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Author(s): Nona Grandea and Joanna Kerr

Source: *Gender and Development*, Vol. 6, No. 1, [Migration and Mobility] (Mar., 1998), pp. 7-12

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#) on behalf of [Oxfam GB](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4030329>

Accessed: 02/08/2011 18:40

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‘Frustrated and displaced’:

Filipina domestic workers in Canada

Nona Grandea with Joanna Kerr

This article examines the case of Filipina domestic workers in Canada, based on a participatory action research study that the authors carried out with Filipina domestic workers in 1996. The Philippines has been a major supplier of migrant labour, and is one of the principal sources of foreign domestic workers in Canada.

In 1995, the plight of two Filipina domestic workers caught the world’s attention. Flor Contemplacion was executed in Singapore for a crime many believe she did not commit. Fifteen-year old Sarah Balabagan was sentenced to death by a court in the United Arab Emirates for stabbing her male employer in self-defence. These cases, though extreme, accentuated the vulnerability and the exploitation of female migrant workers.

As long as global economic inequalities exist, women will continue to migrate. For the community of practitioners, policy-makers, and academic researchers working on gender and development, this raises new issues. In particular, as the ‘North’ and ‘South’ take on a new configuration, since women from the Global South are struggling for their rights in communities of the North.

Worldwide, the number of women who migrate for employment purposes has dramatically risen in the last two decades, particularly in Asia — a phenomenon that has raised new issues and problems (Lim and Oishi, 1996). Attitudes towards the value of women’s work have made their experiences as migrant workers different from those of

men, if not worse. The perception of domestic work as non-productive work that requires little skill has made women less likely to be protected by national legislation and institutions of receiving countries, as well as subject to provisions that are conducive to various forms of abuse. At the same time, women’s migration has had profound social consequences in their home countries. Family separations and neglected children have been among the negative impacts of the phenomenon.

In the last decade, the majority of women who entered Canada to work as caregivers or nannies have been from the Philippines. Canada, on the other hand, has had a long history of procuring domestic workers externally. There have been numerous studies on the situation of domestic workers, but very few have been shaped or undertaken by domestic workers themselves. For the most part, they have been treated as objects of study, rather than agents of change. Over a six-month period in 1996, a group of 14 Filipina domestic workers carved time out of their busy lives to investigate and understand their working conditions and factors that gave rise to them, and more importantly, to identify action-

oriented strategies to improve their situation. These domestic workers from Toronto and Montreal undertook the challenging task of learning participatory action research methods, identifying research questions, conducting focus groups discussions with other domestic workers, and presenting the findings.

The process

The goal of the project was to make the research as participatory and action-oriented as possible. A steering committee was established, which consisted of representatives of domestic workers organisations and collaborating organisations, namely the Women's Advisory Committee of the Philippines-Canada Human Resource Development Program (PCHRD), the Coalition for the Defence of Migrant Workers' Rights in Toronto, and PINAY in Montreal. These organisations set the goals of the project, and recruited researchers within and outside their respective organisations.

The first workshop

The first step in the research was to determine the research questions for the study. At the first workshop, participatory action research methods were introduced using both English and Tagalog. With the use of brainstorming, semi-structured interviewing, matrices, diagrams, trend analysis and historical profiles, a common understanding was achieved of the issues that shape the working and living conditions of domestic workers.

Within the group, there were different levels of awareness of the factors underpinning working conditions, and disagreement on the means to use to address them. As a result of these differences, the group was not unanimous on what the objectives of the study should be. Some wanted to address more immediate concerns, such as working hours, while others wanted to challenge the structures that perpetuate discrimination against migrant workers. Consensus, therefore, had to be carefully built, and eventually the entire group was able to select a research

theme: the conditions of live-in domestic workers. Research questions were then developed and agreed upon that would tackle three issues: immigration, employment and human rights, and family relations.

The second workshop

At the second workshop, the domestic workers were trained in participatory action research methods, using both English and Tagalog materials and learning exercises. With these skills, they would organise and facilitate focus groups of domestic workers themselves. Some of the principles of facilitation — such as avoiding lecturing, allowing everyone a voice, and not being threatened by disagreements — took time for members of the group to assimilate. Members saw conducting the research alone as a huge responsibility, and learning how to conduct the focus groups in a participatory way challenged people's former styles of forming groups and methods of research.

