suspicion of theft.

Years later, when she arrived back at the Manila airport, Estrella still had the P400 she left with, in P100-, P50- and P20-bills.

"I never touched the pesos that I brought to and from Lebanon," she said. She never held Lebanese money either. "All I remember was that their currency had so many zeros, but I never touched it, and was never asked to handle their currency."

The employer accompanied Estrella to the nearest Western Union branch to show her the remittance. She immediately called her husband by mobile phone to confirm the transaction. It always went smoothly.

"There was no war then," she said.

Except for the less than promised salary, the loneliness and homesickness, life at Jbeil town, about 45 minutes from Beirut, was not so bad. Except that added to her tutorial chores, Estrella doubled as a domestic helper doing all-around household chores, as well as a caregiver and nurse to the boy until the very day that she left. The boy would grow up to nearly four years old when he was about to enter school when Estrella was about to leave.

"I raised the boy and he was very close to me," she remembered. When the mother, who was about Estrella's age, arrived from work, she was jealous of the close relationship.

"I guess in some settings, you can't avoid certain relationships with the employer," Estrella said. "Sometimes, I didn't understand her moods."

"I've seen a lot of Filipinas slapped by employers even in public, in the playground," she said. "I don't know who has the problem as the Filipinas also get mad with the employers."

There were the outings and social events with the family and vacations in the mountains; she knows, of course, that it was to take care of the son but then again, it was better than most sad stories she has heard about from her compatriots.

When it was time to go home, she was unprepared for it. Earlier, her three-year contract was extended for

two weeks. She was expecting further extension when Estrella was told to pack for a 10-day vacation out of town. What happened instead was she was put on her way to the airport where her final salary was paid.

There is a footnote to her story. While she was never maltreated by the boy's father, it was different with his grandfather who made sexual overtures, asking if she wanted money. She always replied: "If I want money, I will work hard for it in another way." That is a footnote that is best forgotten anyway.

What Estrella wants to remember are the reasons she left in the first place--education for her children and the house to build. And then there was the pawned property used to finance her recruitment that she had to redeem.

All these, Estrella and Edgar had accomplished. The savings her husband made from the remittances she sent was used for their children's education and to redeem the property. What was left was to build a shell of the house, later improved upon by Edgar's salary after he resigned from the Manila job to join Estrella and the family in Vigan. He is now working as a security guard.

"All remittances from Lebanon went to pay for the property that was pawned for our studies and my going abroad, our family got it back because of the money I earned," she said. "There was little savings for extras really, I didn't really buy anything."

"The P70,000 savings that was left went to build the basic structure of the house," she explained.

In 2006, Estrella went back to teaching in pre-school and elementary before becoming principal of the Great Heights Learning Center in Vigan City, the provincial capital. Because there was no one to take care of the children at home, she stopped teaching in 2008.

Right after that, she was hired as a pre-school teacher at the Bulala-Paratong Elementary School just across the street from her home. It was most convenient but she had to earn the professional license required to teach in government schools.

Her Major in History was not enough so she had to study Elementary Education, going to college classes right after two hours of pre-school teaching in the morning, and again in the afternoon. She graduated in 2010, took the licensure examination but did not pass.

"I will try again," she promised.

Reincarnation

Not far from the house is a small concrete room her sister owns. Here, Estrella is trying one of her latest reincarnations. And successfully at that. This is her *sari-sari* store, her *sari-sari* story.

The new enterprise started in May 2011, with a little help from the ILO-EU Project that provides livelihood to enterprising Filipinos who have worked abroad and want to be productive here as well. Estrella underwent skills development and business seminars.

"The store is to tide things over," she said. Administered by Batis Center, the grant for Estrella was in two tranches of P7,500 each.

"The first tranche went to buy canned goods," explained Nora Lat Guillermo, Batis Center's outreach worker. "There was a little of everything."

Estrella wanted what her neighbors wanted, so she started with sardines, gin (one of the favorite Ilocano drinks), matches, butter, soap, shampoo, tetrapack juices and softdrinks. The largest portion went to P1,500 worth of softdrinks. These remain the bestsellers, although strong beer recently took the lead from gin; on average, neighbors consume two cases of beer almost every night.

She wakes up at 3 a.m. to start cooking in time for breakfast bestsellers during school days--the local noodle soup (Miking Vigan at P5 to P10 a bowl), a rice-and-chocolate porridge (or champorado at P10), stir-fried rice noodles (bihon at P10) and spaghetti (P10). All are sold out by 8 a.m. In the afternoon, she sells fried fishballs (P2 per three pieces) and Chinese meatballs (P5 per three pieces).

The store earns a net daily profit of about P200 from these alone. Then there are the sundry items like the soaps and detergents, the radio batteries, the everyday needs.

Estrella closes shop an hour before midnight (some days, she does laundry at 10 p.m.). To compensate, she takes *siestas* or naps after lunch, or rests when there are no classes -- but hardly because in between she takes care of business. Edgar helps when he is off duty. Julius, the eldest, does the marketing and Joshua helps however he can. Jea, the youngest, plays.

"In a *sari-sari* store, you roll with the capital, especially if you have items on credit," Estrella said. "Payment is expected the following day for cooked



Estrella and her store in Barangay Paratong, Vigan City.

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food, groceries may be paid one week to one month later, some may not even pay.”

She also loads prepaid credits to mobile phones. That is no small centavo in a country reputed to have the world's largest number of users of text messaging. Except for the youngest, all members of Estrella's family have mobile phones.

Estrella has expanded operations, this time with a local ice cream maker whose product line compares with national brands. The freezer comes free with an initial P3,000 order. A minimum of P1,000 per order must be maintained. She marks the ice cream up at about P1.50 or P2.50 per item. “The ice cream sells, even when there are typhoons,” she said, adding hers is the village's first and only ice cream store.

In between school and store, Estrella has a full load of tutorials for two elementary school students (that's P3,000 a month) and two students at St. Paul College (for another P4,500 a month).

She even dreams of establishing her own pre-school one of these days. She certainly has the experience.

In fact, she has already been approached to manage a pre-school in Vigan. She is giving it a thought.

All in all, it has been a good life. Here and abroad. The arrival, too, has been a soft landing, albeit with some struggle – and with a little help.

For all that, “I still thank God that I was able to work abroad,” Estrella said.

Memories to Treasure

by Freiya Reef MacNicol

(In October 2011, an Australian social work intern at Batis Center for Women, lived with Estrella and her family for two weeks. This is her story.)

