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**READING FILIPINA MIGRANT WORKERS IN HONG KONG:  
TRACING A FEMINIST AND CULTURAL POLITICS OF TRANSFORMATION**

**MANIPON AIDA JEAN**

**MPHIL**

**LINGNAN UNIVERSITY**

**2004**

**READING FILIPINA MIGRANT WORKERS IN HONG KONG:  
TRACING A FEMINIST AND CULTURAL POLITICS OF  
TRANSFORMATION**

by  
MANIPON Aida Jean

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Philosophy

**LINGNAN UNIVERSITY**

**2004**

## ABSTRACT

### **Reading Filipina Migrant Workers in Hong Kong: Tracing a Feminist and Cultural Politics of Transformation**

by

**MANIPON Aida Jean**

**Master of Philosophy**

**For Filipino migrant workers**, the journey overseas in search of contractual employment marks a profound turning point in their lives. It registers the crossing of spatial and cultural borders that leads to the shifting of terrains from which they make sense of their selves and the world of ‘others.’ It signifies a rupture in time that alters their sense of history, giving shape to new vantage points from which they reflect on the past and project an imagination of future. This research explores the question of how Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong make sense of their experiences as ‘migrant women’, and how they might articulate a consciousness of themselves as gendered subjects in history. The study begins with a documentation of the personal histories of five Filipina women, as told in their own words and as reconstructed into written text, and offers a reading of the narratives, tracing the ways in which they make sense of their experiences as women migrant workers, wives, mothers, daughters, and diasporic citizens of a nation state. Through this process of reading and narrativizing the life histories of Filipina domestic workers, this thesis hopes to contribute to an understanding of how their gendered subjectivities are formed, shaped and changed over time.

The life histories, though diverse, give voice to a shared and collective experience – a familiar story of poverty, family crises, diaspora, encounter with cultural difference and subjection to difficult working conditions. Together they are the hidden threads that form the underside of the grand narratives of ‘nation’, development, modernization, and globalization. It is against this backdrop that family crises would push five women -- Mader Irma, Gina, Esther, Miriam, and Rosario -- to enter a particularly difficult type of employment which would render them as part of Hong Kong’s invisible ‘others.’ While their journey was primarily an act of love/duty to the family, the experience of migration would eventually reinvent the meaning of ‘wife’, ‘mother’, ‘daughter’, ‘worker’, ‘subaltern intellectual’ and ‘activist.’

To foreground the narratives of life histories, two chapters in the first part of this thesis are devoted to a brief review of the historical contexts in Hong Kong and the Philippines that gave rise to the current migration phenomenon. The chapters also trace the ways by which the ‘Filipina domestic helper’ is positioned and interpellated in discourse, as ‘ban mui’, ‘new heroes’ and ‘spectral presences’ in the nation. Migrant domestic workers straddle two life/worlds, always the inside-outsider/outside-insider, and in this ambiguous in-between space they carve out new identities and struggle to exercise agency.

This research contributes to an understanding of the affective/subjective dimensions of migration by presenting ways of ‘narrating’ and ‘reading’ women’s experiences. It also demonstrates the usefulness of intellectual resources offered by feminist and cultural studies in interrogating the conditions of Hong Kong’s ‘social others’ and identifying issues around which an agenda for transformational politics might be explored.

I declare that this is an original work based primarily on my own research, and I warrant that all citations of previous research, published or unpublished, have been duly acknowledged.

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MANIPON Aida Jean  
October 30, 2004

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## Chapter One

### BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH METHOD

#### 1. Background and objectives:

In the last few years, the number of Hong Kong's foreign population has ranged from 495,200 to about 528,870, constituting at least 7.1 percent of its total population. Roughly about 41 percent of this is registered as foreign domestic helpers, the biggest number of which comes from the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Despite the SARS outbreak in early 2003 and the subsequent economic downturn, Hong Kong continues to be a favorite destination for Filipino women seeking contractual employment overseas as domestic workers. From a couple of thousands in the 1970s, the number of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong rose to more than a hundred thousand by the early 1990s. In June 1993, the Hong Kong Immigration Department recorded the number of foreign domestic workers in the total of 213,910; of this, 130,760 came from the Philippines.<sup>2</sup>

The arrival of migrant Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong is part of a much larger-scale of out-migration from the Philippines – of the Filipino ‘diaspora’ – and specifically, the migration of labor for contractual employment which began in the ‘70s and dramatically increased in the ‘80s. It is also part of the larger phenomenon known as the feminization of labor migration which has been observed worldwide as increasing numbers of women migrate for employment in domestic service. This phenomenon needs to be understood in the context of complex processes simultaneously taking place and interacting with one another: changing employment structures worldwide and shifting patterns of international division of labor,<sup>3</sup> the maintenance within capitalist globalization of an imbalance between developed and developing countries, the pursuit of economic policies that perpetuate an inequitable distribution of power within nation-states and that result in poverty and employment crises, the continued operation of resilient patriarchal values amid changing family structures, and the persistent deployment of ‘colonial’ attitudes, ideologies

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<sup>1</sup> *Baseline Research on Racial and Gender Discrimination Towards Filipino, Indonesian and Thai Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong*. (Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Centre, Asian Domestic Workers Union, Forum of Filipino Reintegration and Savings Groups, Indonesian Migrant Workers Union, Thai Women Association, 2001), 14

<sup>2</sup> *Asian Migrant Yearbook 2002-2003, Migration Facts, Analysis and Issues in 2001-2002*. (Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Centre and Migrant Forum in Asia, 2004), 135.

