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Migrants for Export

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Able Minds, Able Hands

Marketing Philippine Workers

Photographs depicting Philippine workers employed as professionals, medical workers, operations and maintenance workers, construction workers, hotel workers, and seafarers are scattered throughout a glossy brochure entitled “Filipino Workers: Moving the World Today” produced by the POEA’s Marketing Branch.¹ The text of the brochure, meant for distribution to prospective employers and host governments, describes the unique characteristics Philippine workers bring to various jobs. For example, it describes how Filipino professionals are:

equipped with extensive educational training and a natural ability to adapt to different work cultures. They are ideally suited in any multi-racial working environment given a facility with the English language. Their professional competence earned for them the respect of their Asian and Western counterparts, making them much sought after in today’s dynamic businesses.

In another part of the same brochure, the POEA lauds Filipino operations and maintenance workers. They have

created a niche for their characteristic ingenuity, innovative spirit, skill, and dexterity. Through constant training and retraining they have kept themselves abreast with the latest technology. They benefit from a government-sponsored technical and vocational program that instills not only skills development but the right attitude towards work.

This brochure reflects logics similar to those evoked by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s speech to American businesspeople in 2003, which opens this book. As in Arroyo’s address, the POEA’s

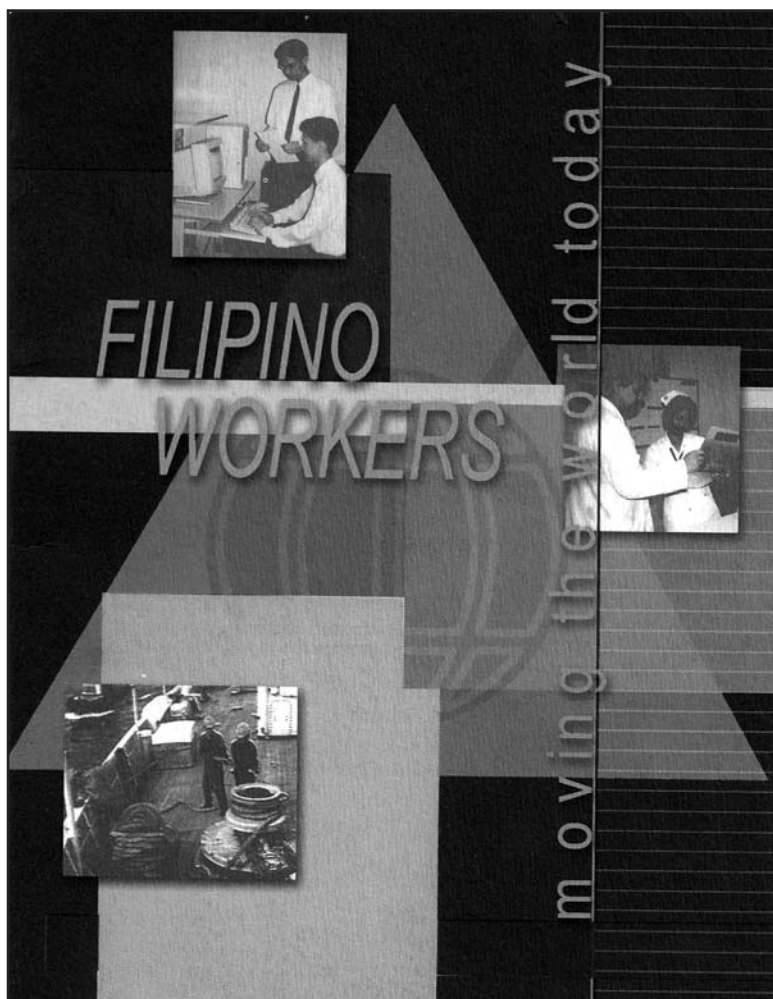


Figure 13. Brochure produced by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration.

brochure refers to the training and education that the government provides. With respect to Filipino professionals specifically, the brochure assures prospective employers and host governments that they can be readily inserted into multiracial social orders triangulated between presumably white (or even Asian or Arab) employers and other racialized groups.² Similarly, Arroyo's pitch implicitly draws on racialized discourses to represent the Philippine workers as modern and civilized (in her terms "educated" and "English-speaking") and therefore suitable for employment in any working environment. In terms of blue-collar workers, the brochure promises its hoped for clients workers who possess innate, essentialized characteristics like "dexterity." Moreover, it guarantees that workers' training not only sharpens their skills, but instills in them the "right attitude toward work." As the previous chapter illustrates, the "right attitude toward work" often means acquiescence and obedience.

Marketing materials such as this demonstrate that racializations of Filipino migrants are not limited to the peculiar ways their host countries interpolate them into their specific (and in some cases emergent) racial orders or how firms draw on racialized and gendered understandings in their hiring practices. Here the labor brokerage state plays its own role in racializing and gendering Filipinos in particular ways. Racializations of Philippine professionals, for instance, resonate with the notion of the "model minority" often ascribed to Filipinos and other Asian Americans in the U.S. context.³ Meanwhile, the racialization of manufacturing workers draws from the same sorts of "capitalist scripts" used by employers in racializing Third World women workers throughout the global South. These scripts try to normalize women from the global South as an enduringly and endemically cheap labor force.⁴ As Juanita Elias describes in her research of multinational firms' recruitment practices, recruiters have a strong preference for women garment workers because "men were viewed as unsuited to sewing work because they were easily bored and lacked the manual dexterity 'nimble fingers' of women."⁵ As performed by the Philippine state, these scripts reproduce what Wright calls the "myth of the disposable third world woman."⁶ The state assures employers that disposable Philippine workers, women (and men), can

nevertheless be quickly and easily replenished by a reserve army of Philippine labor at the ready for deployment around the world.