10/17-23/2011

The host family runs a small store which they got through the support of Batis and so I helped out at the store and assisted in food preparation and went shopping with them at the markets.

I attracted a reasonable amount of attention in my first couple of days with a lot of people stopping to talk to me and ask me why I was there, etc. All the attention was quite tiring after a while but I felt very much at ease with my host family and enjoyed their company.

Very enjoyable end to the week

10/23-30/2011

This week has been taken up mostly by the annual cockfighting competition that has been taking place next to my host family's house.

As a vegetarian for ethical reasons, it is fair to say that this is not precisely my cup of tea and I was not really looking forward to the spectacle of two roosters slaughtering each other while people paid to watch.

But I was careful not to express this or make my host family think that I did not approve of the activity or anything.

While I would never go to this sort of thing deliberately out of my own inclinations I don't feel as if I have any reason or right to complain about the activity when it is offered to me and that it is a part of my community immersion to get involved with the activities that are going on around town.

I only watched a couple of the actual fights but there was no pressure to do so, which I appreciated and took advantage of. Actually, very few women were there at all, the majority of those who were there were running stalls of cigarettes and soft drinks, which is why I was there also. (Estrella has set up a tiny "branch", a small stand, to sell a variety of items to those going to the cockfights.)

And so it wasn't even expected that I would be interested in the event itself. I sat at the stall for most of the time, selling snacks to those watching and really enjoyed the atmosphere and the friendliness of the people and those who had come to watch the cockfights.

In the evenings I would sit at the store and play with the three year old or talk with people who came by to chat.

While my host Estrella was busy, I would serve people in the store which I really loved. I think that often people would buy things from me for the novelty of it but I thought it was pretty novel myself so I wasn't bothered by that in the least.

Sometimes people would have to tell me how much something cost but I was very cautious about not accidentally undercharging someone for things and so would always check with Estrella or one of her children if I wasn't sure about the price of something.

The older children, 11- and 14-year-old boys, did not warm to me as quickly as their younger sister, but after a couple of days with the family the 11-year-old and the three-year-old would comfortably wander into my bedroom and hop on my bed to have a chat or play with my phone or whatever.

I was surprised by my reaction to this as I had always thought of myself as a very private person but I absolutely loved how casually I was treated by the family and how easy they were with me. I was very, very happy there.

Barangay Paratong is a small village with not a lot of wealth but is reasonably close to Vigan and has an easily accessible primary and secondary school.

Through my conversations with people it seemed that while there are jobs available in the area, they aren't sufficiently well paying enough to properly support a family.

I was interested in the attitudes that people had to work and earn money. There seemed to be two very distinct groups, those who worked hard and

valued what they had, and those who didn't seem to work much and resented what they didn't have.

The importance of education seemed to fall under two categories: those who thought that finishing high school and college were the best ways to ensure your future and those who weren't interested in their schooling and dropped out early. It was often those in the latter category who complained to me about how few options there were for them in that area.

10/31-/11/4/2011

This week has marked my return from community immersion to Manila and to the Batis office. I have really loved the time that I have been able to spend in the community and so it was with not just a few tears that I left the place.

It has been absolutely wonderful for me to be able to spend this time here, getting to know the community and to experience life in the rural areas. It has absolutely been the highlight of my time here.

The day I left Paratong, I got a call from the family to ensure that I had arrived home safely. When the three-year-old daughter realized it was me on the phone, she asked to speak to me but upon hearing my voice, burst into tears.

Apparently she had been looking for me during the day, thinking that I had just gone to visit

the markets or something and would be home again soon. Hearing her cry, I was soon in a similar state, wishing I could go back to Paratong and spend more time with my lovely host family.

It would have been nice to be able to have enough time to go back and visit the community, and see again the friends that I made.

I have been pleased with myself through the duration of the immersion. I usually worry that I can come off as shy until I have familiarized myself with a situation but, despite my fears, I don't think this really happened. I think that the connection I formed with the family was genuine and strong and I will miss them a great deal.

I have had several phone conversations with my host family since my return to Manila and have had daily text messages to the family as well as other community members and the *Barangay Kapitana* (village head).

The return to Manila was a sad one for me. My host family brought me to the bus station early in the morning to wave me off, choosing to do that rather than begin preparing food to sell for the day, and I got rather emotional leaving them.

My experience in Paratong has easily been the most enjoyable part of my time in the Philippines and I will treasure my memories of life in Paratong and all of the wonderful people that I met.

A Strong Sense of Connection

Paratong is one of 38 barangays or villages in Vigan, the capital of Ilocos Sur province. It consists of some 230 houses and is run by the Barangay (Village) Council voted every three years. It is a small barangay compared to those around it, and is close both to the ocean and to Vigan City, the larger of two cities in the province (population: 632,255).

Paratong has a population of 1,243 people, making up 267 households. Residents often live in family groupings, very close to their relations in clustered housing.

The majority of residents are connected to other family groups within the community; very few families come from other provinces, although some individuals have married into the community

The residents of Paratong are overwhelmingly Roman Catholics, with the majority worshipping in Vigan City each Sunday. However there are some smaller groups who are members of the Iglesia Ni Cristo (Church of Christ) and Jehovah's Witness.

As Paratong is a community made up of many family groups and those with long-standing connections to each other, there is a strong sense of connection and belonging to the community itself and the individuals within it.

Majority of those who leave the community do so for reasons of employment and support for their families. Well-paying jobs are hard to find within the community itself and in the nearby areas. While there is impetus to leave the community to seek employment,

family and community ties are strong and the desire to remain in Paratong is something expressed by many residents.

Majority of adults within Paratong have had limited formal schooling beyond primary level education. Schools were not within easy access for some time and Paratong has felt the effects of that.

Those who have completed secondary education often end up seeking employment outside the community, either in Vigan or abroad. In recent years, however, access to schooling has improved and there is a primary and secondary school within easy access of the community; bordering another barangay, they are joint schools, servicing children from both communities.

The high school does not have the certification to matriculate children, however, so those who want to complete the final year of high school and graduate must transfer to a high school in Vigan City. Access to the university and community college are available in Vigan.

Despite the accessibility to it, however, education is not seen as valuable by some within the community and despite fees being very low, some children are not required by their parents to go to school and many drop out at a young age.

Paratong has both a primary school and high school bordering the community. Connected to other nearby communities as well, the schools are government-run and as such, fees are very low, only needing to cover incidentals like school supplies. And so access is easy. Private schools are accessed by some Paratong residents, but they are located within Vigan and not Paratong itself and they charge higher tuition.

