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*The following is a presentation given by the Philippine Women Centre at "Towards the Transformation of Race and Gender", a conference organized by the Race and Gender Teaching Advisory Group at the University of British Columbia*

## Filipino Women's Identity: A social, cultural and economic segregation in Canada

### Introduction

When Filipinos started immigrating into Canada in the late 1960's, a preponderance among these immigrants were nurses who were recruited by hospitals and health care institutions. As more Filipino nurses entered Canada in the early 1970's, the nursing profession has almost become the "inscribed" social identity of the Filipino woman.

In the 1980's, another social identity would soon be inscribed on the Filipino woman's body. At this time, more Filipino women are coming into Canada to work as domestic workers under the Immigration Canada's Live-in Caregiver Program or LCP. Even Filipino nurses who applied to work in Canada are accepted only if they come in as domestic workers. A new "social construct" of the Filipino woman began to emerge- that of a domestic worker - a lowly paid migrant worker, highly marginalized and segregated from mainstream Canadian society.


Today, there is another emerging identity of the Filipino woman. In our major research at the Philippine Women Centre, we are finding out that, like domestic workers, mail-order brides are slowly emerging as a new identity for many Filipino women in Canada. And like the domestic workers, this is a social construct that pushes the women in the margins of society and makes them virtual modern-day slaves.


### Context of Filipino woman's identity in Canada

These various "social construct" or identity of the Filipino woman in Canada must be seen within the backdrop of global developments and the political and economic crisis in the Philippines today and several decades ago. The economic integration of countries under a globalized capitalist economy has caused massive shifts in population and dislocation of peoples. As more countries come under the

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dictates and influence of global institutions like the World Bank, IMF and WTO, countries of the South like the Philippines continue to experience economic crisis.

In the case of the Philippines, this economic crisis under globalization would translate in the country's inability to provide employment and livelihood for its people such that migration has become not a choice but a necessity for many Filipinos, especially women. Since the Philippine government institutionalized the export of its people through the Labour Export Program (LEP) in 1973, millions of Filipinos have left the country.

Today, around 8 million or 10% of the Philippine population is outside the country working in various trades and profession in over 180 countries. One unique thing about Filipino outmigration is its feminization. Latest studies show that between 65% to 70% of Filipinos who leave the country are women. In Canada, 65% of Filipino migrants and immigrants are women.

Majority of these Filipino women are working in dangerous, difficult and low-income occupations such as domestic work and entertainment. An article by a leading Filipino woman activist mentioned that domestic worker contracts make up as high as 70% of contracts in the international labor market and domestic workers form a large segment of the world's migrant population. Housework being historically defined as women's work, women as domestic workers form the bulk of this worker category. Majority of Filipino women work as domestic workers in Hongkong, Singapore, and other cities of Asia, Middle East and Europe.

#### Filipino nurses under the LCP

In Canada, over 50,000 Filipino women (around

30% of Filipinos) have entered Canada through the Foreign Domestic Movement and the LCP where they are mandated to work for twenty four months within three years as "live-in" domestic workers before they can go to other occupations. Failure to meet this requirement becomes a ground for deportation. As well, the "live-in" component of the program makes these women virtual indentured servants.

This is why the Philippine Women Centre call the LCP an anti-woman and racist policy. It not only preempts demands for a national daycare program, it also transfers gender oppression from one group of women to another group of women. That these oppressed group of women happens to be women of colour further illustrates the racist bias of the LCP.

In BC alone, it is estimated that there are over 8,000 domestic workers majority of whom are Filipinos. Through our study and organizing efforts at the Kalayaan Centre, we have located over 250 trained and skilled Filipino nurses doing domestic work in B.C. While these nurses hold a Bachelor's Degree in Nursing, they have migrated to Canada under the LCP because it is the only effective way for them to enter this country. No points are given for nursing under the General Occupations List of Immigration Canada. Filipino nurses are drawn to Canada because of the chance to eventually apply for landed status, bring their families from the Philippines and return to their nursing profession. But they soon realize the impact of de-skilling and systemic racism upon their economic and social

systemic racism upon their economic and social situation.

