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Is a Unique Culture of Labour Migration Emerging in the Island Nations of Asia ?

Laurence HUSSON

Abstract

In the space of three decades, three countries, the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka have become the main exporters of labor on a worldwide scale. Are island nations, such as the two archipelagos of the Philippines, Indonesia and the island of Sri Lanka, predisposed to the current large exodus of female migrant workers? Another record shared by these three countries: the very high percentage of women making up these migrant workers. This paper will analyze the principal factors of geography, population and the international labour market that explain this massive exportation of female migrant workers together with the state policies that are actively encouraging female migration. Beyond the determining geographical factor and the need to leave an overpopulated land to earn a living, we should indeed take into consideration the presence of a political will that contributed to the formation of a system of migration which is possibly particular to the island nations of Asia.

Keywords: female migrant workers, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka

亞洲島嶼國家正口生獨特勞工移動文化？

羅倫斯·胡森

中文摘要

近 30 年間，菲律賓、印尼及斯里蘭卡三國已經成為世界主要的勞工輸出國，這三個國家提供了另一個證據，那就是在女性勞工占整體勞工輸出比例相當的高。本研究的問題是，在菲律賓、印尼這兩個島嶼東南亞國家，與斯里蘭卡這個島國，是否較有利於女性勞工大規模地輸出到國外？本篇論文將從地理、人口與國際勞動市場等基本因素，以及國家政策的外在因素，說明女性勞工如何能大規模地輸出至海外。除了從已知的地理因素，以及人口過剩、必須向外謀生的「推力」進行分析之外，我們也不能忽略出於政治因素才產生的移民制度，特別是在上述三個亞洲島嶼國家。

關鍵字：女性移工、印尼、菲律賓、斯里蘭卡

The emergence of a globalised labour market has encouraged the free movement of people. Instead of weakening the links between the place of origin and the place of living and working, migratory movements reinforce connections. Real networks are created that organize the way people relocate. These networks also contribute to maintaining the collective identity links beyond national borders. Considered from the identity point of view, labour-based migrations illustrate the delicate connection between local and global contexts and show how individuals practice their dual relationship between their country of origin and the country where they find employment.

Migrations due to work, voluntary or forced, supervised or spontaneous, have a long tradition in Asia. After the abolition of slavery in the late 1800s, European colonial powers introduced the labor contracts that led to the extensive Chinese and Indian diasporas.

The vast continent of Asia comprises 60% of the world's population and two-thirds of the world's workforce. This labour market is expected to remain a very mobile zone for a long time (Hugo 1998). The two archipelagos of Indonesia and the Philippines are at the crossroads of the trade routes between China and India. It appears that this geographic region, made of archipelagos, peninsulas and straits is an eastern equivalent of the "Mediterranean sea" that encourages mobility and flows in all kinds of exchanges.

In the space of three decades, the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, have become the world's leading exporters of **labour**. Another feature that these two archipelagos and one island nation share is the record high percentage of women

making up these migrant workers. These two striking facts have been the catalyst for this paper in which we will analyze the principal factors that explain this massive exportation of female migrant workers.

Hania Zlotnik (2003) estimates that women represent 47% of migrants in Asia. However, in Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Indonesia, the proportion is higher than 70%. Are the islands of Asia predisposed to such a large exodus? Why are so many women leaving for foreign countries?

Beyond the determining geographical factors and the need to leave overpopulated islands to earn a living, state policies have played a determining role in the gender pattern of migration and have contributed to the formation of a system of labour migration which is possibly unique to Asia. The Philippines and Indonesia form the primary focus of this paper. The consideration of Sri Lankan worker migration is used as a comparison.

A Significant Recent Development

The rise of Asian migrations has followed global trends in migration. In 1965 the world accounted for 75 million international migrants. Twenty years later it was 105 million, and in 2000 it was 175 million. From the 1980s, the growth rate of the world population declined to 1.7% per year while international migration rose considerably to 2.59% per year (IOM 2003).