Classes at the local schools are taught in both Filipino and English, with greater emphasis being placed on English studies in high school. Languages are studied, with many students taking Mandarin Chinese as a part of their course work. Children with disabilities and special needs are welcomed at the schools, although there are no special classes or programs designed for their specific requirements.

Many in the community see education as the best way to get decent employment and a suitable wage. Great emphasis is placed on some young people remaining in school and pursuing further education.

Another school of thought within Paratong is that it is too much effort to send the children to school if they are not interested in their studies. So if they don't want to go they won't be forced.

While many scholarships are available, qualifying tests are difficult to pass and fees are too high. Without the additional support of scholarships, so many people do not go on to tertiary education even though this is seen as the best option for a good job and steady career.

The main employment within Paratong is pottery making. Sourced locally, clay is made into bowls, pots, stoves and tiles. The pottery is usually done by family groups. Many have worked in the industry for many years, and so employment is kept within the family to a great extent.

In order to harden and fire the clay, it is important that the day is clear and sunny so that the unhardened parts can have a chance to toughen before being put into the fire. This means that weather conditions limit pottery making.

The barangay council intends to purchase and make available a kiln which would speed the process of the pottery firing. At this stage, it requires the gathering and combustion of firewood and coconut husks.

Other local employment comes from farming, mostly of rice, where some families who own land employ others to work on it. But this is not considered an especially lucrative position and the work is not sought after. Some of these farmers take to the streets after a daily harvest, carrying baskets of produce and selling to people as they pass.

Low education

Paratong has a few small stores where people can buy snacks, cigarettes and household items, as well as hot foods for breakfast customers. These require a significant degree of capital to set up and the hours are long – although the income is more substantial than other options within the community.

Education levels are low among adults and many of the more professional positions are out of their reach. The most well paid members of the community appear to be those who have found employment in Europe, while the best local job that many youth in the community aspire to is that of a police officer.

While there is no documentation about wages and income received by the members of the community, it is clear from a brief visit that wealth varies greatly and quality of life and standards of living change accordingly.

The Barangay Council has a fund to support indigent families and individuals to a certain extent but family connections are strong within the community. Those with no income often rely on other family members to support them and other dependents.

Many in Paratong live in extended family groups and on family-owned land, and as such the majority of houses and land are privately owned.

Houses vary from the very opulent with electricity and air-conditioning, to the basic bamboo huts without electricity that somehow accomodate large families.

The geographical area of the barangay is small in comparison to the number of residents and as such dwellings are close by each other and neighbors are close.

No figures exist in Paratong as to the percentage of overcrowded or substandard dwellings, but through discussions with locals, it becomes apparent that the standard of housing is almost directly proportional to the wages earned by the household and the number of family members who are employed.

Paratong is located quite near Vigan City where there are more options for employment. The roads are good and well maintained and access to other areas is reasonably easy.

For most part, however, better employment is seen outside of Paratong, in Vigan, Manila or even abroad if you are lucky enough.

Many feel the need to leave Paratong to seek employment elsewhere, hoping to better support their

families with the higher wages offered outside of the community and its surroundings.

Not all households have television or radio through which to gather information. The Barangay Council has two personal computers which are available for students to gain Internet access for their studies.

Newspapers can be bought in Vigan; there seems to be no local supplier in Paratong, and indeed there seems to be little demand. It would appear that the key forms of passing information and communicating new ideas is through word of mouth.

Being located geographically so close to one's neighbors and the presence of large family groups within the community, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that gossip and informal discussions form the great part of the access to information.

People have a strong connection with the barangay and it seems that the vast majority would prefer to stay living there even though the opportunities are low and options are not good. The Barangay Council offers livelihood training activities and agricultural service support, but issues still remain in the community regarding proper education and suitable employment options.

Many residents want options elsewhere. Or to stay, and eke out an existence as best they can.

CHAPTER 9

A Study in Contrast - A Tale of Two Ladies

Two women. Same town. Same foreign country. Two different lives. This is the story of Mary Rose and Marina, neighbors in the village of Makabukod, in Aliaga, a town right in the middle of Nueva Ecija province, in the country's rice bowl of Central Luzon. Ricefields spread in all directions.

Mary Rose Agustin was recruited by a relative of a neighbor who happened to be a friend.

After paying P10,000 to the recruiter, Mary Rose left in February 2008 for Alepo, Syria, at the age of 20. There, she worked as a domestic helper and was, she said, subjected to physical abuse. And was paid \$100 instead of the promised \$150.

After a month or so, Mary Rose went home, in October of the same year, with her air fare paid for by the Philippine government. That is, after she called her mother (she was allowed to use the house phone) and said she couldn't bear the hardship. In turn, the mother called the attention of government authorities. "My husband and I couldn't sleep," said the mother, Mary Ann Agustin.

"She is our only daughter, the second of five children, and we were hoping she could help us," the mother said. "We are still paying the loan we took out to pay for her recruitment." That loan was taken on usurious terms.

The family is landless, having lost their farm to pay for a previous hospitalization. The parents are now share tenants, getting 10 percent of the rice they cultivate and harvest.

Her daughter being home now is for the better, said Mary Ann, the mother. "It's hard, she might have died there," she said, pointing out Mary Rose was nearly run over by a car driven by the employer. "She suffered from mosquito bites," she said, referring to the pinches her daughter was subjected to by the employer's wife who was always in a bad mood.

"Our daughter is so well behaved," the mother continued. "She just wasn't lucky."

Since her return, Mary Rose has gotten married and has a son barely two years old. Her husband is a share tenant, taking 40 percent of the rice he harvests, the rest going to the landlord.

Most of the time, she takes care of the baby. "I'm hoping for my own livelihood, perhaps a small store, to help my family and parents," said Mary Rose, who is a high school undergraduate.

A small store is a difficult proposition, said Beryl Grace Cruspero, a social worker with the Batis Women's Center, considering that there is already a lot of competition in the village along that line. "We have to think of a better business alternative," she said. Piggery is one, but is high risk due to potential hog diseases.

Meanwhile, Mary Ann, the mother, is selling native sausage to pay the P10,000 usurious loan for Mary Rose's recruitment. "Hopefully, we'll pay it in full this year," she said.

This time, the mother took out a P5,000 loan to make sausages which she sells on credit, with one week to pay. In turn, P100 a day goes to the P5,000 loan taken – again – at usurious terms.

