

Keynote Address
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Seizing Opportunities, Upholding Rights
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Introduction

I thank the Chairperson of the National Commission on the Role of the Filipino Women, Ms. Myrna Yao for the invitation to address such a distinguished group of experts, on the subject of “Gender, Migration and Development”. I am deeply and truly honored.

I congratulate the organizers of the conference for the insightful topics that will be taken up in the discussions to follow. My contribution will focus on my area of expertise, namely the relevance of diplomacy to migration.

Diplomacy and Migration

Why is diplomacy relevant to the global debate on migration?

Perhaps, the best answer would be the fact that migration which consists of transborder movements of persons from societies of origin to societies of destination would necessarily impact on the relations between and among states. As such it becomes a political issue and diplomats are drawn to play a role in this global drama. Moreover, diplomats are charged to promote and protect the national interests of their respective countries including of course of their nationals. They remain at the forefront of these relations.

To illustrate , let me speak of my own experiences as a practitioner of diplomacy for the past four decades.

I joined the Foreign Service at the height of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. The Philippines, as an ally of the West joined in the efforts to stem the tide of communism in Indo China. By supporting this effort, the Philippines was rewarded with contracts to construct and reconstruct and with it went the supply of Philippine labor.

When the conflict turned against the West it became necessary to get the Filipino workers out of harms way through diplomatic efforts. As a young and adventurous diplomat with no sense of danger I joined a successful effort called “Operation Pakikisama” through which we successfully got our workers out before the Tet offensive could get to them.

This experience was to repeat itself many years later when I participated in the successful negotiations for the release of a Filipino truck driver Angelo Dela Cruz from his kidnappers and would be executioners in Iraq.

I have referred to these two extreme cases as examples to convey to you the crucial role that Filipino diplomats play in implementing a national policy to assist/save our nationals whether they are documented and undocumented overseas workers, men and women alike.

Let me now turn to the Philippine experience.

To understand the picture of hundreds of Filipino maids congregating on Sundays at a park in Hongkong or the omni-present Filipino women salesgirls at Duty Free Dubai, it is necessary to take a close look into the Philippine setting.

In Asia, the Philippine takes third seat after China and India in global migration. The Philippine is a middle-sized country with 90 million people and a population growing annually at 2.3%. Half of the population are women. As of December 2007 there are approximately 8.73 million Filipinos found in 193 countries of this number 3.69 million (45% are permanently residing abroad, 4.13 million are temporarily working overseas and about 10% are considered irregular migrants.

Unusual in Asia, it is a predominantly Christian country with a minority of Muslims and other indigenous religions. The medium of instruction is English.

The ratio of women to men workers overseas increased to 60% in 2006 due to the increase in global need for services. While Filipino men are likely to end up in jobs that need more skills and therefore better paid the women are likely to get jobs that are low-paying and often unprotected. The majority of women workers overseas take on jobs which are extensions of their roles in performing domestic chores.

This is quite a contradiction because Filipino women still maintain a higher literacy rate compared to men. More women finish primary and secondary levels of education and enrolment in tertiary education registers more women than men.

Beyond these levels there are considerably more women licensed professionals and account for 63% of those who pass government professional board examinations. In the diplomatic service known for its stringent examinations, more women have been making the grade than the men.

Gender Equity Index

The relatively high number of educated Filipino women has contributed to the high ranking of the Philippines in the 2006 Gender Equity Index of the World Economic Forum which has placed the country in the 6th place and the only Asian country in the top 10 following the Nordic countries. Education is one of the 4 criteria that include political participation, economic activity and health.

Challenges

While literacy rate is high, a recent ADB study on the Philippines reported that “schools are producing the wrong skills for its labor market needs and is hurting economic growth”. The result is that there are too many highly educated people chasing too few jobs. Moreover, the report cites that because higher education is a more important determinant of employment in the Philippine market, “low productivity jobs are taken over by the more educated force.”

The Global Setting

Let me now take you to the European scene where I have served for more than 20 years.

Filipino women workers who went there in the early 70's were employed initially in health and nursing sectors and then to service jobs. The demand for domestic labor grew from a population that benefited from the industrial recovery of Europe in the 60's. Moreover, the increased standard of living forced European women to find jobs to augment the family income. The Filipina housekeeper came in handy liberating the European women from housework enabling them to pursue their careers or businesses.

The pattern of migration to Europe developed in a context where the changing structure of the labor market created specific limited job opportunities for migrants, especially women.

As work permits became more restricted, Filipino women service workers who opted to remain acquired permanent residence or by marriage.

An impetus to the feminization of Filipino migration to Europe was the “mail-order-bride” arrangement introduced in the 1970's and continued into the 90's. This arrangement came about after Europe began to close its open-door-policy for Asian migrant labor. Women workers then came in with “fiancé visas”.

During this period, we witnessed a number of domestic violence cases involving mail-order brides. Today however, I note that the number of domestic violence cases have abated. Newer issues such as competition for workplaces with women from the Eastern European countries – is being felt especially in the nursing and domestic services sector. Also, the slowing of economies has diminished the possibilities for low-skilled workers.

This development may be an opportunity for the Philippines to manage its migration policies and seriously consider ways to attract home its migrant workers especially the women before the crunch sets in.

While I may have painted a half-empty glass, let me balance the picture.

Last year, we celebrated the 15th anniversary of “Babaylan”, an umbrella organization of ten (10) Filipino women groups in ten (10) European countries. It is impressive to observe how women working together have been effective in lobbying decision makers and NGO's, especially the religious organizations, to help them assert their rights as migrants.