This brochure is but one example of how the Philippine state actively markets Filipina and Filipino workers to employers around the world. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the migration bureaucracy is a key site for the mobilization of migrant workers. Through agencies like the POEA, TESDA, and others, the Philippine government identifies where visas are available for temporary workers in countries around the world and provides potential migrants with the training necessary to get official authorization for those visas. Perhaps more importantly, it is through this apparatus that the Philippine state is able to actually formalize the transfers of Philippine workers globally. It is this distributive aspect of the migration apparatus, that is, the mechanisms by which the state actually exports workers for the world, that is the focus on this chapter.

Whereas the previous chapter illustrates how the state trains Philippine migrant workers in ways that match the requirements of labor-importing states' immigration policies, this chapter examines how the Philippine government actively works to *open up* markets for Philippine workers. I show, for instance, how Philippine migration officials closely monitor the economic and political trends and transformations wrought by neoliberal globalization in different societies of the world and how they then attempt to exploit potential opportunities for exporting workers through so-called "market promotions." I show how the state deploys techniques used in commercial advertising, like producing the above-mentioned brochure, to virtually "sell" Filipino and Filipina laborers to what migration officials refer to as "clients" (that is, foreign employers). Finally, I illustrate how the Philippine state engages in diplomatic negotiations with labor-receiving countries to formalize transfers of labor. Ultimately, Philippine labor's global mobility depends not only on labor demand, but on host states' willingness to open their borders to foreign workers. The Philippine state actually initiates different kinds of formal and informal relations with foreign governments to ensure out-migration.

Though there is certainly a thriving private labor recruitment industry in the Philippines, very few can compete with the state. No privately owned labor recruitment agency has the capacity to map global labor market trends in the way the Philippine government can, equipped as it is with a global apparatus of embassy and consular offices as I describe in the previous chapter. Private-recruitment agencies, therefore, cannot perform the same kinds of “market promotions” for Philippine workers that the state is able to. Neither can most agencies negotiate with foreign states around the issue of migration policy. If anything, recruitment agencies depend on the state’s work in opening up markets for workers (even as the state itself profits from more and more migrants sending remittances home).

Markets for Migrants

The migration bureaucracy mobilizes Philippine citizens for overseas work through market research that identifies key labor migration policies in different countries and creates training programs to train prospective migrants in skills specified by these policies, as I describe in the previous chapter. In this next section, I analyze how the Philippine state’s market research also pays attention to the trajectories of global capital’s expansion and related economic developments in different countries in order to engage in more proactive measures to formalize outflows of Philippine workers to ever-new sites.

If the expanding U.S. military is identified as a potential market for Philippine labor, as evidenced in the introductory chapter, U.S. firms’ global “commodity chains” are also prime markets for Philippine labor.⁷ I learned during an interview with the Philippine government’s labor attaché working from the Philippines’ embassy in Brunei, for instance:

[There are] new markets for Filipino workers in the garments industry because it is expanding. Brunei has an open quota to the United States — they can export finished garment products without a quota.

This was true at least in 2001 when I interviewed him. The factories I visited were producing garments mainly for U.S.-based retailers like

the Gap and Old Navy, while the workers making the clothing were all foreign migrants, a majority from the Philippines. Because local Bruneians shun factory work and the Brunei economy depends on a diversification of exports for growth, Filipino and Filipina migrants can be assured of jobs in Brunei's garment industry according to this official. According to a Brunei-based labor recruiter who has worked throughout Southeast Asia supplying garment factories with low-wage workers, "When [a clothing tag] says 'Made in Brunei,' or 'Made in Indonesia,' it should really say, 'Made by Filipinos.'"

The most recent market reports posted by the POEA — which draws from research conducted by its own Marketing Branch as well as ILAS and Philippine embassies and consular offices abroad — provide additional evidence to suggest that both the U.S. military and U.S. capital and its global subsidiaries are important markets for Philippine labor. For instance, the U.S. Marines' relocation to Guam is identified as a potential source of jobs for Philippine migrants in a report posted in 2007: "The Philippine Consulate General in Agaña, Guam has reported on the possible employment for OFWs in Guam on the U.S. Marines relocation project from Okinawa to Guam, which will start in 2010."⁸ Of course the Philippines' long-time "special relationship" with the United States has made the U.S. military an important "client" for the Philippines for nearly sixty years.⁹

Meanwhile, reports for Canada suggest that the establishment of subsidiaries of major multinationals like Microsoft and Google are also potential markets for Philippine labor. This report explains that Microsoft's planned move to Canada is aimed at evading restrictive immigration policies in the United States and taking advantage of Canada's more liberal immigration regime:

This announcement follows the recent "death" of the immigration bill that would have expanded the number of foreign high-tech workers that could enter the U.S. each year on H-1B visas. High-tech companies have been pushing hard for Congress to increase the number of visas they are allotted. Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates made a strong plea for unlimited H-1B visas while Google called for expanded ability to hire foreigners, which it credits for the company's success.