The research

A detailed research guide was developed, which outlined questions to be asked under each theme. Four research teams were formed, two per city, with four researchers on each team. The group also developed the criteria for the selection of focus group participants, and a timetable for the research and the sharing of results. The recruitment of focus group participants was guided by the principle of social diversity, and commitment to the research project. Domestic workers from varying age groups, social groups, and family backgrounds, who have different living and work arrangements, citizenship and employment status, and type of employer, were invited to participate.

With respect to the frequency of focus group meetings, a different approach was used in each city. In Montreal, six half-day focus group meetings were held over a two-month period. In Toronto, a single three-day intensive workshop was held. Historical profiling, trend analysis and semi-structured interviews were used to gather information. Researchers in each city worked as a core team, although

they were subdivided into two research teams per city. They took turns facilitating and note-taking. After each focus group session, the teams analysed their results, and the weaknesses and strengths of the process.

Many of the researchers expressed a considerable amount of frustration with the research process at first. They had to listen to the problems and concerns of other domestic workers, yet they felt powerless to do anything to improve their situation. They didn't have the solutions being asked of them by the focus group participants. Some researchers acknowledged that they had thought that their own situations were bad, but after hearing about the situation of so many others, they considered themselves fortunate. By the end of the process, however, they acknowledged that both their experiences as researchers, and the insights that the study offered into their own lives, were extremely empowering. For many, the acquired participatory action research tools offered new ways of organising, confidence-building, and mobilising the domestic workers in their own communities.

In the following section, the results of the research on the realities of live-in domestic workers is presented, along with some of their personal testimonies.

The Findings

Living other people's lives: difficulties faced by workers within the household

'I feel frustrated and displaced. I had an office job in the Philippines, and for me to work in a house is something else'

Foreign domestic workers are required to live in the residence of their employers, and to have flexible working hours to suit their employers' way of life and requirements. They can be called upon at any time of the day to do virtually any type of chore, ranging from putting the children to sleep in the middle of the night, to walking the pets, to shovelling snow, to painting walls, to entertaining guests at midnight. As a result, it is

difficult to draw the line between work hours and off-duty hours. Long working hours have, thus, characterised the lives of foreign domestic workers.

These long hours are often without financial compensation. In provinces where they are entitled to overtime, determining the magnitude of overtime work has been a challenge. What constitutes 'real work' depends on the attitude of the employer. For instance, the time spent by domestic workers waiting for their employers to come home late at night is not considered overtime by the employer, although it precludes other activities which domestic workers might want to spend their time on. Playing with children during off-hours may not be considered overtime, but it is difficult for domestic workers to avoid their employer's children, because they share the same living space.

Moreover, the peculiar status of domestic workers as non-standard workers and as non-family members has circumscribed their ability to assert their rights. For instance, gifts have created a relationship based on gratitude, and thus distract workers from the issue of wages and workloads. In some cases, domestic workers have been accused of stealing items that were given to them as gifts, when there is tension in the employer-employee relationship.

'Once when I was sick, my employer visited and I ended up babysitting her children..'

Unmonitored employment practices have put live-in domestic workers at a disadvantage. In instances when a caregiver has more than one employer, a practice known as the 'sharing of nannies', the workload is heavier without a corresponding increase in wages. This is an attractive option for employers who cannot afford to pay the full salary of a domestic worker. Another practice is to require a domestic worker to work without pay for a certain period, or a so-called trial period. This is illegal in Canada, but often domestic workers are forced into these arrangements, because they cannot remain unemployed for long periods of time. To do so jeopardises their opportunity to be eligible for landed immigrant status, as well as threatening their ability to survive financially.

Perhaps an issue of greater consequence is the curtailed lifestyle that comes with live-in work arrangements. In Canada, some live-in caregivers have been given substandard lodging facilities (for example, laundry rooms), and inadequate, or culturally insensitive, food. Although there are legal provisions with respect to the amount deductible from employees' salaries for room and board, there are no minimum standards set for food and accommodation to be provided by employers.

