

## The culture of migration

I would like to share with you my personal story, not only as a migrant but also as someone who documents lives of people similar to mine, hoping that my visual stories will educate others so that we get the respect we deserved, stop the abuse and fraud that affects our lives everyday.

I m a second-generation domestic worker.

My mother left us when I was 8 years old to work as a domestic helper with hopes of providing us the opportunity to get the kind of education that she never had.

She first went to Singapore illegally to work as a domestic worker avoiding the bureaucratic government guidelines to save money but knowing that she is vulnerable to abuse by her employer. Luckily, she found a nice employer.

From Singapore, she moved to Hong Kong to be a domestic helper. She has been working in Hong Kong for 20 years now for the same employer.

As a consequence of being a child of a migrant worker, I grew up without the guidance of a mother. Since I am the eldest child in my family, I grew up learning to be a mother to my siblings too.

When I turned 19, because of increased financial needs of my family, I became a second-generation domestic helper.

Philippines is one of biggest suppliers of skilled and low skilled workers to the world.

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Because of poverty and lack of opportunities to improve our lives, we Filipinos migrate with the hopes of improving our economic situation, leaving our families behind in spite of the risk of abuse. With limited protection, we are living our lives as migrant workers vulnerable to all kinds of unjust treatment including death.

Because of the Philippines labor export policy that promotes migration, thousand leave yearly to find work in the four corners of the world.

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) is the biggest industry in the Philippines and our yearly remittance is the biggest dollar earner of the Philippines. During economic slump, the impact to the Philippines was less because our remittances not only continued but also increased.

Government regulatory agencies have the laws to protect migrant workers but because of corruption and abuse of the system by employment agencies and freelancing migration agents, the illegal trafficking of workers continues and thrive.

## Problems of Migrants

Our abuse starts even before we start working overseas.

Placement agencies illegally collect very high placement fees that includes hidden charges that migrant workers are forced to pay.

Migrant workers end up borrowing money from loan sharks with high interest rates or selling anything of value to raise the needed funds to get employed.

Termination.

Domestic workers in Hong Kong work with a contract where all the power is with the employer.

Workers can be terminated immediately without any reason. The migrant worker doesn't have any right to sue the employer for wrongful termination. It creates an imbalance of power that leads to fear, the fear of losing his or her job and not being able to pay back the money she borrowed in order to be employed. This unjust condition forces the migrant worker to continue working for an abusive employer.

Second class citizens/Racism

Domestic workers are treated as second-class citizens. At the airport, domestic workers cannot queue on visitors line or the resident line. They need to wait for a certain window to open up. I experienced it a lot of times and its really degrading in a way that we are segregated from the rest of society.

## Isolation

Some employers also don't allow their helpers to take off days and vacation time. Their isolation makes it harder to seek help when they become victims of abuse.

It adds to the stress and loneliness of being away from their families.

Domestic workers have an identification card but the rights we have are similar to the rights of refugees. We cannot earn any cent outside our contract. I've been photographing for almost 6 years and even though some people want to buy my prints; I cant because I might go to jail if I sell them.

## Family Separation

One of the biggest effects of migration is family Separation. Children grew up without one of their parents or both and this affect their development as youths. Couples grew apart. It's very common to see broken families due to migration.

## Trafficking

When people hear the word trafficking, it is often associated with sex trafficking not knowing that labor trafficking is a bigger issue and happening everywhere. Victims are in the underdeveloped countries and developed countries.

Recently, New York Times published my story about human trafficking in New York City. My goal is to put faces on the issue of human trafficking. While I am not a victim, as a former migrant worker, I can relate to their situation and I hope that my work will shed a better light to their plight.

People made comments that that people I photographed don't look like trafficking victims.

There is a stigma that when a person is a trafficking victim, she is supposed to look like a "victim". Which is exactly my point for doing that personal project. I was hoping that this images can show that anyone can be a victim of trafficking, even to people who are highly educated.

I want to humanize them, show the society through my photographs that trafficking victims can be survivors if we help them. That victims are normal people who live a normal life until they become victims of trafficking. They sacrifice a lot and find ways to survive in order to continue helping their families they left behind.

As a former migrant worker, I can relate with the issue of human trafficking. I am just one of the lucky ones, but not knowing beforehand, I can also be one of the victims.

I can understand the vulnerability migrant workers face daily and I can relate to the pain and anxiety of family separation. I am a migrant worker.

With my work now as a documentary photographer, we can help each other put the issue of human trafficking in the forefront, create awareness, educate others, and make sure that migrant workers know their rights.

As a young and poor growing up in the Philippines, I have always wanted to be able to help others and now with the skills and opportunities that I have, consider be as a partner in the stopping migrant workers' abuse and human trafficking.