Meanwhile, Carnival cruise lines' joint venture with a Spanish firm also offers promising job prospects for Philippine seafarers.¹⁰ Beyond Carnival, the Philippines generally dominates the international seafarers labor force.¹¹ While multinational U.S. firms around the world are a significant market for Philippine labor globally, even small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can be important. According to an ILAS official, "There are so many prospects for Filipino workers so the focus must be on the bigger enterprises. SMEs can't be avoided, however, because it is often they who more immediately require foreign workers." SMEs in Asia, a major site for the employment of Philippine migrants, are often linked to U.S. multinationals. The Brunei factory I described above is an example of an SME linked to a U.S. multinational corporation. U.S. global capitalist restructuring has created specific dynamics in Asian newly industrializing countries (NICs). Though they have benefited from this restructuring, they continue to be dominated by the interests of capital in the core and are therefore vulnerable to its interests. Odekon argues, for instance:

As neoliberal policies reshape and transform the semiperiphery economies and subject them more and more to the will of global capital in the core, the semiperiphery faces the danger of becoming a periphery. This prospect inevitably threatens the semiperiphery and, in particular, labor in the semiperiphery, which now faces similar marginalization in flexible labor markets.¹²

Consequently, NICs have turned toward the importation of unskilled or semiskilled workers to labor along those nodes of global commodity chains (like garments) that are located in their countries to perform "3D" jobs (dirty, dangerous, difficult) that locals have begun to shun. Importing workers is a measure to keep foreign capital investments flowing while simultaneously benefiting domestic firms.¹³

The Philippines markets the same types of labor it has supplied global capital even before the institutionalization of labor export. In chapter 1, I discussed how the Philippines supplied service workers ("houseboys," chauffeurs, and hotel workers), seafarers (for the navy) and nurses (though not intentionally) to the United States during the colonial period. Later, as I also discuss in that chapter,

the Philippines' developmentalist initiatives in the decades immediately following "independence" would attempt to attract employers in tourism and light manufacturing. Now it actively markets these very categories of worker throughout the world. In the POEA's 2007 market reports, for instance, tourism-related jobs are identified in Singapore, Brunei, and throughout the Gulf States. Meanwhile factory jobs are identified in Taiwan and South Korea.

In spite of the national anxieties that the migration of Filipinas as domestic workers has produced in the Philippines,¹⁴ the Philippine state works to actively locate markets for them.¹⁵ In a 1999 labor market report, Israel was classified as an "emerging market" for domestic workers. Meanwhile, a 2004 "Market Update" for Hong Kong noted that it will continue to be a strong market for Filipinas because of:

prospects of economic growth, increased labor force participation rate (especially of women), increased median of monthly domestic household income and preference of young Chinese families and expatriates for Filipino domestic helpers.¹⁶

By 2006, the Philippine government implemented the so-called "Super Maid" program aimed at training prospective domestic workers in CPR and other kinds of basic emergency health care.¹⁷ Supposedly intended to help prospective migrant women to command higher wages from their employers, the program makes evident that markets for domestic workers are an important source of revenue that the Philippine state is eager to invest in.

Statistics on women's migration from the Philippines confirm that the state has been hugely successful in mobilizing women for overseas work in gendered forms of employment. According to the POEA's statistics, of the top ten job categories for newly deployed migrants, household service worker was the number one job category. An overwhelming majority (almost 96 percent) of these workers are women (Table 2). Filipina women actually dominate in different labor markets for household and related workers. For over a decade, for instance, Filipinas constituted the majority of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore.¹⁸

Table 2. Deployed Overseas Filipino Workers — New Hires, 2008,
Top Ten Skills by Sex (POEA)

Skills	Male	Female	Total
Household Service Workers	2,240	47,842	50,082
Waiters, Bartenders, and Related Workers	5,183	8,728	13,911
Charworkers, Cleaners, and Related Workers	1,851	9,769	11,620
Nurses Professional	1,556	9,939	11,495
Caregivers and Caretakers	595	9,514	10,109
Laborers/Helpers General	8,175	1,536	9,711
Plumbers and Pipe Fitters	9,643	21	9,664
Wiremen Electrical	8,812	81	8,893
Welders and Flame-Cutters	6,746	31	6,777
Caretakers Building	1,139	5,471	6,610
Other Skills	128,988	70,406	199,394
Total Deployment	174,928	163,338	338,266

Source: POEA.