Lack of privacy, loneliness, and isolation are conditions that erode domestic workers' mental health. Domestic workers often do not have keys to their own rooms, or to their employer's house. There have been many instances when their right to privacy is not respected, with employers going through their personal belongings or having guests stay in the domestic worker's bedroom. There have also been cases when domestic workers are locked out of the employer's house when they do not come home at a designated time.

'I nurture feelings of hate, fear and stress'

Just as damaging to the self-esteem of domestic workers has been the practice of 'apartheid' (separate living defined by race). In many cases, due to cultural or racial prejudice, employers do not allow their domestic workers to share eating utensils, drinking glasses, toiletries, sheets and laundry facilities with their employers. While applicants in the Philippines are required to attend pre-departure training and orientation sessions, employers are not obliged to attend orientation sessions that would deepen their understanding of cross-cultural differences and their responsibility to respect the rights of domestic workers.

Living in the home of their employers has also made domestic workers prone to abuse. Many participants referred to experiences ranging from verbal abuse, to physical abuse from children when they do not get what they want, to sexual harassment. The private nature of the workplace conceals practices that are not acceptable in a regular work environment. It also makes it difficult to monitor and enforce labour standards or to ensure that contract violations do not occur.

In some cases, employers ask domestic workers to work in their businesses, in violation of the terms of the work permit. While refusal would mean the employer's displeasure, compliance could mean their deportation.

High costs, minimal returns?

'I can tolerate it because I am waiting for my papers'

Financial pressures further complicate the lives of foreign domestic workers. In the Philippines, applicants for overseas contract work bear onerous costs related to travel, recruitment, and government requirements. Some applicants pay exorbitant fees to recruitment agencies, which can be as high as US\$3,500. The total cost of landing a job in Canada can be as high as C\$8,300. Many migrant workers find themselves deep in debt early in the process.

Low economic returns and other difficulties faced by foreign domestic workers stem from the low value ascribed to domestic work. Historically, this type of work has been perceived as non-productive work that requires little or no skill. The integral relationship between domestic work and the functioning of the economy, and the role it plays in raising future generations, has been largely unrecognised (Folbre 1994). Despite a burgeoning demand for domestic workers as a result of women's contribution to the formal economy, little has been done in Canada or elsewhere to set up a universal and affordable child-care system. When provided in the formal economy, domestic work continues to be poorly remunerated.

As participants in this research confirmed, for many Filipina domestic workers in Canada, the promise of a better life has been soured by difficult living and working conditions, financial difficulties, and strained family relations. Moreover, the attainment of landed immigrant or citizenship status does not guarantee a good life. There are barriers to the upward mobility of domestic workers. While many were trained as teachers, nurses, accountants, and engineers, the educational background of foreign domestic workers is not recognised in Canada. Lengthy separations

from their families have led to emotional stress, difficult parent-child relationships and family break-ups. The difficulties of re-adjustment upon family reunification, and family adaptation to a new culture, create yet another source of tension. Many family members are, in their turn, unable to find employment, or can find only low-wage jobs for which they are overqualified.

'Even after working for so many years, it seems like the income was only enough to support myself and pay bills'

Generally viewed as one of the best destinations for migrant workers, the researchers believe that Canada does not appear to live up to its reputation. While Canada may appear rosy compared to some countries in the Middle East, there is a lot more Canada can do to ensure the protection of the rights and well being of domestic workers within its borders.

Policy recommendations and action plan

After two months of participatory research, the researchers came together for a final gathering to share their results, summarise findings, and develop policy recommendations and an action plan for change to take back to their focus groups and organisations. Recommendations were targeted at the Canadian government, the Philippines government, and the foreign domestic workers themselves.

Government policy changes needed in Canada

1 Abolish the Live-In Caregiver Program. Domestic workers should be recruited as independent immigrants, not linked to a particular employer.

2 Amnesty should be granted to domestic workers who came outside the formal recruitment program, who should be allowed to apply for landed immigrant status.

3 Implementation of immigration law should be standardised. Immigration officers should be consistent in processing papers.

4 The financial situation of domestic workers should be taken into account when setting

fees for sponsorship, work permits, and applications for landed immigrant status.