One participant in our research stated it emphatically this way:

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

Besides discriminatory immigration policies and the basic exploitative nature of the LCP itself, there are other factors contributing to the dire situation of Filipino nurses doing domestic work. In another research at the Kalayaan Centre, it identified the role that systemic racism plays in maintaining these women as source of cheap labor in Canada. The participants in the research identified barriers in the areas of immigration, education, economic equality and professional institutions. For instance, they find the obligatory English tests being expensive, inaccessible, and irrelevant. Philippine trained nurses are educated in English using North American textbooks under a U.S.-patterned nursing curriculum. But despite this, an official in the nursing profession in BC belittles this by describing the English competency of these nurses as "home-based English" - hence, they are unfit to practice in the profession.

Despite the recognized acceptance of an acute shortage of nurses in Canada, health care institutions, organizations and professional bodies continue to put up barriers for the return to profession of Filipino and other foreign-trained nurses. This can only be construed as systemic discrimination and racism.

#### Filipino women as mail order brides

Historically, Filipino women migrated to other countries as nurses, teachers and other professionals. In Canada, these women came to work as nurses and teachers in the 1960s and 1970s. The nurses were very visible and it was during this period when the Filipino woman identity as a nurse came to be defined.

As the economy of Canada continued to expand and became more integrated with economic globalization, the demand for more Canadian women to participate in the formal sector of the economy also grew. To replace their unpaid labour at home, the need for foreign domestic workers also became a necessity. This need for domestic workers was filled up mostly by Filipino women since the 1980s and it was during this period when the social construct of the Filipino woman as a domestic worker began to emerge.

But the relentless expansion and growth of globalization necessitated further inroads of capital in all areas of human endeavor. Long ago, Karl Marx already saw this globalization when he said that the expansion of capital would compel it to chase markets "over the whole surface of the globe" and commodify everything that comes across its path. This is precisely true in the trafficking of women today.

Trafficking in women has become such a lucrative business that it ranks number three after trade in arms and drugs. This is one major context of the mail-order-bride business in the Philippines. Mail-

mail-order brides are the latest sector of Filipino women to leave the Philippines. According to the Philippine government, close to 150,000 Filipino women left the country between 1989 and 1998, as fiancées or spouses of foreigners. The top destinations of these women are the United States, Australia and Western Europe.

Today, Canada is becoming a new frontier for mail-order brides from the Philippines. In our research published this year, we interviewed 40 Filipino mail-order brides in five provinces. We found out that we have only scratched the surface of this subject. More studies need to be done. But one thing that is slowly emerging is a new identity of the Filipino woman as a mail-order bride.

### Marginalization and Segregation

While it is true that a large number of Filipino women may have integrated successfully into the mainstream of Canadian society, it is also a reality that our community continues to be marginalized and segregated. Filipino nurses continue to do domestic work and they face systemic barriers whenever they try to return to their profession. Besides doing the traditional domestic work, they are also being used as 24-hour home support workers to care for the affluent elderly and people with disabilities. This is part of the slowly emerging privatization of the health care system and cheapening of the nursing profession. It also creates a division between the nurses from the South and nurses from the North where the former are looked down as inferior to the latter.

The LCP, which continues to be in place, has had a severe impact on the community as whole and second generation of Filipino Canadians. The long years of separation due to this program has created dysfunctional and disempowered members of families. Filipino youth has the highest drop out rate among high school students in the Lower Mainland. This will only perpetuate further segregation of the community and deepening of economic marginalization.

### What is to be done

Despite all the barriers and our marginalization, Filipino women have continued their resistance. We have always defined our work at the Centre within the context of our situation in Canada that uses us as cheap labour, in the Philippines that "forces" our migration and within the global reality that intensifies our dislocation and forced migration. Our presence in Canada has been largely shaped by our history of migration with its roots going back to the crisis in Philippine society and the need for cheap labour by advanced capitalist countries like Canada. This cheap labor is often provided by women from the South who end up at the bottom of the economic ladder enduring class, gender and racial discrimination.

With this understanding, our work at the Centre involves three major components. The first one is in the area of education. We do community-based research and education in order to fully understand our reality and root causes of our presence in Canada. The next component of

our work is organizing. We organize in order that we can collectively and effectively present our issues both within and outside our community. This way we develop both our personal and collective empowerment. The third component is our mobilization work. We do not only educate and organize ourselves. We mobilize ourselves and our community for action to change our reality. We

develop alliances and coalitions with other women and their organizations. We also do lobbying work with the government for policy change and/or development of policies that are not oppressive, anti-women and racist.

Thus, our work at the Centre involves mainly three key areas: education, organization and action for social justice, genuine development and just and lasting peace not only for this generation but also for future generations.

Cecilia Diocson  
May 4, 2001

Organizations in the Lower Mainland

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