Jobs understood as more “masculine,” such as construction work or even IT work, are equally prevalent throughout the world, and the Philippine state pays attention to economic developments in different countries to identify labor markets for these types of jobs. For instance, a labor market report posted in 2007 notes:

Due to the economic boom in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government has announced mega projects in the country, such as the Economic Cities in Rabigh and Jizan, railway projects linking east and west of the Kingdom, petrochemical projects, new hospitals, new universities and a wave of new industries. Major companies like Saudi Aramco and Saudi Basic Industries (SABIC) will need more engineers and construction workers until 2010 to work on \$95 million worth of projects in the Kingdom.¹⁹

Similarly, another 2007 report of market prospects in Asia states:

The region’s continued economic growth has resulted to construction of major infrastructures and industrial projects. Consequently, it has induced a steady increase in the demand for foreign workers such as professionals (engineers, teachers, and IT workers) and skilled workers.

Recent statistics on newly deployed workers as seen in Table 2 indicate that under the category of “Plumbers and Pipe Fitters,” “Laborers/Helpers (General),” and “Wiremen Electrical,” all occupations likely to be engaged in infrastructure or industrial projects are filled mainly by men.

Labor market information generated through these market reports enables the Philippine state to proactively market Philippine workers to foreign employers. “Market missions” have long been successful in facilitating outflows of Philippine labor. During “marketing missions,” a bureaucrat at the POEA’s Marketing Branch explained, representatives from the different migration agencies “meet with governments and prospective employers and will [visit] existing employers.” The purpose of marketing missions is to generate interest in Philippine workers among prospective employers as well as to initiate discussions with foreign governments on the possibilities of formalizing inflows of Philippine workers.

One high-ranking migration official in ILAS recounted his participation in early market promotions work:

In the early 1970s, I was part of the team that organized marketing missions in the United States. There we put together the biggest construction contractors along with Philippine private labor recruiters to talk about partnerships. The reason why we went to the United States was because it was U.S. companies that had operations in the Middle East. They were the ones behind the construction boom in the Middle East. So, instead of dealing with these companies’ Middle Eastern middlemen, we went straight to the head offices to get a head start over other bidders of foreign labor.

Filipinos’ employment in Saudi Arabia, as this interview suggests, is linked to the globalized expansion of the U.S. construction industry. Yet the market promotions the Philippine state has done since then have perhaps been equally important to sustained Philippine out-migration to Saudi Arabia, which is among the top ten destination countries for migrants from the Philippines. As of 2007, in fact, it was the number one destination for Philippine workers.²⁰

I learned during the course of my field research in 2000–2001 that the POEA was in the process of planning marketing missions to countries like Palau, Taiwan, and Israel. The 2001 POEA *Annual*

2007	Azerbaijan, Canada, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates
2006	not available
2005	Bahrain, Cyprus, Qatar, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates
2004	Korea, Kuwait, Lebanon, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates
2003	Croatia, Indonesia, Ireland, Korea, Slovenia, Taiwan, United Kingdom

Figure 14. Marketing missions, 2003–7. Source: POEA.

Report confirmed that in fact, marketing missions were conducted to Taiwan (three times), the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway, Ireland, Israel, and Japan. According to the most recent POEA *Annual Report* for 2007, missions took place to Azerbaijan, Canada, Taiwan, and the United Arab Emirates. Figure 14 lists the POEA's market missions since 2003. The various kinds of missions the POEA plans and invests in demonstrate the Philippine state's global reach. The state, moreover, is willing to pour its resources into missions in a range of countries including politically beleaguered countries like Israel, to "tiger" economies like Taiwan and Korea, to eastern European countries like Slovenia and Croatia, as well as to traditional immigration countries like the United Kingdom.

One official at the DFA explained that there are "times when specific requests [for Filipino workers] are made by foreign governments." The fact that foreign states themselves make direct requests for Philippine labor from government officials seems to suggest that the Philippine state has been able to successfully project itself internationally as a labor brokerage state. Perhaps as a testament to the effectiveness of the Philippine state's active marketing of Philippine workers globally, it now plays host to delegations from overseas seeking to employ Filipino and Filipina workers. In 2001, members of the Norwegian government came to the Philippines to "work out manpower provisions." More recently, the POEA hosted the visits of foreign delegations from four provinces of Canada, namely, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia, as well as from Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates, and Azerbaijan.

“Filipino Workers: Moving the World Today”

The Philippines' migration agencies often draw on commercial marketing strategies to promote Philippine labor for export. For example, in addition to producing the glossy brochures that I discuss in the introductory section of this chapter, the staff of the POEA's Marketing Branch planned to reintroduce a so-called “direct mailer” campaign targeting the IT industries in Germany and the United States. The Marketing Branch had even created a “Hotel Promotional Linkage” program through which it distributes flyers at hotel business centers in the Philippines for business tourists. Additionally, coordinating with the Department of Trade and Investment, the Marketing Branch has organized exhibits on Filipino migrant labor at international trade fairs.

Examining the representations of Philippine workers by officials responsible for so-called market “promotions” and in the state's marketing materials demonstrates how the Philippine state circulates Filipina and Filipino bodies in the global marketplace. In the same brochure I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the section on Filipino medical workers states that “the strong desire to heal and help people make Filipino medical workers much preferred,” which echoes the remarks made by a POEA official during an interview. She commented that despite the fact that the U.K. was increasingly securing nurses from China and that the United States was securing nurses from India, “The Philippines is still top. Filipinas have a warmth and care that people like.” This brochure, along with the official's comment, illustrates how the Philippine state plays a key role in producing specific sets of discourses of Filipina women. Moreover, these discourses can be traced to longer histories of Filipina nurses, as I describe in chapter 1. While many scholars have focused on the ways labor recruitment agencies or even labor-receiving countries play a role in producing and legitimating specific discursive constructions of Filipina workers, it is important to link these discourses to those long (re)produced by the Philippine state.²¹

FILIPINO NURSES

Caring for the World...