It was not until 1973, at the time of the extreme petroleum price escalations, that the large scale immigration of workers to the Gulf States began, firstly from Southern Asia and then from South-East Asia. The oil-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula

Table 1 Estimated numbers of Asian (*origin*) workers in the Middle East

Nationality	Year	Number
Filipinos	2003	1,471,849
Indonesians	2000	425,000 *
Sri Lankans	2003	900,000

* for Saudi Arabia only

Source: Hugo (2005: 10).

sought Asian workers for construction and general laboring because they were thought to be more docile and cheaper.

Rising from 1 to 5 million between 1975 and 1990, the number of migrant workers rose to almost 10 million in 2000 in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. The table 1 [above](#) illustrates the attraction that the Gulf States continue to exert on Asian labourers.

After 1980, the South-East Asian work migrations became more diversified. The Gulf States continued to absorb a large number of mostly South-East Asian laborers and notably women (Philippinos, Sri Lankans and Indonesians) to meet the increased demand for house-workers (maids and domestics) and the growth in service jobs. By the middle of the 1980s, inter-Asian mobility rapidly developed. Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Brunei became preferred migrant worker destinations. During this period, migrant flows became more complex as numerous countries became simultaneous importers and exporters of labor (*cf.* Husson 2000, 2004).

The Gulf War (1990-1991) as well as the Asian financial crisis of 1997 provoked a massive return, albeit temporary, of migrant workers. Since then migrant flows have

Table 2 Estimated number of *annual* departures

Country of origin	Year	Annual departures	Estimated number of illegals migrants	Destinations
Indonesia	2002	480,393	+ 50,000	Malaysia, UAE
Philippines	2002	265,000	+ 25,000	Asia, OCDE, UAE
Sri Lanka	2003	192,000	+ 16,000	UAE, Singapore

Source : ILO (2006).

resumed. Maruja Asis noticed that “unlike male migration, the demand for female migration is more constant and resilient during economic swings. The 1977 [1997](#) crisis in Asia was instructive in this regard. While the demand for migrant workers in the construction and manufacturing sectors declined, no such change was observed for domestic workers” (Asis 2004).

However, available statistical figures seem to be contradictory and are therefore difficult to analyze with confidence. For example, Stalker (2000) stated that in 1997 there were up to 6.5 million Asian migrant workers in Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan. While, Huguet (2003) estimated that at the end of 2000 approximately 5.5 million foreign workers were living in a host East and Southeast Asian country. The misleading implication from comparing these two estimates is that the number of Asian migrants has decreased during those three years. Whereas, a more careful consideration of these estimates suggests that the collection and analyses of migration statistics in this part of the world are not yet sufficiently reliable due to movement complexities. What may be discerned is that the global circulation of information, capital, ideas and labor and wider access to air travel has increased mobility and overcome the problem of large geographical distances. During this time, the main destination for female Asian migrants shifted from the Middle East

to the other Asian countries whose booming economies needed additional migrant workers to fill labor shortages.

A Growing Feminization

Since the 1980s, the massive participation of women in the international labour market has been a phenomenon without precedent in the history of human migrations. While most researchers agree that global restructuring increasingly forces a larger number of women in developing countries to participate in the international labour market, Nana Oishi (2005) demonstrated the need to investigate the differential impacts of globalization, state policies, individual autonomy and social factors.

In the past migration flows, women have been the wives, mothers, daughters or sisters of male migrants. In contrast, since the 1990s women, with or without work contracts, have become active participants in the international labour market, and not just to join or accompany a male migrant. Since this period, these female migrants have become fully integrated into the host country's job market. This phenomenon is referred as “the feminization of migration”.

In addition to the feminisation of migration, the other significant change has been a new level of awareness on the part of migration scholars and policy-makers as to the significance of female migration, the role of gender in shaping migratory processes and, most importantly, the increasingly important role of women as remittance senders (Instraw 2007). The trend seems now to be irreversible. The inclusion of the gender perspective in the analysis of migration has illuminated the new geographic mobility of women. The development in recent years of feminists studies has allowed female migrations to be understood as a different social phenomenon to the mobility

of men. Applying a gender lens to migration patterns can help identify ways to enhance the positive aspects of migration and to reduce the negative ones.