<sup>3</sup> Geertje Lycklama a Nijeholt, The Changing International Division of Labour and Domestic Workers: A Macro Overview (Regional), in Heyzer, Lycklama a Nijeholt and Weerakon, eds. *The Trade in Domestic Workers: Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences of International Migration*, Volume One. (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre, 1994), 10-18.

and racial biases. All these combined gives rise to a particular *problematique* – the emergence of the migrant domestic worker as subject – which public policy has often inadequately addressed. As Heyzer and Wee suggest, while the export of female labor from less developed countries to more developed countries is now such an instituted process that economic and social planning considers this as a resource to be used and managed, the contractual domestic work rendered by migrant laborers continues to be a ‘job that has no proper name’. This is primarily because the work involved is socially defined as women’s work, and thus cheap, easily available and unskilled.<sup>4</sup>

The import-export of female domestic labor could be seen as a socio-economic phenomenon which produces and is produced by cultural and discursive practices which embed constructions of gender, work and identity – of understanding and practicing ways of being ‘woman’, of what it means to be a ‘woman’ in and ‘belonging to’ a particular society. It is a phenomenon at work within and as part of a complex web of globalizing processes in which both Hong Kong and Philippines are implicated. The Filipina domestic worker lives in and embodies such phenomenon.

By sheer numbers alone, Filipina domestic workers constitute a significant sector of Hong Kong society; and yet, bounded by the domestic nature of their paid work in Hong Kong they are rendered as part of Hong Kong’s invisible and marginalized ‘others’. Their role as a (potentially) significant actor -- acting in and on the various layers of Hong Kong’s economic, social and cultural realms – is greatly underestimated and under-represented in public discourses. On the other hand, little is also understood about how the experience of living and working in Hong Kong as temporary domestic laborers produces and is produced by specific gendered subjectivities of migrant Filipina women as subjects in/of colonial history and globalization.

What does the experience of migration as contractual domestic helpers in Hong Kong come to mean for Filipina workers? Would this experience enable the construction of a position from which a feminist and cultural politics of transformation could be traced or articulated? How could such articulation be made accessible and relevant to academia and social movements in both Hong Kong and the Philippines?

Indeed the journey overseas in search of contractual employment marks a profound turning point in the lives of Filipina migrant women. It registers the crossing of spatial and cultural borders that leads to the shifting of terrains from which they make sense of their selves and the world of ‘others’. It signifies a rupture in time that alters their sense of history,

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<sup>4</sup> Noeleen Heyzer and Vivienne Wee, *Domestic Workers in Transient Overseas Employment: Who Benefits, Who Profits*, in Heyzer, Noeleen, Lycklama a Nijeholt, Geertje, and Weerakoon, Nedra, eds. 1994. *The Trade in Domestic Workers, Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences of International Migration*, Volume One (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre, 1994), 31-32.

giving shape to new vantage points from which they reflect on the past, imagine the future, and inhabit new subject positions responsive to the present. This research explores the question of how Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong make sense of their experiences as ‘migrant women’, and how they might articulate a consciousness of themselves as gendered subjects in history. The study begins with a documentation of the personal histories of five Filipino women, as told in their own words and as reconstructed into written narratives, and then offers a reading of the narratives, tracing the ways in which they make sense of their experiences as women migrant workers, wives, mothers, daughters, and diasporic citizens of a nation-state.

Through this process of reading and narrativization of life stories, this research hopes to open a textual and cultural space for the ‘voices’ of women migrant workers to be recorded and included in ‘history’, and to contribute to an understanding of how their gendered subjectivities are formed, shaped and changed over time. By drawing out significant themes emerging from the narratives, this thesis also explores and suggests new areas for further research.

This research pursues the following objectives:

1. To document and reconstruct into written narratives the life stories of selected Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong as told in their own words, in order to open a textual and cultural space for the ‘voices’ of Filipina domestic workers to be recorded and included in history;
2. To propose ways of reading and interpreting the narratives in order to gain insights into how the Filipina domestic worker understands herself and her history as a woman, worker, wife, and daughter;
3. To contribute to an understanding of how Filipina domestic workers are produced as gendered subjects and how their subjectivities are formed, shaped, and change over time; and,
4. To draw out significant themes emerging from the narratives in order to explore and suggest new areas for further research.

The following sections will further develop the arguments for the rationale of this research project by first introducing some of the relevant theoretical approaches and main issues arising out of the worldwide phenomenon of international migration and specifically the ‘trade’ in domestic helpers across national borders. The emergence of the foreign domestic worker-subject is briefly presented as a phenomenon attributable to a complex

matrix of global, national and local processes which inscribes and is inscribed with patriarchal, racial and ethno-centric undertones. A cursory survey of emerging issues around migration theories points to the need for re-conceptualization of theory which would explore the connections between social dimensions and individual agency. The last part of this chapter introduces the basic methodology of research and method of inquiry employed in this study, and highlights how this study approaches the question of constructing the Filipina domestic worker as an object of research.