Meanwhile, the mother plans to buy a refrigerator to extend the shelf life of the sausage and is suggesting to her daughter that she take the same business. To which Mary Rose is agreeable with. The local garlic sausage – at P200 a kilogram – has a reputation for being one of the best in the country.

Since October 2011, Mary Rose has been enrolled with the ILO-EU-Batis Center reintegration program for returned migrant workers.. She attends a series of livelihood training seminars co-organized with the Aliaga Municipal Social Development Office.

“They look forward to capital, at the very least, to start up a business,” said Beryl, who is the community organizer for Batis Center in Nueva Ecija. “But we don’t come up-front with money as they will expect it as a matter of course. So now we are in the process of evaluating what livelihood or business fits them best.”

In truth, she said, “many returning workers are not ready for enterprise or business. Others don’t prosper even with a P15,000 grant. Our services may not yet be appropriate for their needs.

“Sometimes, we accompany them to procure materials or goods to ensure that the money really goes to buy merchandise for the variety store,” Beryl said. “Sometimes, there are other more immediate needs for the family; P15,000 is easy to spend, easy to get lost.”

“Migrant women workers are so many, they come from almost all corners of Nueva Ecija,” she observed. “There is a heavy concentration of migrant workers in the province.”

There is a difference though, compared with returning workers in some places. In Ilocos Sur, for example, where Beryl has done social work with returning workers, there are many large houses built by workers who have since lived in Europe.

In contrast, for many workers returning to Aliaga, their financial conditions remain the same, they stay poor.

A different story

Then there was a knock on the door. It was Marina Alfanta, a neighbor just across the highway, who left the village at about the same time Mary Rose did. Only she had a very different story to tell.

Indeed, they departed for Damascus on the same aircraft. They went through the same hassles at the Hong Kong airport where, when their tourist visas to Syria was questioned, they admitted they plan to work there. They were allowed to leave by Hong Kong immigration.

After arriving in Damascus, Marina and Mary Rose stayed in the same agency holding house for migrant workers where they underwent a so-called training program. This involved working and doing chores at the agency offices. After that, these daughters of Aliaga went their separate ways and never saw each other again – until Marina returned to the Philippines much, much later.

In Damascus, Marina’s lady employer tried to help her look for Mary Rose. But the agency refused to disclose Mary Rose’s address.

From then on, for the three years she stayed in Syria, Marina did not know Mary Rose has already left – and despondent at that. Marina next saw Mary Rose when she returned to their village of Makabukod in Aliaga in January 2011.

Meanwhile in Syria, Marina was paid \$150 a month which, she said, is the average wage a Filipino domestic helper is paid. Those from other countries may get \$130 or less. And her lady employer treated her well, even now calling Marina in the Philippines once in a while to ask about her family.

“Your number one enemy back there is being homesick,” recalled Marina who left home at the age of 37, and finished her contract two years later. She left her youngest son, the only boy, when he was a seven-month-old infant, and saw him again already a three-year-old. There are three other siblings, all girls.

The father sold, and still sells, tofu drinks in Manila, about three hours by bus away. In fact, all the children were born in the big city when Marina was selling street foods long before she went abroad.

Strange as it seems, Marina was earning in Manila more than she ever did in Damascus – about P500 a day, more than double the peso equivalent at today’s exchange rate. When she accompanied her widowed mother-in-law to visit Aliaga, Marina met the same recruiter of Mary Rose, who asked the same P10,000 fee, all in, including return air fare.

While Marina was in Damascus, the father went home about twice a month, and still does. The grandparents raised the children, while the eldest girl Marfe “became both a mother and father to all,” Marina pointed out.

For one and a half years, the remittances went to the father until the eldest daughter turned 18, and got a bank account. Only then was the family able to buy appliances and make home improvements.

Before that, nobody told Marina that the children did not benefit from the remittances. The children and the grandparents did not want her to worry abroad. But then Marina found that nothing much, not one single furniture or home appliance, came out of her remittances. After she started receiving the remittances, daughter Marfe was able to replace their bamboo slat windows with glass jalousies.

When Marina left, the eldest was in second year high school. One daughter graduated from elementary

school but did not proceed to secondary school. Two were in kindergarten and in Grade 1. Today, education is still central in Marina's plans. Two of her children are in elementary school and one in high school.

She has no job, no livelihood, except to go with a group of villagers to plant rice – but only at times when their labor is needed. She helps weed rice paddies, like today, earning P100 for working from dawn until 10 a.m. "That's spending money for the day," she said.

"Or I do nothing at all," she said. The husband remains in Manila most times and sends money twice a week to help pay for grocery credits.

"I have no savings, I sent all my wages back home," Marina said. "I didn't think of saving at all, it was important for me to send money to the children. It all went to them, I thought they were going to school."

"My plan now is simple: To have a livelihood, however it takes," Marina said. Even if it may be easy to find a job in Manila, she does not want to leave the children anymore. Even if she has to work in the rice fields.

"I am already happy here with the children," she explained. The children too, don't like her to work in Manila, or anywhere else. One alternative, she said, is to sell grocery items or rice on credit and demand payment during rice harvests – a common practice in the village, and in thousand more villages nationwide. A sack of milled rice sold on credit, for example, is paid with three sacks of unmilled rice, which yields two sacks of milled grains. Or double the capital of about P1,500 per sack of milled rice.

After the planting season, while tenant farmers wait for the rice to grow, the cereal is the main commodity that villagers buy on credit; next are groceries. That is a potential market, Marina said, if only she has the capital to go into the business.

The income may not be as good as working in Syria where, Marina conceded, wages were regular. Here, some credit may not even be paid for, or payments may be erratic.

After rice and groceries, villagers do not worry much about tuition, which is free in public elementary and high schools. Marina, for example, spends P100 a week for her children's transportation. High school fees amount to about P340 a year, inclusive of PTA and Girl Scout fees.

For Mary Rose and Marina, having their own

livelihood would be dreams come true to help them cope with the future and pay for their children's education. They both pray for good returns for their business.

Indeed, they will be part of a field trip organized by Batis for the ILO-EU Project to observe successful enterprises that might be good business models for both.

Two migrants from Aliaga, two different tales. One involving a single woman who did not stay long abroad and went home poor. Another a mother who had a better deal, survived loneliness away from her children for three years – and returned still poor.

The story does not end there. Marfe, Marina's eldest, is now 19 and works in Manila as a domestic helper, like her mother before her.