In 1990, the United Nations estimated that the total number of migrants living outside their native countries at 57 million, that is to say, 48% on the global scale. According to an estimate by the ILO (International Labour Organisation) in 1996, at least 1.5 million female Asian workers were employed outside their country of origin. Each year, almost 800,000 Asian women leave their own country for an employment under contract in the UAE (United Arab Emirates), Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea or Malaysia, where they will reside for a minimum of two years (Lim and Oishi 1996). The migrations of female workers henceforth, constitute the majority of the migrant work-flow under contract. Indeed, the Philippines and Indonesia export the largest number of migrant workers in Southeast Asia and are also the world's top exporters of female workers. The females of these two archipelagos are far more numerous than their male counterparts— as women represent 60% to 70% of workers sent abroad by these two countries. Sri Lanka created an office for foreign employment (SLBFE) with the express objective to promote and develop their export of workers, and especially female workers. .

The number of Sri Lankan women leaving under contract to work abroad, in particular to Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, grew from 9,000 in 1988 to 42,000 in 1994 and to 115,000 in 1996 (UNO 2003). Even though Sri Lanka started sending its domestic assistants to the Gulf States later than Bangladesh, Pakistan or India, it remains the only country to continue doing so. The proportion is one male migrant to three female migrants, of which more than 60% work as domestics almost exclusively in one of the seven member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Table 3 Proportion of Female Labor Migrants

Origin	Year	Number of migrants under contract	Percentage of women
Philippines	2003	651,938	72.5 %
Indonesia	2003	293,674	72.8 %
Sri Lanka	2003	203,710	65.3 %

Source: Hugo (2005: 18).

Table 4 Female Migration in Asia - proportion of female in percent regarding the total number of migrants

Regions	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
South Asia	46.3%	46.9%	45.9%	44.4%	44.4%
East and SE Asia	46.1%	47.6%	47%	48.5%	50.1%
West part of Asia	45.2%	46.6%	47.2%	47.9%	48.3%

Source: Jolly and Narayanaswany (2003: 7).

Keiko Yamanaka and Nicola Piper (2005: 9) have calculated the number of women as a percentage of total migrant workers in the Asian labour-importing countries for the early 2000s (Singapore: 43,8% ; Malaysia: 20,5% ; Thailand: 43%; Hong Kong SAR: 95%; Taiwan: 56%; Korea: 35.1%).

One must emphasize that these statistics apply only to official work migrants who are legally permitted to work abroad. They do not take into account people who leave their own country to study, travel, or to get married who subsequently work in the visited country. Illegant entrants or people who work without a work permit. It is probable, therefore, that the number of migrant workers would be much higher if we include those who migrate clandestinely. It is estimated that at least a third of all labor migration in Asia is unauthorized.

Besides the numerical importance of these flows and their visibility, another feature of these Asian female migrations is their disproportionate concentration in a very limited number of jobs.

It seems that female labor is mainly related to medical care, private domestic services and commercial sexual services. The categories of typical female employment returns to the stereotype roles of women as maids, waitresses, prostitutes and nurses (Chin 1998; Parrenas 2001). In the eyes of employers, Asian women are traditionally perceived to be discrete, subservient, docile, gentle, ready to please and serve, particularly suited to these subordinate employments as carers, nurses, domestic servants and as sex workers. The female migrants are forced into a limited number of trades due to a clear segregation of the sexes in the international labor market. They are concentrated in the service sector, domestic house-work, and a large number of entertainment trades that are a thinly disguised form of prostitution.

We will now compare the female migrations of Indonesia and the Philippines and consider the initiatives introduced in the Philippines and Sri Lanka to protect vulnerable female migrant workers who emigrate to the Arabian Peninsula and Eastern Asia.