Figure 15. Brochure produced by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration.

A separate brochure for seafarers entitled “The Filipino Seafarer: Taking the Lead,” describes to prospective employers how they are “among the most sought-after seafarers in the world today.” The brochure explains this as a result of

the dynamic development of the Filipino mariner’s skill and competence over time. His affinity to the sea comes from living in an archipelago of more than 7,100 islands with a vast coastline. His history as a seafarer dates back to the 15th century when Filipino ancestors were heavily engaged in barter trading with neighboring Asian countries. During the 16th century, Filipinos manned galleons and worked hand-in-hand with Spanish seamen honing their navigational skills. And between the 18th and 19th centuries, they served as helmsmen or quartermasters aboard American ships sailing in the Pacific.

Colonialism is represented here as having helped hone the skills of Filipino seafarers. Histories of imperial violence and coerced labor are revisioned and sanitized.

To hire Filipinos, then, is to hire workers who offer distinctive cultural attitudes, embodied capacities, and skills that make them ostensibly more desirable than other nationalities of workers. Not only does the state train a wide range of workers (through the migration bureaucracy) who can perform a vast array of jobs (from construction to hotel workers, medical workers to professional/managerial), the state can guarantee employers specific kinds of racialized workers — Filipino workers — who possess essentialized traits. Moreover, these workers, inheriting specific histories of colonialism as Filipinos, namely, Spanish and American, have been left with skills that make them especially productive workers.

What the Philippine state’s marketing strategies also reveal is how nationality or national difference figures in the construction of labor in a globalized labor market as specific nationals are ascribed, by their states, to have particularized skill sets or cultural sensibilities. Today’s global economy functions on a global division of labor that ultimately rests on a national logic. National difference is necessary to the racialized (and gendered) work hierarchies on which the global division of labor, and hence capitalism’s profits, depends. Under conditions of

globalized production which also operates under conditions of international migration, different states are distinguished as possessing a kind of national labor “specialization.” Different nation-states are distinguished as possessing a kind of national “specialization.”

I found the workers often had a sense of pride in their distinction as Filipino workers. Roberto, for example, describes how in Taiwan the factory where he was employed hired only Filipinos, because the employers believe workers from the Philippines are “‘*masipag*’ [hard-working] and listen to instructions.” Similarly Mike, a former seafarer, told me that “Filipino seamen are number one.” “Why are we in demand?” he went on to explain, “because of English communication and we are *masipag*.” Mike uses the same term as Roberto to describe what makes Filipino workers distinct.

Chiari, a dentist by profession but enrolled in a caregiver program to try to get authorization for employment in the United States, claims, “Most of us, Filipinos, as you can see, we are more patient. It’s our characteristic. It’s a very, very important virtue if you will take a caregiver course because we’re going to take care of children . . . old persons. So you really, really have to have that much patience.”²²

Workers’ identification with the putative national attributes of being “hardworking” or “patient,” however unwittingly, reifies the Philippine state’s construction of culturalist notions of Philippine labor. Though understandably a source of pride and dignity for people who are forced to have to work far from home, these cultural nationalist ideas can serve to reproduce racialized differences in the workplace and therefore undermine worker solidarity. At the same time, I would argue, following Brooks, that the Philippine state uses “notions of culture to pathologize working conditions,” and thereby places the blame on culture for exploitation or abuse, “rather than on production imperatives.”²³ Of course, nationalisms are pliable and can be reimagined in important ways. Activists in Migrante International, a transnational alliance of Philippine migrant workers, for instance, mobilize around a nationalist politics that is critical of the Philippine state’s neoliberal orientation. They have also built coalitions with migrants from a broad range of ethnic and racialized

backgrounds to unite in wage and employment struggles as well as to fight for migrants' rights around the world.

Negotiating Transfers of Migrant Workers

Though the Philippine government uses marketing techniques that are similar to the kinds of advertising strategies used in commercial retail (that is, brochures, direct mailers, etc.), since labor is less mobile than other kinds of commodities because it is subject to stringent regulations (that is, visa requirements), the Philippine state necessarily has to engage in diplomatic relations with labor-importing countries if it aims to continue to export labor to existing and new markets. The Philippines has a stake in initiatives taken by labor-importing states to introduce new visa categories that allow for the legal in-flow of migrant labor into their countries, as I have demonstrated above. However, the Philippines actively tries to initiate bilateral labor agreements and other forms of mutual understanding with labor-importing states to help facilitate the migration of Filipinos. Hence, to "promote" or "market" Filipino labor, officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs (that is, embassy and consular staff) become so important. The kinds of diplomatic relations the Philippine state engages in range from informal networking activities to formalized agreements.