Indeed, it is a joy to see how many of the Filipino migrant women have developed leadership roles in their respective communities.

Government Responses

A close look into policies governing its migrant workers show that the Philippines is the largest organized labor source country in the world today. While a substantial number of Filipinos abroad are permanent emigrants, most of whom settle in U.S., Canada, and recently in Australia, the majority of overseas Filipino are workers go to the Middle East and East Asia where the pull factors are strongest.

The mass deployment of Filipino workers overseas had a significant beginning in the 1970's with the great demand for workers in the production process and related occupations coming from the middle East following the boom in the oil industry.

The government decision to lend support to overseas Filipino at this stage was to mitigate the risks involved in migration such as abuse and exploitation. At this point, the protection and promotion of rights of migrant workers became an important government

policy. Philippine diplomats became instant social workers, investigators, referees, legal advisers and even marriage counselors and forensic officers.

Subsequently, in order to respond effectively to the demands of migrant workers, a quasi-government entity, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) was created to manage the welfare fund of workers and provide services to its contributing members.

Increased Filipino emigration became a highly political domestic issue that Philippine Congress filed 55 bills to look into OFW deaths between 1987 and 1991.

In 1995, following the execution of a Filipino woman domestic worker in Singapore, Filipino diplomats found themselves in the forefront of a politically charged debate that caused the resignation of both the Foreign Minister and the Labor Minister and downgrading of bilateral diplomatic representation.

Again, reacting to these developments, a strong political response came in the passage of the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995 known as the Magna Charta for Philippine labor. The law called for the government to promote the welfare of migrant workers and place their protection above all else. The law states-

“While recognizing the contribution of Filipino migrant workers to the national economy through their foreign exchange remittances, the State does not promote overseas employment as a means to sustain economic growth and achieve national development.

The existence of the overseas employment program rests solely on the assurance that the dignity and fundamental human rights and freedoms of the Filipino citizen shall not, at any time be compromised or violated.”

In effect, the law spelled out the marching orders for Filipino diplomats. Today, consular establishments are set up in areas where there are a sizeable number of Filipino citizens. The flag followed the migrants.

Diplomatic Efforts

My first hand experience in dealing with women migrant workers who were violated physically and psychologically gave me the determination to go beyond just extending immediate consular assistance.

In 2004 as Secretary of Foreign Affairs, I saw an opportunity to elevate the issue to the then United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva by initiating resolution 2004/49 entitled, “Violence Against Women Migrant Workers”. My resolution called upon governments of origin and destination, to undertake the following measures: 1) to put penal sanctions to punish traffickers and perpetrators of violence against women migrant workers; 2) to provide the victims of violence and trafficking with the full range of immediate assistance such as counseling, legal and consular assistance, temporary shelter and other means; and 3) to safeguard their dignified return to the country of origin as well as to establish reintegration and rehabilitation schemes for returning migrant women workers.

I was supported fully by the women Foreign Ministers who were present at that conference. Certainly, as you are all aware, there is great value in networking among women. Perhaps we could unite to monitor how all these political and diplomatic initiatives are being respected.

Global Recession

Recent global developments are showing signs of declining economic performances of major economic players. I believe that it is time to take a good hard look at the impact of this global economic downtrend especially on the more vulnerable segment of the migrant communities, namely ; the women migrant workers.

Last week, notices were released by the DFA that several traditional destinations for women service workers were closing their recruitment doors. It was also reported that even low-paid jobs were getting even lower. Soon, it may not even be an economic win to have women workers continue with overseas jobs, if one has to take into account the serious social costs of an absent wife and mother.

Certainly, one has to admit that labor export which was initially intended as a stop-gap measure has served and continues to serve the country well. Remittances reached a peak of 15 billion dollars in 2007 representing over 23% of export earnings.. Indeed, the globalizing world has opened opportunities to the Filipino migrant worker.

Current Trends and Policies

Before I left Berlin last week, I learned that migration has moved to the top of the political agenda of the EU.

Under the current French Presidency, measures are being taken that will commit the EU to a common policy of managing migratory flows through a multilateral treaty which will: 1) define the obligation for countries of origin to re-admit their nationals who are illegally staying in the territory of another state; and the 2) prohibition addressed to all host countries from encouraging brain drain or accepting manpower needed in the development of the poor countries.

What is interesting in this directive is the two-prong approach:

- first, a concerted and selective immigration policy that takes into account the interests of both the country of origin and of the host country;
- second, a development aid policy that intends to address the socio-economic causes of migration.

These initiatives will be taken up at the 7th ASEM Conference, next month (17-18 September) in Paris.

Conclusion

As I look back at more than 30 years of women migration experience, I can not help but raise certain questions: Do we want a second generation of Filipino women domestic workers overseas? What are our choices? How can we as concerned women bring about those choices.

I reiterate the need for an honest assessment of Philippine migration policies taking into serious consideration the current economic and political challenges.

In thanking the NCRFW for giving me this opportunity to contribute my share to the global debate on gender and migration. I am reminded of an comment from Jan Karlsson, the former co-chair of the Global Commission on International Migration who

said, “In all fields of public policy, migration is the area where the distance between those who know and those who do is the largest”.

I hope that you in this conference who certainly belong to “those who know” can bridge that gap. I’m certain you will because you are women and you care.

I wish you all not only a pleasant stay in the Philippines but more importantly a conference that will make a difference. From my side I give you all my support, diplomatically or otherwise.

Thank you and Mabuhay!