With 7.8 million migrant workers, the Philippines is an example of how to improve and defend the rights of migrant workers. Indonesia, has the largest total number of migrant workers and the majority of these are women who are recruited as maids. Indonesia has tried to protect them by providing training and by fighting against the non-official recruitment agencies. Repeated press articles on the vulnerability of foreign workers, where migrant workers and locals are rarely treated

on an equal footing means that the [states](#) concerned can no longer remain insensitive to this problem.

We will use the following abbreviations: TKW (*tenaga kerja wanita*) in Indonesia to designate the female migrants workers and OFW (Overseas Filipino Workers) for the Philippines.

Over representation of female Asian migrants in the international *labor* market

The reasons for the strong participation of Asian women in the international labor flow are numerous and different in order: psychological, religious, economic, and political. In general, the offer of employment for female workers was as a result of supply and demand. These women were able to leave their families at short notice and for a set time in order to earn income at a time when the demand for male workers had diminished in the Gulf States. They profited from a demand for female workers. This was even easier as the jobs for women generally did not need a diploma or qualifications and appeared very attractive due to the big differences in wages and salaries between the countries of departure and the countries of arrival.

In South East Asia, women have a certain level of freedom of movement and autonomy in decision making, and are used to working away from home. In several ethnic groups in Indonesia, women have traditionally had a significant role in the generation of household income, through productive work both within and outside the household (Williams 1990: 50). In 2005 the ILO (2006: 13) stated that up to 53% of women in Indonesia participate in the work force compared to 87.1% of men.

Whereas in the Philippines, the proportions were 56.7% for women and 70.7% for men. In the families that need supplementary income, the women know how to cope with bringing money home, this would obviously favor emigration. However, many Islamic countries, including Pakistan and Bangladesh, have forbidden sending female workers overseas, as it was considered that young women travelling without a male escort outside their homes was against the teachings of the Koran. India has also put a brake on the export of female workers following too many denunciations by the national press.

To explain this massive feminine participation of women in migrational work, it is tempting to invoke traditional Asian values and the notion of family responsibility. Family responsibility is a foundational concept and is not a question of filial devotion. The sending of a woman abroad to earn money is related to the idea that she will remain committed to her family and that she will willingly sacrifice her own wellbeing and send all her savings home. A man in the same position, may be more inclined to play, drink and spend his savings. Overall, men remit more than women because they earn more, though women tend to remit a larger proportion of their earnings. This study carried out in Thailand confirms that despite their salaries being lower than men, the female migrants who work abroad to help their families managed to save more and sent most of their savings to their families (Osaki 1999). Women, especially if they are mothers, do not leave home easily and conversely the families certainly preferred to see the men go abroad rather than the women. In general, an extended family always found it more difficult to replace a mother than a father. She would often carry out a great number of tasks and is hard to replace, especially when it concerns the needs of very young children and elderly parents. But there is little

choice when the only employment offered is for females. The woman, whether she is a mother, daughter or sister, accepts temporary emigration and the family left behind will have to deal with her staying abroad.

Another possible factor, that needs to be verified with specific studies, is the incidence of bad conjugal relationships preceding female emigration. The researchers Gunatillake and Perera (Gunatillake and Perera 1995: 131) showed that in Sri Lanka, female worker migration is often a form of disguised divorce, in a society where divorce is still negatively perceived. The divorce is then not officially announced, but the emigration of the wife marks her economic independence and their physical separation as a couple. In Indonesia, while married women constitute the largest proportion of migrants, divorced women, single mothers and widows are over represented. It is clear that the departure is a solution to survive, a way of forgetting or escaping a situation of failure.

Women can also be “trapped” into migration. Low wages, financial difficulties, irresponsible spending, spousal infidelity, estrangement from children, and many others personal factors at home, may compel women to stay in, or return to the same country, or find another labor contract elsewhere.