In the Philippines, POEA officials, specifically those in the Marketing Branch, initiate and build informal relations with the representatives of the Philippine-based embassies of countries receiving Philippine workers as well as prospective new "clients":

We approach embassies. We have a "Greet a Client" program where on national holidays we send them flowers or other gifts and we participate in the activities they sponsor. This is a yearly project. We do embassy liaisons with the diplomatic corps of the embassies. This is PR [public relations] work. We even participate in celebrations when someone is sent to a new post.

Maintaining existing relations and establishing new relations with prospective "client" states includes social networking with foreign

embassies. I learned that these “liaison” activities lay the groundwork for more formal labor agreements.

If Philippines-based officials engage in informal “public relations” campaigns to market Filipino workers, the diplomatic corps does the same overseas. As staff from the Marketing Branch explained, international conferences become important venues for the promotion of Filipino workers, and marketing missions are timed to take place at the same time; side meetings are arranged with prospective employers.

International conferences are not only the place where Philippine officials promote Filipino workers; they are also the place where foreign officials make requests for Filipino workers. A top-ranking official at the Department of Foreign Affairs recounted one example of this:

I was approached at the Beijing Review [of the U.N. Summit on Women] in New York by a woman who heads the Commission on Women in the Japanese prime minister's office. She had proposed the possibility of setting up a program for home care workers from the Philippines. With Japan's elderly population increasing and the continuing need for child care, they are looking to bring in foreign workers to fill those positions. The program would ensure that workers would get proper training and social security benefits. I thought it was a very good idea and there are now prospects of a Joint Commission Meeting on Women that will include this discussion.

By 2004 an agreement between the Philippines and Japan was formalized.²⁴

Bilateral relations, mainly in the form of bilateral labor agreements (BLAs) or memorandums of understanding (MOUs), have been a key mechanism by which the Philippine government facilitates flows of Philippine labor to key overseas markets. According to one POEA official:

Market development activities include getting into negotiations with foreign governments bilaterally and multilaterally like at international forums such as the ILO (International Labor Organization), APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), East Asian Growth Area, the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) Labor Ministries annual meetings, IOM (International Organization for Migration), and the International

Maritime Association. The POEA provides the strategic dirty work of labor diplomacy. It is part of our strategy of diplomatic relations.

“Labor diplomacy,” as Philippine migration officials describe it, is the more formalized state-to-state relations the Philippine state engages in to develop markets for Philippine labor. Different branches of the Philippine migration apparatus engage in labor diplomacy. As this official describes it, the POEA’s work is to engage in the “strategic dirty work” of labor negotiations, which involves, dealings with states through a range of multilateral formations as well as engaging in more informal relations with foreign diplomatic staff in the Philippines as I described in a section above.

As of August 2000, while I was conducting field research, the Philippines had either a BLA or an MOU with a total of seventeen different countries.²⁵ Among the provisions contained in the BLAs or MOUs are those relating to the expansion of overseas employment and the streamlining of the bureaucratic processes necessary for workers to go abroad. For instance, one of the key provisions of the Philippines’ bilateral labor agreement with Libya is “exchange of information on relevant studies and researches, technical expertise to enhance employment promotion and labor administration.”²⁶ The exact provision is found in the bilateral agreements with the governments of Jordan and Iraq, while similar language can be found in the bilateral agreements with the governments of Kuwait, CNMI, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Qatar.²⁷ According to the Department of Labor and Employment, one of the four strategies guiding bilateralism is to facilitate the “more efficient mobilization process . . . [and] liberalization of entry regulations to labor-short economies.” In other words, bilateralism formalizes and institutionalizes mechanisms by which labor is transferred. Not only does it formalize and institutionalize the transfer of labor; it ensures that the process is better rationalized.

The Philippines’ proposed bilateral agreements with Brunei, Japan, Palau, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Bahrain, Lebanon, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Belgium, France, Greece, and the Netherlands at the time of my field research likewise center on the expansion

Country/Province	Title and Type of Bilateral Agreement/Understanding
Alberta	Memorandum of Understanding (on labor and human resources development)
Azerbaijan	Memorandum of Understanding (on labor cooperation)
British Columbia	Memorandum of Understanding (on cooperation in human resources)
Croatia	Bilateral Labor Agreement
Malaysia	Memorandum of Understanding (on migrant workers)
Manitoba	Memorandum of Understanding
Qatar	Memorandum of Understanding (on the additional protocol to labor agreements)
Singapore	Memorandum of Understanding
Taiwan	Memorandum of Understanding (on the SHPT, abolition of affidavit on fees and salaries of OFWs, review of onsite fees and charges from workers, problems on working conditions of Filipino fishermen, among others)
United Arab Emirates	Memorandum of Understanding (in the field of manpower)

Figure 16. *Bilateral agreements, 2007. Source: POEA.*

of overseas employment to these countries and the more rationalized and streamlined deployment of migrants, but they also contain provisions relating to the maintenance of certain standards of employment qualification. That is, they require that Filipino workers demonstrate some degree of training or skill to qualify for particular jobs.