## **2. A job with no name: the foreign domestic worker, labor/capital flows, and the transnational division of female labor**

The “push and pull” paradigm for understanding the phenomenon of migration within an increasingly globalized world has been widely utilized and proven to be useful in identifying the macro economic processes simultaneously taking place in sending and receiving countries. Framed within a macroeconomic discourse, such paradigm explains the larger processes which give rise to a demand for imported domestic labor on the part of receiving countries, causing a ‘pull’, on the one hand, and on the other, an oversupply of (feminine) ‘labor’ on the part of the sending countries, causing a ‘push’. As Lycklama a Nijeholt notes, importing labor has been a way of dealing with labor shortages in a country with sustained economic growth, thus bringing labor to the centers of capital.<sup>5</sup> It has been widely understood as a process of richer countries importing labor necessary for the further pursuit of development and modernization, on one side, and on the other, of poorer countries exporting labor in order to stave off economic crisis and temporarily solve problems like unemployment.

This paradigm, however, does not adequately convey the problems attendant to the rise of international labor migration. For one, the already given disparity between receiving and sending countries would continue to persist and worsen. The receiving countries maintain the advantage of keeping their import labor policies flexible, being in a position to unilaterally impose restrictions and liberalize labor import as necessary to keep with fluctuations in the labor market. On the other hand, the ‘poorer’ developing countries, which perhaps at first saw the export of labor as a temporary stop-gap measure, would find themselves perpetually plagued by economic problems. At the same time they also would realize that they benefited a lot from the remittances of their overseas workers. Sending countries, such as the

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<sup>5</sup> Lycklama a Nijeholt, The Changing Division of Labor and Domestic Workers: A Macro Overview (Regional), in Heyzer, Lycklama a Nijeholt and weerakon, eds. *The Trade in Domestic Workers: Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences*, Volume One (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre, 1994), 11.

Philippines would soon evolve and even strengthen state policies to encourage and institutionalize the export of labor.

An attempt to summarize the key policy issues arising out of the trade in domestic labor in the region was undertaken by non-governmental organizations as early as 1992. Several issues were noted : wealth disparities between sending and receiving countries; illegal migration; abuses in the recruitment process; the further impoverishment of those who are already poor and the further enrichment of those who are already rich; the loss of hard-earned remittances and the lack of safe mechanisms for sending remittances; the inadequacy of legal protection and labor legislation for foreign domestic workers in the receiving countries; the variable treatment of women migrant workers; the vulnerability to verbal and physical abuse; the disruption of the domestic workers' family life at home; the difficulties of re-integration and the prospect of permanent nomadism.<sup>6</sup>

The rise of xenophobia and racism in Europe and other parts of the industrialized world during the last two decades has been linked to the influx of emigrants and migrants, the declining willingness of European local markets to absorb the labor, and the diminishing capacity of the state to provide mechanisms for welfare support. A plethora of migration theories has emerged to explain and address these problems and enable the receiving countries to cope. While different theories emphasize different aspects of the issue and therefore suggest different 'solutions', most theories agree that labor flows are linked with capital flows and that international migration will continue to be a significant part of global reality. Lycklama a Nijeholt, in reviewing some of the issues for debate, calls for a re-conceptualization of migration theory and practice to respond to issues specific to the Asian region, address the question of whether migration enables the emancipation of women and investigate the changing role of the state. She urges the adoption of an approach that would close the 'gap' between the narrow neo-classical framework which emphasizes the voluntary willingness of individuals participating in the migration process and the historical-structural approach which emphasizes broader structural transformations in explaining why certain people migrate and others do not. In order to understand migration processes, both the role of 'individual agency' and social dimensions need to be examined and connected.

Lycklama further suggests that migration issues and the movements of people across the border could be seen as part of hegemonizing and globalizing processes. Understanding the rise of xenophobia and racism cannot simply be reduced to a one-sided approach of

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<sup>6</sup> Noeleen Heyzer, Introduction : Creating Responsive Policies for Migrant Women Domestic Workers, in Heyzer, Noeleen, Lycklama a Nijeholt, Geertje, and Weerakoon, Nedra, eds. 1994. *The Trade in Domestic Workers, Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences of International Migration*, Volume One (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre, 1994), xv-xxv.