It is necessary to add that working abroad has become more commonplace and less harrowing as the cost of transport and overseas communications *via* phone, Internet, MSN, Skype have been considerably reduced. With quicker and cheaper exchanges, the effective distances have been shortened and the social-emotional separation from family has become more acceptable by the women. For example, in certain Javanese villages, the migration of women is so frequent, so usual, that they

have become normal, and as one might say, they constitute a standard.

An additional religious factor is often proposed by Indonesians wanting to work in the Arabian Peninsula, especially in Saudi Arabia as it allows them to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at a reduced cost. It has been attested by researchers that Sri Lankan Muslim female workers were able to gain respectability and self-esteem by working in the Arabian peninsula, acquiring material assets, adopting Arab customs in fashion, cooking, interior decoration, and obtaining religious education for them and their relatives (Thangarajah 2003: 144). As pertinent as they are, these reasons alone cannot explain these growing flows.

It is also necessary to take into account the actions of governments in order to augment foreign-exchange revenues and private organizations that promote the export of female labour, and who apply pressure on family and social networks. Authorised Asian female migration would never have known such growth without an initial worker migration industry and the setting up of labour market channels and networks.

The Multiple Channels And Networks

Migrant workers have become commercial objects that constitute a valuable resource. In Asia, the recruitment of foreign workers has become a lucrative activity. The agencies, whether public or private, legal or illegal cover the financial cost of migration, in order to maximise the profits on each departing candidate. Manolo Abella (2005) has emphasized the role played by private fee-charging job brokers in organizing labour migration in those countries. According to him,

“recruitment and placement have been left largely in the hands of

commercially-motivated recruitment agencies because few labour-importing states in the region have shown any interest in organizing labour migration on the strength of bilateral labour agreements. As a consequence, over the years, the organization of migration has emerged as a big business in both countries of origin and of employment”.

Nevertheless, the governments of exporting workforce countries play a major role. Sending migrants workers abroad is a solution to national unemployment, a way to avoid social unrest, and a means to gain foreign-exchange reserves. As early as 1974, the Philippine government, recognized the importance of labour migration to the national economy by establishing the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration in order to promote labour export. Sri Lankan and Indonesian authorities have followed this example.

Female labor migration is a demand-driven, rather than a supply driven, phenomenon. To respond to demand patterns in the host countries, labor-exporting countries have to promote both male and female overseas contract workers and to face increased competition for a good position in the labor export market. To achieve this goal, they have created within their Ministries of Labor, offices or agencies to increase the number of foreign employment_ with an aim to promote, control and organize the recruiter and exportation of workers: AKAN in Indonesia, the Philippine Government Agency for Overseas Employment, (POEA) in the Philippines, and the Sri Lanka Bureau/Office for Foreign Employment (SLBFE) in Sri Lanka.

The AKAN Indonesian Office of Foreign Employment was created in 1984 under the supervision of the Ministry of Labor. A year later, in 1985, the SLBFE

adopted the same objectives. The government objectives were to reduce national unemployment and to increase the savings of migrants. The transfer of funds from migrant workers made up 8.2% of PNB in the Philippines or more than \$7 billion, 6.3% in Sri Lanka (CESAP 2003), and 4.7% in Indonesia. The three million Indonesians who work abroad bring in approximately \$1 billion (ILO 2006b).

In the Philippines, there are approximately 2,876 Foreign Employment Agencies, amongst which, 1400 are regarded as reliable (POEA 2004). Because of the competition, these agencies tend to specialize in particular destinations or types of employment.

In Indonesia, 412 employment/placement agencies were listed in 2000 (Cohen 2000). Sri Lanka had 524 licensed recruitment agencies by the end 2002 (plus many more illegal operators) which placed 204,000 workers abroad in that year (Abella 2005). These numbers clearly show the commercial and profitable character of worker migrations. A large number of temporary work migrations are thus orchestrated by these paid recruiter agencies. The OIT (International Work Organization 1997) points out “their intervention in 80% of all movements of the Asian work-force to the Arab States, one of the biggest migrant flows in the world”. In the same press release, the OIT added “In Indonesia and in the Philippines, the private agencies dominate the organization of migrant workers, placing 60% to 80% of migrants”.