"Don't worry, mother. Stay there, give me one year then I'll help more when I save more," said Marfe who was going home for Christmas and New Year. Who knows? Perhaps Marfe might even try foreign lands.

And so the cycle goes.

When Stability Means Missing the Family

by **Nellie Anderson** in “The Migration Situation in Nueva Ecija”
Social Work Student Intern, Batis Center for Women

(Nellie Anderson is a social work student at the University of South Australia in Adelaide. She was an intern at the Batis Center for Women while she was an exchange student at the University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development).

Numbers defy the national average in the migration movement out of Nueva Ecija. Take age. The migrant workers, in their 30s, follow the national pattern well enough. However, many are young; about a third are under the age of 20.

The age disparity could be attributed to the lack of jobs available to the youth. As the younger generation enters the working age, at a time when population is fast increasing, unemployment looms.

The provincial government estimated that nine out of 10 people in Nueva Ecija were over 18 years old and at the working age in 2007. In 2008, only six of 10 were employed, while four of 10 were idle.

The Nueva Ecija Medium-Term Development Plan has identified the lack of job opportunities as a serious issue. Based on the Filipino Labor Force Survey of 2003, a moderately high number of migrant workers are from Nueva Ecija. According to the Cabanatuan City Officer of the Social Welfare and Development Office, Nueva Ecija is a trafficking “hotspot” in the Philippines; and yet there has been no single conviction of a human trafficker in the province.

At the surface, there are many reasons to stay in Nueva Ecija (population in 2008: 1.83 million), the largest province in the Central Luzon, the country’s rice granary. Agriculture dominates its economy and half of the landscape, boasting one of the largest irrigation systems in the country. It is rich, 11th on the country’s wealthiest list.

Except for Information Technology, almost all of the top money makers are linked to agriculture: processing, food, furniture and home furnishing, handicrafts, gifts and holiday decors.

Nueva Ecija has one of the lowest rates of poverty: less than 20 percent are extremely poor, according to the Social Watch Monitoring Project, compared to 33.7 percent elsewhere in the Philippines.

And yet, even many of the rich are leaving. The National Per Capita Income Quintile of 2006 puts 46.7 percent of overseas workers in the richest group within

Nueva Ecija. A little lower than the national average perhaps, but overall, 86.2 percent of Novo Ecijans who work overseas come from the two richest income brackets. Meaning, they come from the richest families in the province.

Much of the money is pumped from abroad. The amount of remittances is increasing yearly, from P2.6 billion in 2000 to P6.5 billion in 2006, according to the Institute on Migration and Development.

The Family Income and Expenditures Survey of 2009 even puts it higher, from P2.7 billion in 2000 to P7.1 billion in 2006. The survey shows that at least one-fourth of the finances in 10 percent of households come from abroad; 5.7 percent of households rely on remittances to provide as much as half of their incomes.

This indicates that one in 10 families in Nueva Ecija is at least partially reliant on a family member abroad. And that many income in many households are boosted by the money sent back.

Billions of dollars are sent each year by one of every 10 Filipinos who work in other countries – at least 8 million Filipinos; these migrant workers represent 20 percent of the country’s labor force. Not only do they send much needed money, they tip the unemployment scale down.

Nueva Ecija’s share (15%) of migrant workers abroad is average for Central Luzon, the country’s fourth largest (12%) origin of migrant workers.

The last two decades saw an increasing number of Novo Ecijans leave for greener pastures, from just 746 in 1988 to 1,567 in 2010 – all in all, 23,131 during the period, says the Commission on Filipinos Overseas. Most left highly populated urban centers: Cabanatuan, San Jose, Gapan, Gumba and Munoz. Half were married. Six of 10 were women, according to the Labor Force Survey of 2003.

The survey indicates that the more educated someone is, the more chances he or she has to work overseas. Which is true for Nueva Ecija where 89 percent

of workers abroad were at least high school graduates. Six of 10 were either college graduates or undergraduates.

Four out of 10 worked in the Middle East and North Africa; a fourth worked in Asia and the Pacific. Less than one in 10 worked in Europe, Canada and the United States. The other major destinations were Japan, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and Dubai.

Most worked in production-related jobs, which is interesting, considering many of the jobs that people have in Nueva Ecija were related to agriculture. However, it is not surprising either because many go abroad without the background related to the work they would be doing.

Even those with university education may not work in course-related jobs.

Drivers

I learned so much from conversations with people in Cabanatuan, Palayan, Talavera, San Antonio and Aliaga, as well as in discussions with social workers in Palayan, Cabanatuan and Talavera. They portray a relatively clear picture of what drives Novo Ecijans abroad.

They go because there are not enough jobs. There are not enough jobs with decent wages.

Highly skilled workers or people with a high level of education seek employment abroad, while leaving behind a high portion of low skilled and uneducated workers, according to the Nueva Ecija provincial government in 2008.

In several interviews, many residents stated they sought work abroad hoping to relieve their families from poverty. The lure of an adventure and a new experience added to the appeal.

Many of the younger migrants, said Helen Bagasao of the Municipal Social Development Office, wanted the chance to travel. She explained that while families struggle for money it can be a social expectation or obligation that the oldest sibling or a parent, particularly a mother, to be willing to go abroad to help the rest of the family.

During my stay in Nueva Ecija, I have seen how several people who had ventured overseas to work and then returned, after a moderate period, had saved enough money to start businesses of their own. Several of these families looked better off than other families living in the neighboring barangays.

This suggests that some who have returned have achieved their goal of earning enough money to venture into their own businesses, to support themselves without

leaving home again.

Threats and Deception

Human Trafficking can be defined as an illegal act of recruiting, transporting and/or harboring a person for the purpose of exploitation. The means of getting a person to the place of exploitation can involve threats, deception, abuse of power, coercion, etc. An act of human trafficking is not defined by whether the victim consents, or not, and can occur within or across national borders. It is a gross human rights violation.

Illegal Recruitment can be defined as an unauthorized person or authority facilitating a person's entry from one country to another, illegally, with the promise of work. Often the person or authority in charge of organizing the entry of a person into the country will lie about the job offered to the victim.

Still, for some who have benefited financially, stability remains as long as a family member continues to work abroad. Some families who enjoy a better lifestyle are unsure when the father, mother or sibling will be settled back home. So it is that economic benefits come at a price; a better lifestyle can only be retained while somebody else in the family works abroad.