Figure 16 summarizes data from the POEA's 2007 *Annual Report*, noting the countries the Philippines has attempted to negotiate more formal diplomatic relations with on the issue of labor migration.²⁸

Bilateral labor agreements, however, require that the Philippine state strike a balance between its interests in expanding markets for Filipino and Filipina labor and its interests in maintaining other economic or geopolitical relations with foreign states. According to another POEA bureaucrat,

Bilateral agreements are formed with an understanding of the general foreign policy context outlined by Joint Commission Meetings (JCMs) and/or Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between the Philippines and specific countries. The JCM or the MOU are a kind of “umbrella” providing the context for labor agreements. We at the POEA handle these agreements, but we have to work with the regional desks of the Department of Foreign Affairs who handle JCMs and MOUs.

Philippine migration agencies, as this quotation indicates, can make bilateral labor agreements with particular states only if they have a broader understanding of the Philippines’ diplomatic relations with those countries. One official at the DFA explained:

Each agreement must be analyzed within the context of overall relations between the Philippines and that country as well as overall relations in the region, including multilateral relations in ASEAN or other groupings. For example if the Philippines signs an agreement with Myanmar, it may have implications for the Philippines’ relations with other ASEAN states. Timing is key as is the overall climate of political and economic relations.

An ILAS official provided another example of how different sets of diplomatic relations impact the Philippines’ ability to negotiate bilaterally around labor migration with specific states:

Our challenges with labor diplomacy are reflected, for example, in Taiwan because of the one-China policy. The Philippines has a pseudo “embassy” in Taiwan which is officially not an embassy but is *de facto* an embassy. It acts as a private corporation but it performs governmental functions. The dealings with the Taiwanese become difficult because you can’t go as public officials. Government officials go as private citizens who go on speaking engagements in Taiwan, for instance, while setting up meetings on the side with local officials.

Though the Philippines sends workers to both China and Taiwan, as this quotation makes clear, it must also make sure not to threaten overall diplomatic relations with both countries, since the Philippines officially has a one-China policy.

While the Philippine state competes with other labor-exporting states for a share of the global labor market, it also attempts to cooperate with certain labor-exporting states in ways that can be mutually beneficial to all parties.

The Philippines is attempting to create a niche in skilled labor while Vietnam provides more unskilled labor, but there is a drive toward regional complementation among labor-sending countries. For example, there is a proposed complementation in market promotions with Vietnam, which packages both Philippine and Vietnamese labor to prospective employers where the Philippines offers to provide potential employers with skilled and managerial staff while Vietnam pledges to provide unskilled labor.

“Regional complementation” is an example of the innovative forms of labor diplomacy the Philippine state engages in to distribute migrant workers globally. Of course, professionals generate more money for the Philippines. In 2007, for example, the POEA announced that “the increasing number of deployed professional and skilled workers caused the steady increase of remittances by overseas Filipino workers.”²⁹

The Philippine government’s role in marketing Filipino workers and engaging in diplomatic relations with foreign governments is both for the purpose of promoting the deployment of migrants through Philippine-based private recruitment agencies as well as through its own government recruitment facility, the Government Placement Branch (GPB). In a marketing mission in 1998 to the United Kingdom, for instance, the Philippines explored the possibilities of deploying Filipino nurses to meet the demand for what was estimated as fifteen thousand vacancies. Furthermore, the POEA met with U.K. hiring agencies, demonstrating a willingness to recruit workers directly through the POEA’s GPB.

The GPB supports the private labor recruitment industry. A Marketing Branch official states, “During marketing missions, the Marketing Branch doesn’t distinguish between the GPB and private recruiters. It markets for the whole industry.” However, the GPB to some extent competes with private recruitment agencies, a fact acknowledged by POEA officials: “The Government Placement Branch is important, but the private sector doesn’t like it. The GPB isn’t about ‘hard sell.’ It captures those markets that don’t want to go through private recruiters.”

The GPB is the agency that foreign states deal with to secure migrant labor for government-to-government hiring. Rather than

allowing private recruitment agencies access to potentially huge foreign government clients, the Philippine state positions itself as the provider of labor for these government labor contracts. "When there are foreign diplomatic dealings and foreign labor officials request labor of the President, the GPB steps in. We can't recommend private recruiters." The state sees itself as being a more ideal provider of migrant labor to foreign governments than private recruitment agencies because the transfers of labor between governments become a diplomatic matter. Furthermore, the state ensures that workers are properly trained and certified and conveniently spares foreign governments the effort of trying to locate appropriate recruitment agencies.

The POEA official responsible for the GPB described the various client states it has and the kinds of labor it supplies to them:

Our governmental clients include the Ministries of Health, for example, of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, specifically bigger government hospitals. The governments of Fiji and Libya are also our clients; we provide workers to their state hospitals as well, but we're having some problems with them. There are also some private employers that get workers through the GPB from these countries. The government of Qatar is also a client for medical personnel. The Ministry of Education in Papua New Guinea is a client. We supply workers for the Water Systems and Royal Navy of Abu Dhabi. The GPB also recruits for Saudi Airlines and Catering as well as Royal Brunei Airways and Catering. Private clients are usually those who do not want to deal with private agencies. They are for very specific and technical jobs. In Saipan, for example, we have a publishing house as a client. The GPB has a special relationship with Taiwan. A Memorandum of Agreement signed between the Philippines and Taiwan allows for specific private employers to deal exclusively with the Philippine government. These include Acer and Nanyang, they are electronics companies, which hire both general and skilled workers.