blaming it on the migrants. In the course of establishing hegemony, such as in the case of Europe, the hegemon constructs and emphasizes its distinctiveness from its subjected populations, assigning values and notions of superiority and inferiority in such differences. “Looking at the Asian region and in particular... ‘domestic work’, it is clear that throughout history such worldwide processes of establishing hegemony have been and are taking place. Processes which involve the creation of social constructs for superiority and inferiority. Social constructs, which in the case of female domestic workers, are fabricated on the basis of prejudices regarding gender, race, and class and probably religion.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Heyzer and Wee situate the emergence of the foreign domestic worker subject within the larger framework of inequities and their human consequences: inequities in gender relations, family structures, class position, formal and informal sectors; and uneven development process in the different Asian societies.<sup>8</sup> Out of this context has emerged a ‘job niche’ with no proper name. Derogatory references, like “foreign maid”, are thus resorted to. Because the work is the work of ‘everyday life within the domesticity of the home,’ the name ‘domestic worker’ has been coined – and yet the worker is neither a family member, nor a citizen, nor a permanent resident, nor even a permanent worker.<sup>9</sup> No proper name is given to this work because in a situation of gender inequities, domestic work – the work of the home – is commonly regarded as “dirty” work, work that can be and should be done by women naturally and instinctively, and thus does not qualify for proper paid work. This is one of the main reasons, Heyzer and Wee argue, behind the reluctance of policymakers to provide legal protection for domestic workers. Domestic work, however, is vital to the social reproduction of any society and economy, and moreover, as Heyzer and Wee continue to argue, domestic work also requires skills. In recognition of the status of foreign domestic helpers as workers contracted for temporary employment that is “a vital service to the social continuity of the families who employ these workers”, Heyzer and Wee thus propose the use of the name, ‘domestic workers in transient overseas employment.’<sup>10</sup>

Heyzer and Wee further call attention to an issue that should be an agenda for feminist politics in both receiving and sending countries – the transnational division of female labor. They point out that the estimated millions of female migrant workers are now taking on the domestic burden of an equivalent number of middle class women who as a result are able to pursue their professional careers. Thus, the receiving countries not only benefit from the

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<sup>7</sup> Lycklama a Nijeholt, pp. 17-23.

<sup>8</sup> Noeleen Heyzer and Vivienne Wee, Domestic Workers in Transient Overseas Employment: Who Benefits, Who Profits, in Heyzer, Lycklama a Nijeholt and Weerakon, eds., *The Trade in Domestic Helpers: Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences*, 1994. Kuala Lumpur: Asian Pacific Development Collective, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

labor of the female migrant workers but should also count as well the more direct and visible benefits from the labor of their own professional women whose contribution is made possible only through the employment of foreign domestic workers.<sup>11</sup> “Indeed, so vital are the contributions of these professional women in a number of countries that the instant withdrawal of their labor could threaten the collapse of the economy – in particular, the civil service, the educational system, the hospital system, the financial service sector and other service industries.”<sup>12</sup> They conclude that the shifting division of responsibility between the State and the family for the social reproduction of everyday life has been effectively transformed into a trans-national division of labor between middle class and working class women. Through the years, the pursuit of modernization and development goals in many parts of East Asia has been accompanied by ‘government messages to strengthen family values’ which, Heyzer and Wee point out, may be interpreted as a declaration that despite the economic need for women’s work in the formal sector, the social reproduction of everyday life for the nation as a whole remains the domestic responsibility of families, especially women, whether or not they are themselves employed. “It is in this sense that in the receiving countries, development processes are being subsidized by a genderized international class structure – by the labor subsidy of female migrant workers and by the income subsidy (and therefore also a labor subsidy) of middle class women. It is also this substitution of a woman for a woman that contains the seed of much interpersonal tension between employer and employee, thereby adding an emotional cost to the economic cost.”<sup>13</sup>

Scholars of feminist theories and gender studies in the Philippines echo similar views and argue the need for theoretical approaches that link the macro and micro (personal) dimensions<sup>14</sup> and that underscore the global racial and sexual division of labor. Francisco and Pagaduan assert that in order to fully comprehend the processes that subordinate Filipino women and the struggles they wage for “empowerment in the midst of both capital accumulation and male domination...there is a need to enhance the prevailing macro and structure-centric analysis with a more deliberate integration of an analysis of the personal subjective experiences of Filipino women.”<sup>15</sup> The efforts of Filipina migrant workers to cope with and transform their very conditions could better be supported more effectively with

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<sup>11</sup> Heyzer and Wee, p. 44

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Josefa Francisco and Maureen Pagaduan, *Confronting Patriarchy and Globalization: Paradoxes of Reality, Feminist Analysis and Advocacy on Filipino Women’s Overseas Labour Migration*, in Butalia, Urvashi, Magno, Neng, and Lau Kin Chi, eds, *Resurgent Patriarchies: Challenges for Women’s Movement in Asia*. (Hong Kong: ARENA Press, 1999), 16-17 .

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 17

“studies that explore not only the tensions and dilemmas at the economic and political level, but also the shifts and ruptures at the psycho-cultural and individual-subjective levels.”<sup>16</sup>

Abesamis maintains that it is through the global racial and sexual division of labor – in which vectors of race, class and nationality divide the woman employer from the Other woman – that women and men in the North enjoy an image of higher social status and profit from their own waged labor. She points out that feminists worldwide have interrogated the racialization of paid domestic work in the global economy, linking it to the sexual division of labor in the home and across culture.<sup>17</sup> Citing Chant and Radcliffe, she argues that as women in the North/developed countries are able to break the gender hierarchy in their own households, they transfer their paid and little-appreciated reproductive work to women from the South/developing countries, whose predisposition and skills are often deemed ‘natural’ for the job. In this process, what is extracted by the woman employer from the woman migrant worker is not only her labor but her very personhood.