Nueva Ecija, like many other provinces, has its troubles with illegal recruitment. Many migrant workers are lured overseas by false promises made by illegal recruiters. Stories told by victims of illegal recruitment and human trafficking are terrible. Many of them have had to escape from their jobs after only a short period of employment. This has had a negative effect on the family.

Several returned in debt because they had to borrow to go abroad in the first place. Such experiences made them less inclined to work abroad again.

Many felt their time abroad had affected their everyday life. Many victims of human trafficking and illegal recruitment still felt stressed when thinking about the experience.

Transition

The transition into living back home is easier for some than others. The major issue relates to livelihood and employment – because previously, they were able to support their families with an income bigger than would ever be possible in the Philippines.

the family working abroad, and are able to transfer these savings into successful and lasting enterprises.

Others are not so lucky and are faced with the issue of having to be able to continue to support their family without the income generated by a relative working abroad. It is often that those who return had been victims of human trafficking or illegal recruitment; they have the biggest needs. They escaped their terrible situations abroad but returned to a large debt, therefore putting them in more need of employment and livelihood, said Ms. Bagasao.

Others had mental health concerns, stressed as they are about their experiences. While they were interested in seeking justice, they did not have the finances to go to court.

Amid these broad range of needs, livelihood is still the priority of all those who had returned.

Provincial and municipal social welfare and development offices offer some services. For example, women who do not want to work abroad again may avail of the province's Livelihood Assistance and Self-Employment Support.

The municipal Social Welfare and Development Office in Cabanatuan is helping victims of human trafficking seek legal justice. The Talavera Social Welfare and Development Office set up an Anti-Illegal Recruitment Desk responsible for the repatriation and rescue of victims.

These towns and the provincial government have expressed the desire to develop a desk for overseas workers, including for those who have returned. Several NGOs have pitched in to help. The Batis Center for Women offers group personal and family counseling, social enterprises training, and even legal referrals.

The Batis Center for Women, in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Nueva Ecija Provincial Government, is helping migrant workers who have returned to Nueva Ecija.

One of the most successful services is the Kooperatibang Likas ng Nueva Ecija or KOOL-NE, one of the most progressive and successful cooperatives in Nueva Ecija.

This initiative has developed an Adopt-a-Client Investment Program which allows overseas workers to invest in local business through loans. It aids poor workers and allows their business to get off the ground. At the same time, it provides overseas workers with an investment portfolio; they receive a return on their investments upon arrival.

While the needs of returning workers are well understood by the local governments and NGOs, it is apparent that these workers are not aware of these services and assistance. The key is to educate these workers and make resources more accessible.

One example is to make legal services and counseling more accessible to victims of illegal recruitment and human trafficking, such as what the Batis Center for Women is doing. It would be logical to tailor services and assistance to the demographics: Women in their 20s and 30s, married and with a higher level of education.

Finally, prevention is better than cure. The Provincial Government, ILO and the Batis Center for Women are working to educate the province on the pitfalls of illegal recruitment, particularly human trafficking.

Before, During and After

It is hard to provide services and assistance when there is no full understanding of the number of people, and the type of people, they are needed for. Better records are needed before workers leave, while they are abroad and when they return. The Cabanatuan City Social Welfare and Development Office is starting a registry of overseas workers. Data from barangays, municipalities and the province need to be shared for accuracy.

The welfare of workers needs to be considered before, during and after their stay abroad. Municipal and provincial "desks" should be responsible for them. These Desks should help workers prepare for overseas assignments, advice potential workers on conditions abroad, and discuss the risks of illegal recruitment and human trafficking. These Desks should check on their welfare while they are abroad and on their return.

Workers must be made aware of the services and assistance available to them. Better coordination on all government levels means resources are better used and prevents overlapping services and assistances.

Victims of human trafficking and illegal recruitment victims have been identified as the ones who need the most support during reintegration; specific livelihood services should be created or more NGOs should be encouraged to fill the gaps, including training, individual and family counseling and more support for legal action.
— *Recommendations from the Batis Center for Women, Nueva Ecija Provincial Government and the International Labour Organization*

CHAPTER 10

Sewing a New Life Together

Seamstresses all, these unflappable women have all worked abroad at varying duration and time – and they all ended up in one place, in Romania.

At journey's end, they converged at a Romanian garments factory, except for one who worked in Cyprus. And they all have common grievances. These are skilled sewers who were victims of contract substitution and poor living conditions.

They were made to sign new employment contracts with inferior stipulations than those they signed before leaving the Philippines. They were made to avail of loans to cover their placement fees from several lending agencies referred by the recruiters. They faced criminal charges for issuing checks – as required by the lending companies – that later bounced.

Assisted by the International Labour Organization (ILO)-European Union (EU) Project, through the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), they have won their legal battle before a labor court for recovery of damages and unpaid salaries. Their claims remain unpaid by the recruiter.

The sundry shops or *sari-sari* (variety) stores that they now manage are brief interludes in their long journeys, a pit stop as they prepare themselves to more lofty aspirations--of putting what they have learned abroad to good business sense by establishing a garments factory.

However small. And in the long run.

At the moment, they are content with having small seed money for the enterprises that they are nurturing to help tide them over. The seed money was sown by the ILO-EU Project and OWWA's National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers (NRCO).

The grants came toward the end of a long process that eased their transition from nightmare to hope,

from stress debriefing and psycho-social counseling, to reintegrating with their communities and families. Each received a P12,500 grant to start individual enterprises, but not before they received training needs assessment, financial literacy seminars, basic accounting and business counseling.

They continue to make dresses but have embraced these supplementary incomes. Marilou Maceda of Taguig is the leader of the band. She is president of the Lingap Pangkabuhayan, the credit cooperative that the women have put up. She operates a *sari-sari* store.

Imelda Ignacio of Tondo is the vice president and runs a *sari-sari* store.

The same goes for Pelita Banderada of Antipolo and Rhoda O. Suyod of Caloocan who both operate neighborhood variety stores.

Amalia S. Salazar of Alabang sells toys from a stall in a shopping mall.

Only Myra Geron of Taytay remains a seamstress in her business.

All women, however, remain true to their calling. Starting a new life in Metro Manila where they have converged after their close calls overseas, all have bonded together and dream of putting their heads – and experiences – together to set up a small clothes factory.

Their exposure to different stages of clothes manufacturing in Romania had prepared them just for this. While scattered in the metropolis, they meet regularly or use Facebook to communicate and network with each other.