Kassim (2000) has pointed out that both the heavy burden of the formal bureaucratic procedure and the high financial costs involved may induce Indonesian migrant workers to look for irregular recruitment channels in order to get a job in Malaysia.

The Journey Of The Migrant Through Legal Or Illegal Channels

For example, an Indonesian who wants to work in Malaysia has three possible choices. One is to contact a legal placement agency (PJTKI, *Perusahaan Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*, Office for the Indonesian workers) situated in town and endure a long and costly administrative procedure due to civil servants demanding bribes.

The second way is to go to a local intermediary/recruiter (called locally *calo*, *boss*, *taikong*, *mandor* or *patron/sponsor*), who is often a notably rich and respected man, having performed the *hadj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), and who will serve as intermediary between the candidate and an official agency based in Jakarta. His performance is equally costly but it has the advantage of reassuring the candidate, as the *calo* is a well-known person.

In the embarkation ports to foreign countries, situated mostly in Sumatra (for example Medan, Tanjung, Pinang, Dumai, Batam, Tanjung Balai, and Pekanbaru) the migrant candidates may go to a third kind of intermediary, unscrupulous ferrymen who try to transport them to Malaysia on the first available boat. In the Indonesian archipelago, generally the official legal procedure is badly perceived and does not prove to be more secure, less expensive or any more effective than the private recruitment agencies. Corruption exists at every stage in the migratory cycle.

Despite these factors, these intermediaries do enable the low-qualified and less well-informed women to go through the procedures to find foreign work. The beneficial services provided by these intermediaries is that they can connect the

employee and employer, give training and find board and lodging, supervise their work contracts, organize the trip, lend them money, and organize the return journeys of the migrant.

The negative costs is that these agencies have a tendency to claim excessively high and unjustified fees, commissions and gratuities that force the applicants into debt.

This debt can bring about a relationship of dependence and abuse between the female migrant worker and her recruiter agency. Such abuses are more obvious in the case where the female migrant worker is involved in illegal or Mafia networks.

Outside of these channels of recruitment, the migrant workers forge their own networks through which information circulates, allowing them sometimes to meet the supply and demand. The combination of formal agencies and informal networks end up creating a chain migration.

The Indonesians prove to be more exposed than Philippine workers to extortion and abuse before their departure. This system, along with the tariffs applied by the agents and their high rates of interest mean that the female Indonesians are often in debt for several months of their pay. In 2003, the Indonesian Ministry of Work and Emigration recognized that 80% of the problems, such as falsification of documents and the various extortions undergone by the migrants, take place before departure (Dursin 2003).

The period immediately before departure and immediately upon their return are the critical moments when Indonesian and Sri Lankan female migrants are most at

risk of being robbed.

Every day, almost 800 migrants pass through Terminal 3 in Jakarta's airport, while in Sri Lanka around 300 women a day return to their home country. These female migrant groups, who return loaded with packets, presents and money, are targeted by civil servants, servicemen, policemen, porters, and bus-drivers who seek to take their money.

The Philippines And Sri-Lanka Provide Two Female Labour-Export Models For Indonesia?

Massive labor-exporting countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri-Lanka are confronted with the dilemma between promotion of female labour emigration and the protection of their national workers abroad. The Philippines, has substantial experience in labour export. The government, conscious to protect their “new heroes” (*Bagong Bayani* in Tagalog) who allow the country to prosper, create two distinct institutions. The POEA whose mission was to promote the export of the work-force and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) which was established to defend and protect the rights of migrants. In the same spirit, the archipelago established an official charter, the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act, voted in, in June 1995, so that the migrants are aware of their rights and their duties to be respected. The government enacted this charter to slow down the exportation of the less qualified workers who were the most vulnerable. Filipino NGO's, civil society and the Catholic Church have had a long history of activism, campaigns and debates to improve the life, conditions and rights of migrants workers.