What is suggested by all these perspectives is that, given the unequal and unbalanced international division of labor and the racial and sexual division of labor across cultures, a process of naturalization is taking place in which paid domestic work becomes and is viewed as the (exclusive) domain of ‘the poor women from the South’ – the subalterns who bear the brunt of the hierarchies of power relations. To fully interrogate these relations of power at work in and through the ‘foreign domestic worker-subject’ (as a reconstructed/reinvented ‘poor woman from the South’), and in order to appreciate and support the ways by which such conditions are being challenged and transformed through the agency of migrant worker-subject, theoretical work needs to benefit from gaining more insights into the individual-subjective dimensions.

### **3. Narrativizing the life histories of Filipina domestic helpers – constructing the migrant domestic worker as object of research and subject of discourse**

Representations of Filipino migrant workers in official state discourses and popular literature often revolve around the hero/victim paradigm – either depicted by government as heroes of national development or portrayed as victims of globalization in NGO literature.<sup>18</sup> Often, such representations are inadequate, if not problematic, in making visible the complexity of individual lives caught in matrices of power relations and larger social forces at work. In contrast, narratives of life histories offer some access to the thoughts and feelings of individuals, how they make sense of their experiences, how they construct meaning, and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 31

<sup>17</sup> Marilen Abesamis, *Women Loving Women: The Experience of Some Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong*, in Tigno, Cezar, Francisco, Josefa, eds., *Quilted Sightings, A Women and Gender Studies Reader*. (Quezon City: Miriam College, Women and Gender Institute, 2002), 41.

how they articulate an understanding of themselves in relation to others. Because personal narratives are social in character, they also offer a resource for analyzing the complex cultural and social worlds they live in, act on, and which influence them.<sup>19</sup>

Feminist scholars have argued the need for more attention to the individual-subjective dimensions of the migration phenomenon. As such, this thesis hopes to contribute to an understanding of how Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong are produced as domestic-worker-subjects and how their subjectivities are formed in and out of this experience. This qualitative research project draws on critical ethnography, feminist research methodologies and cultural studies approaches to examining discourse and representation and interrogating the construction of meaning and identity. Critical ethnography as grounded in critical theories assumes that society is structured by class and status, as well as by race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation in order to maintain the oppression of marginalized groups.<sup>20</sup> Feminist theories identify patriarchy as central to understanding experience and inform research methodologies that seek to put women and women's experience at the center of discourse.<sup>21</sup> The focus of this research is not 'women's experience' as such, but the telling and narrativizing of experience in and through the construction of a 'life history.' It is not the aim of this research to produce a 'life history' as the essential truth and transparent evidence of 'experience', but rather as textual narratives that offer traces of the discourses which are available to, and called forth by migrant domestic workers as they reflect on their complex experiences and construct themselves as subjects in history. The ways by which they interpret the events and processes in their life from the subject-position of Filipina migrant domestic helper in Hong Kong give insights into the discourses which produce the migrant-domestic worker as subject as well as the gendered matrix of relations in which they are produced and which constitute them as subjects.<sup>22</sup> This research does not assume an autonomous subject of sovereign will, but rather assumes that it is the gendered matrix of relations – of race, ethnicity, class – that is its 'enabling cultural condition' and through which 'all willing first becomes possible'.<sup>23</sup> It is in and through a complex matrix of power relations that the Filipina domestic worker emerges and is effected as a subject and in which she is called to negotiate gender and cultural identity.

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<sup>18</sup> Francisco and Pagaduan, p. 30

<sup>19</sup> Susan Chase, Learning to Listen: Narrative Principles in a Qualitative Research Methods course, in Josselson, Ruthellen D, Lieblich, Ami and McAdams, Dan P, eds., *Up Close and Personal, the Teaching and Learning of Narrative Research*. (Washington DC: American Psychology Association, 1996), 79-99.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*. (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.12

<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter : On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

The thesis presents narratives of personal histories of five Filipina domestic workers and offers a reading of the narratives. The research process involved three major processes: storytelling, narrative writing (and translation), and reading of the narratives. The method of primary data collection is oral interview, and the scope of the interview is ‘the story of a life’ as told in the words of the interviewee/subject. It is a form of oral history; but while oral history has come to be understood as a way of recording and constructing history – the history of an event, process or a phenomenon – through oral interviews, personal histories specifically attempt to construct the story of ‘a life’. In this case, the construction of ‘history’ focuses on a ‘life’ as subject; and the ‘data’ is gathered through oral interviews. They are then read and narrativized in the form of a written text which has been produced collaboratively by both researcher and subject. Thus, the life history that emerges is a written narrative, a form of literature that promises the possibility of multiple readings. Inasmuch as the literature that is finally presented and offered as the primary document to be read and analyzed in this thesis has been the product of the collaboration between interviewer/researcher and interviewee/subject, the researcher must bear responsibility as co-author of the written narrative. While the written narratives presented as stories are the translations of the words enunciated by the subject/interviewee, they are at the same time the words that have been ‘heard’ and ‘penned’ by the researcher/interviewer. What thus emerges is a product of a reflexive exercise of storytelling and ‘storymaking’ (narrativization) which requires both a narrator as principal character and a listener as recorder and co-author.

What constitutes the story of a life? The history of ‘a self’? In the position of narrator and storyteller, the interviewer then narrates the story of a life, recalling through memory and reconstructing experience from the specific spatio-temporal location of a migrant domestic worker and in the process becomes a ‘speaking subject’. In the construction of the narrative, the listener/reader is offered an access to the speaking subject’s thoughts and feelings and glimpses into a life/world remembered and imagined.