5 Applications for landed immigrant status, renewal of work permit, etc, should be processed more quickly and applicants allowed to work while waiting for renewals.

6 Work permits should not be tied to a specific employer.

7 More points should be awarded to domestic work in applications for landed status, to reflect the true value of this work.

8 The policy of rejecting the whole family when one member is ineligible should be abolished.

9 Wages, working house, and benefits should be standardised, and workload clearly defined. The terms 'flexible hours' and 'flexible workloads' should not be used in contracts. The provisions of the Employment Standards Act on worker entitlements (e.g. paid sick leave, accident insurance) should apply to domestic workers. Salaries should be increased, and the government should monitor working conditions. Workers should be allowed to study.

10 On arrival, domestic workers should be informed on their rights.

11 Live-in arrangements should not be mandatory.

12 Skills and educational background of domestic workers should be recognised, to promote labour mobility.

13 A regulating and collective bargaining body should be set up, comprising domestic workers, employers, and government. Its mandate should include the review of working conditions.

14 Employers should undergo orientation sessions to deepen their understanding of cultural differences, and awareness of their responsibility to respect the rights of domestic workers. There should be a mechanism to ensure their compliance with contract provisions.

Government policy changes needed in the Philippines

1 Regulations on recruitment agencies should be enforced. Agencies should be required to provide adequate information to job applicants before contracts are signed.

2 Fees for unnecessary services, requirements, or training courses should be abolished, to reduce the cost of applying for an overseas job. The processing of papers should be speeded up and simplified, to prevent corruption.

3 Orientation sessions for workers should provide more information about living and working conditions in destination countries.

4 The government should enter into a bilateral agreement with the Canadian government to protect Filipino migrant workers.

5 The government should focus on internal job creation, to reduce the pressure to migrate, and promote equality of rights for rich and poor.

Action plan for domestic workers in Canada

'The only healing part is when I joined organisations and got involved to help other domestic workers...'

1 Through educational activities in the Philippines, the belief that life is better in the West should be eliminated, and the myths about the lives of overseas contract workers exposed, to discourage migration. Workshops should be held for domestic workers in Canada to raise awareness of their rights. Cultural behaviour patterns such as 'debt of gratitude', shyness, and the impulse to co-operate at all costs, should be discouraged. Domestic workers should build their leadership and advocacy skills.

2 Transition houses should be set up for workers between employment, and support services established.

3 Existing organisations of domestic workers should be strengthened, and new ones formed, to meet the unmet needs of domestic workers. Unity among workers should be promoted, and regionalism and class discrimination discouraged. Workers should be involved in the process of social transformation in the Philippines.

4 Organisations of domestic workers should join national and international networks, and link with people's and women's groups in Canada and the Philippines.

5 Domestic workers should advocate for change through letter-writing to decision-makers, petitions, and awareness-campaigns.

6 The achievements of the project should be build on by training more domestic workers in participatory action research methods.

Conclusion

By examining the issues from the perspectives of domestic workers, the project has contributed to an understanding of the plight of women migrant workers. It has also been a learning and empowering experience for those who participated, some of whom have continued to conduct participatory research on their own. In Toronto, the Coalition for the Defence of Migrant Workers' Rights held another series of focus groups, in order to build on what was achieved in this participatory research project. In Montreal, PINAY project participants have continued their group-building activities.

This insight into the lives of Filipina domestic workers in Canada illustrates their struggles, not just for gender equality, but also for justice on the basis of race, class, and citizenship. Improvement of their lives will require, therefore, challenging the social and legal structures that maintain these inequalities. The participatory action research process, which enabled new strategic alliances amongst domestic workers, researchers and other social justice activists, is one step in that direction.

Nona Grandea, currently a Senior Policy Analyst at Status of Women Canada, was a Senior Researcher at The North-South Institute in Ottawa, Canada during the time of the project. Contact details: 360 Albert Street, Suite 700, Ottawa K1A 1C3, Canada. Fax: 00 613 947 0530, e-mail: grandean@swc-cfc.gc.ca

Joanna Kerr is a Senior Researcher at The North-South Institute. Contact details: 200-55 Murray Street, Ottawa, K1N 5M3, Canada. Fax: 00 613 241 7435, e-mail: jkerr@web.net

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