The civil society is better organised in the Philippines. They list more than a hundred NGOs who are very active in the fight to protect migrant workers. In comparison, Indonesia accounts for only 15 NGOs and a similar number in Sri Lanka. Cassettes, training modules, self-defense courses, handbooks and information booklets emanating from Filipino NGOs inform the migrants of the dangers in looking for employment abroad. Very rapidly, the Sri Lankan NGOs are following their example with pre-departure orientation and training programs. One of the major problems is the lack of clear, precise and reliable information explaining each stage in the migration process. This information is often not provided to Indonesian workers resulting in frequent misdirections, errors and fraud with their damaging consequences. In general, female Filipino migrants with better education and training and a good command of the English language have less problems in communication than Indonesian migrants.

To benefit from the Filipino example, Indonesia should:

- increase the level of general education of its population;
- “clean up” its recruiter system;
- train the migrant candidates better, particularly in language;
- diversify the countries of destination.

Following the example of the NGOs that advocate for Filipino women migrants workers, Indonesian NGO's could similarly pressure the Indonesian government to help the migrant labor-force through better national and international coordination, information networking to provide accurate information on all aspects of migration,

and more strict regulations for the recruitment industry to help prevent abuses and malpractices.

Towards An Industry And A Culture Of Migration In Asia

As we have seen, the global trend towards the feminization of migratory flows in Asia and the demand for female migrant workers is likely to increase. This phenomenon is more accentuated in Asia, where the proportion of women in the total number of migrant workers approaches 70%. Even though we cannot speak of a migratory system peculiar to the island nations of Asia, the migratory flows of these three countries present common characteristics which are unique.

In three decades, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka constitute the majority of emigration workers in the world.

These nations have put in place policies favoring the emigration of workers to reduce the poverty and unemployment and to increase the foreign currency remittance by migrant workers.

These two archipelagos and the island nation of Sri Lanka share high unemployment rates and chronic under-employment. The respective rates of unemployment in Indonesia and the Philippines remain high at 9.9% and 10.1%, under-employment is considerable. While there remains a large inequality in the wages between men and women, women will continue to comprise the majority of poor workers. .

These countries, via their recruitment agencies, filled an opportune labour-market niche that was vacant by others. The agencies could satisfy the growing demand for domestic personnel, nannies and home nurses. These female employment positions had the advantage for South East Asian migrant women of not requiring any particular qualifications.

Encouraged by the State, in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, a culture of migration has emerged with the establishment of a solid “migration industry” with a network of agents and intermediaries. Advisors, recruiters, travel agents, trainers, started to work together at all stages of the migration process to find as much labor as possible for the greatest number of foreign employers. The Philippines enjoys a great deal of experience in this field.

Another common characteristic of these three labor exporters resides in the creation of formal and informal migrant networks and channels by which to disseminate important information for future migrant workers. Maruja M. B. Asis (2005: 36) suggests that the numerical growth in the domestic personnel in various countries, of Philippine origin, partly reflects the “multiplying effect” of the informal migrant information network resulting in parents and friends going to the same destination and working in the same niche markets.

This suggests the possibility of a direct job appointment without having to go through the employment agencies. Moreover, the conditions for migrant workers could progressively improve. The International Convention on the International Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and their families provides a normative framework to the transnational labor migrations. It has been ratified by 34 countries,

including the Philippines and Sri Lanka, and came into effect in 2003.

These three countries were pulled between the desire to increase the export of their work-force and their duty to protect them. By sending so many female workers abroad, in conditions that, in one way, could put them in danger, they highlighted the global question of Human Rights within the general framework of migrations and work legislation.

This positive outcome puts into perspective some of the criticisms that is sometimes addressed to them, that by exporting their own work-force in such great numbers, they would not create local jobs and thereby would avoid the internal problem of unemployment. Perhaps the years to come will show that the returning migrants can fulfill the role of providing local employment thanks to their remittances, their ideas and new skills.

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