The GPB had twenty foreign government clients at the time of my field research in 2000–2001. The biggest demand from these clients, as this quotation indicates, is for medical personnel in government hospitals. Additionally, the GPB has some private-sector clients. In addition to the ones mentioned by this official, the GPB provides physical therapists to the United States and IT workers to Singapore. As of 2007, the GPB had seventeen government clients.

The fact that the GPB has a number of government clients suggests that with increasing privatization states are “outsourcing” government workers, securing migrants from other countries rather than its own citizens and nationals.

The term “labor brokerage” suggests not only that the state distributes labor globally, but must do so through a process of negotiations, most critically with labor-importing states. Yet for a developing state like the Philippines, successfully securing bilateral labor agreements or other kinds of formal understandings regarding migrant labor requires that the state curtail the distribution of Filipino workers when necessary.

In the Asian crisis, for instance, the question of how different labor-importing countries would address the issue of migrant workers became particularly urgent as states throughout the region had to deal with the consequences of massive economic dislocation. South Korea, which experienced some of the most severe forms of dislocation leading to the IMF crisis, introduced a repatriation policy, the only country in the region to do so.³⁰ The Philippines, according to one researcher, was best equipped among the various sending countries to deal with the potential influx of returning workers. He argues, “The Philippine Congress had the foresight to provide for the establishment of administrative machinery for the purpose of dealing with return migration under the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995.” However, I believe Lund and Panda’s formulation is more apt. They describe the expulsion of migrant workers in the wake of the Asian crisis as “involuntary return migration or mobility.”³¹ In the case of Philippine migrants, the Philippine state performs a role in the forced return migration of workers.

Even in the absence of severe economic crisis, as in the case of the Asian crisis, migrants can be a source of political problems for labor-importing states if local workers see foreign workers as unfairly competing for jobs. The perceived excess of foreign labor by native workers in host countries can be politically contentious. Philippine marketing efforts are attuned to the potential controversy that accompanies the entrance of foreign workers into particular countries. As I described in chapter 2, the Philippines’

migration agencies responsible for labor market information generation therefore attempt to identify job openings and accompanying visa categories in different countries while also being careful to alert prospective migrants about the closure of markets or new visa restrictions in order to regulate their outflows.

The Philippine state coordinates with host countries in attempting to manage undocumented migration. When Israel, in 2003, issued plans to crack down on undocumented migrants, Philippine migration officials made sure to advise Filipinos to enter the country legally. According to a public statement issued by the Philippine embassy in Israel, "Those who wish to work in Israel must be properly documented, or they will risk being arrested and immediately deported."³² Meanwhile, the Philippine embassy in Israel requested the Israeli government to abate the mass deportation of migrants, cooperating with Israel to ensure that undocumented migrants availed themselves of mechanisms to legalize their status.³³

If economic crisis and the contraction of jobs in labor-importing states necessitate the repatriation of workers, or political crisis and concerns about undocumented migrants require the deportation of migrants, the crisis of war has opposite effects. According to an ILAS official:

During the Gulf War, the Saudi leadership appealed to the Philippines to encourage people to stay rather than evacuate. The fear on the part of the Saudi Arabians was that without Filipinos, their economy would fall. As a result, the Philippines had to show workers that it was safe to stay in Saudi Arabia, going around, for instance, without gas masks to show workers that they had nothing to fear.

The Philippine state has well-developed transnational apparatuses that not only export labor; it also has the capacity to repatriate workers should they pose problems to host states. This is an important mechanism by which the Philippine state is able to reproduce its system of labor export: it is able to ensure foreign states and employers not only that they will be able to take advantage of cheap foreign labor, but that the Philippine state will intervene when its citizens are redundant or even politically problematic. While the Philippine state has an interest in guaranteeing outflows of labor through bilateral

agreements, this must be balanced against the interests of labor-importing states. Labor-receiving states may demand cheaper migrant labor, but they must also contend with demands for employment by their nationals in the case of domestic economic crises. Furthermore, if labor-importing states face the crisis of war, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, the Philippine state even uses its migration apparatus to compel workers to stay in their places of employment if it suits their employers.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the mechanisms by which the Philippine state exports migrants globally, we come to see how a “peripheral” state plays a critical role in the globalization of labor. Global production is giving rise to a reorganization of work and demands for gendered and racialized flexible labor. The labor brokerage state, meanwhile, exploits this labor demand for its own purposes. By examining the processes by which the Philippine state distributes labor around the world, it becomes clear that international labor mobility is a product of globalized trade in labor that depends on relations and negotiations between states. The Philippine state does not operate in isolation when it brokers Filipino labor.

While the Philippine state has an interest in guaranteeing outflows of labor through bilateral agreements, it balances these interests against the interests of labor-importing states. These states may demand cheaper migrant labor, but they must also contend with their nationals’ demands for employment. Migrants can be a source of problems for labor-importing states if local workers believe foreigners unfairly take away their jobs. Accordingly, the Philippine state has developed mechanisms by which it not only exports labor but by which it forcibly repatriates workers. As I will show in chapter 6, the Philippine state even uses these mechanisms to discipline workers for foreign employers.