The written narratives presented and ‘read’ in this thesis are a reconstruction of oral interviews with five (5) women: Mader Irma, Gina, Esther, Miriam, and Rosario.<sup>24</sup> A simple set of criteria was used to identify and select the five women and which consisted of the following : a) should have lived and worked in Hong Kong for at least seven (7) years<sup>25</sup>; b) should be willing to speak about her personal life and employment experiences in the Philippines and in Hong Kong; and, finally; c) the set of interviewees should be a

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<sup>24</sup> In order to protect the identities of the interviewees, their real names do not appear in this thesis.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Seven years’ was used as a benchmark in order to follow change over time and in keeping with the minimum years of residence required by Hong Kong immigration law to determine eligibility for permanent residence status.

combination of women of different ages, background and working arrangements in Hong Kong. Thus, the women who were finally selected (Mader Irma, Gina, Esther, Miriam, and Rosario) range in age (from early thirties to sixties), ethno-linguistic background (from native Tagalog speakers to native Ilokano and Visayan speakers), educational background (from high school graduate to a university degree holder), occupational experience prior to coming to Hong Kong (from housewife to factory worker to activist-organizer working on full-time basis), to employment arrangements in Hong Kong (from 'stay-out' to 'live-in' domestic helpers), and experiences with employers (from experiences of verbal and emotional abuse to harmonious and affectionate relationships with employers. All have been working in Hong Kong as domestic helpers for at least eight (8) years. In collecting their life histories, there is no intention to view them as 'representative sample' of the entire population of migrant domestic helpers, nor to utilize such stories as hard data for drawing conclusive generalizations on the conditions of migrant domestic workers. Conscious that while each life history is unique and specific to the individual, this research nevertheless proceeds from the assumption that lived experience is itself social in nature. Further, inasmuch as the act of recalling, retelling and reflecting on 'experience' is in itself enabled in and through discourse, language and a system of meanings, the construction of life history itself is a social process and a cultural practice. Thus, the significance of this research is that it offers precious access to the social and cultural 'worlds' inhabited by Hong Kong's social 'others' as seen through the eyes of these five Filipina domestic workers, and valuable insights into the formation of their subjectivities.

The whole process of constructing the written text of personal histories revolves around their responses to the basic question from the researcher, *Paki-kuwento mo naman ang buhay mo*. (If you please, tell me the story of your life.) The researcher/interviewer in this instance assigns the interviewer the dual role of narrator and author of a life story, 'her life story,' and the interviewer as listener and recorder. The story is told in the first person, beginning with the subject/I naming herself in her own words. It is within the staging of this storytelling exercise that a 'speaking position' is constructed, albeit momentarily, and the interviewee is placed as the central character of the story.

Each interview began with a basic set of questions : *Who are you ? Where are you from ? What is the story of your life ? What was your childhood like ? Why and how did you come to Hong Kong ? What is your experience like in Hong Kong ? How would you describe your work and your life in Hong Kong ? Your relationship with your employers ? With your friends ? Your family ? what do you enjoy the most ? What don't you enjoy the most ? What are your desires, aspirations and dreams for the future ?* The actual storytelling itself, however, was not limited nor confined to this structured set of questions. The interview

process offered the interviewee greater flexibility in ‘telling’ and ‘constructing’ the story such that the end-goal was not so much to get the answers/truths according to a fixed and standard questionnaire but to enable both subject and researcher to construct reflexively and collaboratively the story of a life in the form of a written narrative. The usefulness of this methodology is that it provides access to the subjective thoughts and feelings of the subject (and as such into her ways of knowing and making meaning) by allowing her greater flexibility in choosing to tell what she sees is important in her storytelling. By framing the data as a ‘story of a life’ rather than a series of disconnected responses to interview questions, the subject is put in a position from which she is able to narrate and interpret her own experience in such a way that she is able to bridge the different life-worlds traveled across space and time (my life before coming to Hong Kong, my life after coming to Hong Kong). This is a crucial point for reflecting on and understanding the affective and subjective dimension of migration and thus helpful in understanding the formation of subjectivity and notions of self/subject from the vantage point of the migrant.

While there is also no assumption that an entire life history could ever be exhausted in a few hours of ‘story telling,’ there is an implicit understanding between interviewer and interviewee that this request is meant to capture fragments of a life history and frame them within a narrative. While the initial questions and sub-questions were provided by the interviewer, the selection of which events and moments to be included and which ones to be excluded, is primarily undertaken by the ‘narrator/author,’ with the collaboration of the interviewer. (The interviewer would occasionally interrupt the narration with follow-up questions like, ‘so what happened after that’, and sometimes with nudges to ‘please go on’. Once in a while, the researcher interviewer would also add her own anecdotes as a deliberate gesture to establish sympathetic rapport and connection between the interviewer and the interviewee/subject).