“With the assistance from OWWA, through the ILO-EU Project, I had training in small business,” said Marilou. “Later, after the small capital put each of us on our own business paths, we decided to start a credit cooperative so we can help each other.”

“They could have put up any kind of cooperative, but they decided on a credit cooperative instead,” said NRCO Director Vivian Tornea. “It appeared that they needed funding to augment businesses needs.

“The beneficiaries initially formed associations, then decided to put up a cooperative since they were already businesswomen,” she said. The objective was to return the P12,500 grant to the cooperative so the fund can be tapped if needed.

Marilou stayed nearly six months in Romania and was not compensated for her services. She turned the disappointment into something positive and profitable after receiving the grant from ILO-EU Project.

She earns P250 a day from the hamburgers she sells – plus more from the other groceries at her home-based store.

Going home was a hard adjustment to her, but a welcome respite. “It’s better to have your own livelihood, you have no boss, you own your time,” she said. “If you need to do something, you can do it. Because of the NRCO and ILO, I’m inspired to improve on my business.”

The inspiration comes from the series of skills training and counseling sessions required by the ILO-EU-Project. Certificates of attendance are proudly displayed in her store.

Imelda, the cooperative vice president, attended the same business counseling classes and, with the same grant, beefed up the shelves of the store she left before leaving for Romania. It has since become a 24/7 mini “7-11” convenience store for the carwash boys and tricycle drivers in the neighborhood.

And she had to hire two female helpers to manage the store. That is the smallest – and probably most meaningful – version of employment generation in the neighborhood.

Because of a course on meat processing, she sells American burgers and hotdogs, as well as Chinese dumplings. A freezer came free when she hit a softdrinks sales quota. Imelda does not think of going back abroad as an option anymore. She is contented with what she earns.

To top it all, she is now a sub-contractor to a garments maker. Recently, she snagged a contract to supply school uniforms for elementary students of New Era University. For this big contract, she plans to tap the women members of Lingap.



The seamstresses of Taytay, Rizal. © ILO/M. Duran

Amalia, who sells toys in a shopping mall, was so successful especially on holidays that she reinvested the little earnings she made and bought more toys. She now has a steady supplier and knows what toys are attractive with children. She is studying the mall layout to position her goods in the best vantage point.

Pull factor

Reintegration is a recent terminology, popularized in the 2000s, Tornea said, adding that even before that, OWWA had programs to encourage workers to come home “because of our cultural bias for closer family ties. These workers left the country mostly because of their aspirations to do better.”

Those who return are encouraged to be productive, whether as employees or to manage their own businesses.

Even before that, a replacement and monitoring center was tasked to fill the gaps left by migrant workers so that local requirements did not suffer. The center was later replaced by the NCRO.

In 2007, the OWWA reintegration program started with staff members assigned to victims of human trafficking and exploited workers. The first phase of the capacity building program followed the realization that OWWA interventions must ensure that returning workers live normal lives.

The second phase was the pilot testing of this approach to “sustainable reintegration” that over time would act as an alternative to overseas employment. Here, economic considerations joined psycho-social integration, which was the hallmark of OWWA interventions in the past.

Before the economic factor came in, interventions were limited from an institutional perspective to help, for example, returning workers negotiate grievances with employers. Psycho-social counseling was the norm. Alternative income sources to help ease the return were barely factored in, if at all.

“The ILO approach was responsive intervention, to make the return sustainable,” Vivian said. So in October 2010 to March 2011, the ILO-EU programs on legal, psycho-social and economic empowerment were put in place, and the Project agreed to also provide start-up capital.

When the ILO saw it was working, it ushered in the Third Phase or the institutionalization of the Program, which was to benefit workers returning from Europe as well as Syria, Cyprus, Lebanon and Jordan. So far, in a pilot testing of the program, the NRCO has reached 60 beneficiaries in South and Central Luzon , and Central Philippines.

Something

“Returning workers have made big with what seemed to most people to be a low amount of P12,500,” Vivian pointed out. “They made something big out of it, and P12,500 could really make a lot of difference.” The experience, she said, has helped the NRCO to come out with templates in successful reintegration.

The need for reintegration was more acute in recent events: the global financial crisis and the Arab Spring which Vivian called “two waves that sent massive numbers of workers returning.”

Although the Department of Labor and Employment tried to redeploy many of the displaced workers, not all could be accommodated.

The NRCO provides those who opted for self-employment in the Philippines with livelihood and enterprise training and financial help – and a P10,000 “starter kit”. Should they need more financing, OWWA has a P50,000 livelihood support fund for each qualified beneficiary.

“The ILO-EU Project contribution was the recognition that economic intervention is important in pursuing sustainable reintegration, regardless of status, regardless of condition when they come home,” Vivian said. “You need not be a worker in distress, a returning worker still needs to hurdle re-adaptation to family and community. “And ILO’s contribution can be replicated in other parts of the country,” she added

A returning worker, she said, still has to prepare to make day-to-day adjustments in the family – and vice versa. “Even just conversing with a teenage child is vastly different from holding that child when he or she was a toddler. You have to know each other all over again.

“Major decisions now have to be made by both the husband and wife,” she pointed out. “One needs to adjust from making decisions alone.”

Then there is the switch in wages, from working abroad and working at home. “You have to adjust to a different working environment,” Vivian continued. “Some are disoriented when they return.”

Returning workers are pressured to bring home dollars, gifts and prosperity. Their community standing as having worked abroad, presumably with higher wages, must be maintained. A professional who has worked overseas cannot go back to their former jobs. Or they cannot compete with younger workers for the same jobs. They are even encouraged to return abroad.

The tendency is cyclic. After the hard-earned money is exhausted, especially if children have to go to school and elderly parents have to be supported. The worker goes back eventually. “Money management is the main issue among successful returnees,” Vivian said, adding that some lose, some gain

“Some have investments, some have financial literacy,” Vivian said. “Many are not only world-class workers, they are world-class entrepreneurs, too.

“They can attain their goals here and stay with their families at the same time,” she said. “And then there is the ripple effect of creating jobs, and probably encouraging people to stay and not to work overseas.”

“More important, they learn to access opportunities, like availing of the grants and now organizing a cooperative,” said Concepcion “Ching” Burgos, NRCO Coordinator of the EU-ILO Project. “This is the lesson learned; that it’s not just the money, that knowing how to access opportunities is important as well.