Framing the interview as a narration of ‘the story of your life’ – *ang kuwento ng buhay mo* – inevitably runs the risk of producing an artificial text of self-representation and self-interpellation, or of reducing the narration of a ‘life story’ into a performance staged for the benefit of the researcher/interviewer. On the other hand, it is a strategy employed by the researcher in the hope of partially or temporarily dissipating the relations of power between researcher/object of research and by securing the ‘control’ of the subject/I in the hands of the interviewee. Furthermore, the use of this strategy is meant to place herself in a self-reflective mode as a narrator, using a form of storytelling that is already familiar. “*Ang kuwento ng buhay ko*” (the story of my life) is a device often used in popular literature, TV dramas, folk stories and pedagogical resources in the Philippines. By utilizing it instead of a structured ‘question and interview’ format, the interviewee/narrator is placed in an empowered position

from which she can speak about her thoughts and feelings without the usual constraints that characterize more formal and structured ‘question and answer’ sessions. The effectiveness of this storytelling strategy relies largely on the rapport that is established between interviewer and interviewee.

The recorded interviews were then transcribed and reconstructed into a single ‘un-interruptive’ narrative first in Tagalog, and then translated into English. The transcription and narrativization into written texts has been undertaken primarily by the interviewer, as has been the translation. The primary document which represents the narratives being read is thus the written text constructed out of the oral transcripts, edited mainly for the purpose of style and framing into the format of a readable, written text. Inasmuch as the transcription, the writing out of the narratives in written form, and translation into written English have been done by the interviewer, the written text of the narratives as they finally appear as appendices in the thesis should be seen as a collaborative effort between the interviewer and interviewee, in which the researcher assumes the position of co-author of the written text. It has been understood that the reconstruction of the text has been undertaken primarily for the purpose of placing it in a body of literature to be used for and produced through academic research. It is thus to be remembered that the translation and construction of the written text into continuous running text has become an action of the researcher’s. As such, even in seemingly small stylistic gestures, the researcher already exercises a certain kind of interpretation by assigning positions to certain events and enunciations. In that sense, the researcher is co-author of the written narratives.

In doing so, however, there are no claims that the written narratives per se are the authoritative sources of ‘truth.’ Nor is there an assumption that the written texts in themselves are coherent, self-explanatory, self-contained or transparent. Neither is it the assumption that the subjects are fully disclosed and made accessible in the text. What is best undertaken is not an analysis of ‘a life’, but a reading, one of several possible readings of a narrative (for there is no final authoritative reading) that would allow glimpses into fragments of lives made accessible in the text. The process of writing and reading – where there is a shift from the subject/I to she -- also inevitably reinforces the privileged position of the researcher, especially given that the researcher is both the interviewer, the writer, the reader, and the one who immediately ‘benefits’ from the research project.

The construction of life history is in itself a form of representation. It needs to be underscored that the narrative is not to be understood simplistically as a presentation of ‘truth’ in itself but a form of representation that it itself a product and producer of discourse. Thus the ‘reading’ of the life history is equally important for knowledge construction. The readings offered in this thesis draws on analytical tools offered by cultural studies and

feminist approaches to narrative and discourse analysis, reading the text for how it sheds light on discursive practices which are embedded in or which further embed the specific diasporic experience of women migrant workers. In this instance, the researcher goes beyond the written text and relates it to other social and cultural dimensions, such as the historical context in the Philippines and in Hong Kong, mainstream migration theoretical approaches, representations of migrant workers, theoretical perspectives on patriarchy and gender and identity construction.

A reading of the narratives is thus offered in which the researcher/listener/reader first looks for clues into the ways by which the Filipina domestic worker constructs herself as a speaking subject in history, and ways by which she makes sense of her experiences and history as a woman, worker, wife, and daughter. Secondly, using the lens of feminist theories interested in unraveling the workings of gendered relations of power in the formation of subjectivities, the reader/researcher focuses on how the narratives unfold to demonstrate the ways by which the storyteller negotiates her position within and as part of the 'family', whether as mother, wife, or daughter. The 'family' is seen as a matrix of gendered power relations that interpellates and produces her as a migrant domestic worker. In looking at the family, the reader/researcher seeks out the other voices and characters in the stories, such as the absence/presence of the male voice of authority, the voices of other women in her life, *amos* (employers) and *alagas* (ward), and then traces the ways by which the storyteller/subject responds to such voices and in the process constructs and articulates an understanding of a speaking subject/self. The family is then seen and portrayed as a network of voices and characters communicating and interacting with one another, sometimes interrupting and disrupting each other's voices and positions.

It is envisaged that a retelling of the narratives of personal histories, would make more accessible to discourse the ways by which the social phenomenon of 'contractual employment of foreign migrant workers for domestic labor' is lived and experienced from the vantage point of the domestic workers themselves. Furthermore, it is also hoped that a reading of such narratives would make it possible for the reader to open the text and relate it to the wider field of theory in feminist and cultural studies and to the broader agenda of transformational politics.