“This is the start of reaching more of the distressed returning workers,” she said. “These distressed workers are victims of human trafficking, deception, fraud, intimidation, contract substitution, poor working conditions, maltreatment, sexual and physical abuse, non-payment of wages, and so on,” she added.

“It’s a starting point for them to make informed decisions, to decide whether to stay, given the trauma

abroad and the opportunity to have a livelihood here,” Ching said. “Most of them actually decide to stay.”

“Knowing that there are available resources to be tapped, that they can use, that matters very much,” she added.

Network

And that is for the Lingap Pangkabuhayan credit cooperative that Marylou and her band of sisters registered. This is no ordinary network. Because most are well-versed in the many stages of garments manufacturing, they are actually in a position to realize their dreams.

Take Imelda, who worked for 10 months in Brunei, three in Namibia and five months in Romania, each assignment putting her up one slot higher than the previous job description. In Romania, she was what is called an Assembly Line Leader, overseeing the work of 24 workers. Her position was higher than that of a Supervisor.

Marilou worked nine years in Brunei as a seamstress, but was promoted to the payroll department in the Romanian garments factory.

“I was wiped out because of Romania, the placement fee was so expensive at P120,000,” she said. “I expect to recover it with my present business. In fact, I have already started.”

Pelita has a two-year experience in Brunei and five months in Romania as a seamstress.

Amalia spent two years in Taiwan doing the same, and then seven years in Mexico and five months in Romania where she was assigned as a Supervisor.

“Before Romania I was doing fine, but I lost everything going to that country, I had to pawn off everything I had and go into credit to pay the recruiter,” she said. On top of her toy business, she plans to have a stall to sell garments at the Alabang shopping mall. “Ready-to-wear should sell,” she said, “so why return abroad? I’m happy here.”

Myra spent two-and-a-half years in Brunei, then five months in Romania checking sample garments before they go into mass production. After her return, she even worked for a while as Assembly Line Leader here. She lost the small savings she had to pay the recruitment fee to go to Romania. She was promised \$400 in her contract, but was actually paid \$168 a month.

Myra already has volume orders for 1,000 pieces of garments a week. Because she only has six sewing machines at home, she had sub-contracted the order, increasing employment downstream. She has a small property in Bulacan, which she is offering as a factory site so the cooperative will not spend for rent. With a factory, the cooperative is even eyeing a cafeteria to cater to what could be an expanding workforce.

They plan to expand the cooperative to 50 members, most of them seamstresses. Even at their present number, they can already avail of loan facilities at OWWA, which provides for a group of at least five members a loan starting from P200,000 minimum to P1 million.

To start-up a factory, the cooperative needs all the help it can get. A brand new current model sewing machine costs at least P25,000.

“Then you have to factor in the electric bills, salaries, materials and so on,” said Marilou.

Rhoda, who has a small store in Caloocan, is not a seamstress but is most welcome to join the cooperative. She met her sisters in NRCO livelihood seminars and counseling sessions and has made friends with them since. She will soon train as a seamstress in one of the livelihood courses.

Rhoda worked in Cyprus for four years and came home with nothing to show for it. Now, the small store that she started with the ILO-EU Project grant has been fruitful. With some profit and the earnings of her husband, they have built a second floor to their small home, and dream of a third floor. She plans to open a canteen for a nearby construction site.

“It’s different if you have children,” said Rhoda of their two sons. “You have to work and earn fast.”

“Who would have thought I’d make it here?” she said. “I’m proud of what my fellow workers and I have achieved.”

All of her friends have yet to tie the knot. “We’re all so busy, we’re all still single,” Marilou said. “We have even thought of branding our clothes as *Single Ladies*.”

P2 Billion Loan Facility

The National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers (NRCO) of the Department of Labor and Employment provides not only counseling on values formation, family support and the importance of preparing for the eventual return of workers and the realization of family goals.

It advises on re-entry options such as wage employment, livelihood, entrepreneurship and business options. Counseling includes savings, financial planning, money management and investment options. Capability building involves skills training, retooling and upgrading and entrepreneurship training.

Entrepreneurship development includes assistance for business capital (or starter kits); assistance to obtain business loans and other credit facilities; and assistance for technology and product development and marketing.

For distressed returnees, the NRCO gives rescue and temporary shelter assistance, as well as help in matters concerning legal, medical, repatriation, airport, transfer and economic needs.

And it provides job search assistance for local or overseas employment.

What is more, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) has a P2 billion special loan program in partnership with the Development Bank of the Philippines and the Land Bank of the Philippines. It is intended to support enterprise development among Filipinos working abroad, and their families.

The loan is available to members and former members of OWWA Regional Welfare Offices. They must have completed the Entrepreneurial Development Training conducted by the NRCO and OWWA in partnership with the Department of Trade and Industry, Philippine Trade Training Center and the Bureau of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise Development.

To be eligible, projects must generate a net monthly income of not less than P10,000.

The loanable amount ranges from a minimum of P300,000 to a maximum of P2 million at an interest rate of 7.5 percent per annum, fixed for the term of the loan. Maturity for a short-term loan is a maximum of one year, while for a long-term loan, it is up to seven years, inclusive of a two-year grace period on principal.

The borrower's equity is 20 percent of the total project cost; meaning, the maximum loan is 80 percent of the project cost.

Banks will require applicants to submit proofs of confirmed market, purchase/service order or a list of mortgage-ready assets, if any, for loan security purposes.

Going Home, Making Good

*Stories of triumph and hope
as told by Filipino women migrant workers
returned from the European Union
and neighbouring countries*

This book features personal narratives of some of the Philippine beneficiaries of a three-year Project of the International Labour Organization (ILO), supported by the European Union (EU) - "Going back - moving on: Economic and social empowerment of migrants, including victims of trafficking, returned from the EU and neighbouring countries."

The overall objective of the Project was to contribute to the reduction of labor and sexual exploitation of migrants by supporting a humane return and reintegration process emphasizing economic and social empowerment.

The Project partners - Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), Batis Center for Women, and Kanlungan Centre Foundation - have been assisting a number of women who have returned from Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. These women are from the Project's geographical focus, specifically the provinces of La Union, Ilocos Sur, Nueva Ecija and Metro Manila, and its nearby areas. These direct services consist of counseling, health care, legal assistance and rights education, job placement, skills and entrepreneurship training, and referral services, among others.

As these women told their stories, we can only hope to encourage others who want to reclaim their roots, and ease them into productive livelihoods, nurturing their aspirations back home. The narratives presented in this book reflect the sustenance of these dreams.



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DECENT WORK

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