To foreground the narratives of personal histories, two chapters in the thesis attempt to review the historical contexts in Hong Kong and the Philippines that are most significant in understanding the emergence of the Filipina migrant domestic worker-subject as a phenomenon and which have been most productive in positioning them in the domain of public discourse. Chapter Two focuses on the arrival of the Filipina in Hong Kong as a domestic worker and traces some of the ways by which she is positioned in and against a

discourse of economic restructuring, modernization and capitalist globalization. It is also in Chapter Two that an overview of the general conditions of the Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong is presented, as they have been documented by Hong Kong government and non-government agencies. This includes a brief discussion on the most common and difficult issues they face, such as racial and gender discrimination, as well as some of the strategies they have individually or collectively employed to change their conditions. Chapter Three traces the historical processes shaping outmigration in the Philippines, and how, as part of the Filipino diaspora, they had been marginalized as surplus labor and simultaneously interpellated as new heroes. In this section, the recalling of colonial history is given strategic emphasis in so far as the analysis of its effects on gender, class and culture has been a site for competing discourses.

To provide an overview of the narratives, Chapter Four presents a profile of the five women interviewed, introduces some of the themes common to their stories, and foregrounds some of the issues around which their representations differ. Chapters Five, Six and Seven are devoted to the narratives themselves and the readings of the researcher. Chapter Five focuses on the stories of two mothers, their experiences as they travel and transit between two life-worlds, their relationships with their family and with their employer's families, and their notions of self and motherhood. Chapter Four presents and positions two women as 'unmarried daughters' who are committed to helping their younger siblings gain an education and who find themselves negotiating between competing discourses of tradition and modernity, between the past they left behind and the present in which they must also prepare for their own future, between their obligations to their family and their own dreams. Chapter Five presents the story of one woman who struggles to balance her multiple identities as mother, wife, daughter, intellectual, activist and migrant worker. Her narrative emerges as one testimony to the struggles of a Filipina migrant worker's search for individual and collective agency in transforming the personal and the political.

Finally, Chapter Eight serves as the concluding chapter which summarizes some of the most significant themes that have emerged in the narratives, recalls the objectives of the research and discusses its contribution to and usefulness for academic and other politico-intellectual engagements.

**Chapter Two**  
**THE ARRIVAL OF FILIPINA DOMESTIC HELPERS**  
**IN MODERNIZING HONG KONG**

The project of creating a modern, prosperous and ‘global’ city of Hong Kong has required economic restructuring which in turn has necessitated the importation of cheap labor from neighboring or even far-flung countries. The pursuit of this project, however, has also required the mobilization of public support and the consolidation of middle class identities towards the articulation and reproduction of elite ‘modern’ culture and aspirations. The process of consolidation of a ‘modern,’ global-oriented Hong Kong identity would entail the imagination and construction of differences – of what makes such identity distinct from and superior to that of ‘others.’

Identity in this sense would not be confined along ethnic lines, but also along class, race and gender, as the nature of economic restructuring would entail a gendering of difference – the perpetuation of a gendered division of labor in which the function of social reproduction is primarily taken up by ‘women’ and ‘inside the home’ as the domestic sphere. It would eventually create the lines of ‘difference’ among women along national, ethnic, and class positions, what Heyzer and Wee refer to as a transnational division of female labor. As Momsen points out, in this situation the migrant domestic worker becomes constituted as a social ‘other’ who is directly subordinated to her (female) employers and subordinated more generally to the urban host society.

The process of identity consolidation would be an arena in which power is contested and in which, in order to secure and affirm its position of superiority, the dominant identity group would turn its gaze towards its ‘others.’ The household of employment, being the primary site of culture-contact is not spared in this process, as the tension and relations between the foreign domestic worker and her employer would play out and be read in terms of cultural oppositions.<sup>26</sup> A racializing and ethnocentric gaze would inscribe on the bodies of Filipina domestic workers the images of the backward/ancient (modern slave) and the primitive/bestial (dogs). Such images overlap with, sometimes displaced but not erased by, the precarious figure of a ‘modern, income-earning woman’ and the resisting worker-subject emerging from the marginal discourses and the practice of collective protest. The following section traces the ‘arrival’ of Filipinas in Hong Kong and some of the ways by which they

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<sup>26</sup> Janet Henshall Momsen, *Maids on the Move, Victim or Victor*, in Momsen, Janet Henshall, ed, *Gender, Migration and Domestic Work*. (London: Routledge, 1999), 1-2.

have been perceived and discursively positioned amid a context of growing awareness of racial, gender and class discrimination against foreign domestic workers.

### **1. Economic restructuring and the arrival of the Filipina domestic worker**

Hong Kong, described as ‘one of the most progressive, cosmopolitan, intensely competitive cities in Asia and the world’, is also one of the top migrant-importing countries in Asia.. Migrant groups cite Hong Kong as an attractive destination for migrants because of its comparatively higher wages for migrants, more protective migrant labour policies than most migrant-receiving countries, more liberal social and political environment, and its hosting of a high number of migrant support groups’.<sup>27</sup> While Hong Kong remains relatively open to the importation of labor, it also imposes stringent requirements and conditions on foreign domestic workers or as referred to by the Immigration Department, the FDHs (Foreign Domestic Helpers). Local labor groups are known to be generally protectionist over Hong Kong’s labor market and officially oppose the importation of foreign workers. On the other side of its open policy is Hong Kong’s efficient mechanisms of control and regulation, agencies such as the Immigration Department, Labor Department, police, etc. As such there is a very small percentage of undocumented migrants in Hong Kong.<sup>28</sup>

The influx of foreign domestic workers to Hong Kong has been generally attributed to Hong Kong’s increased prosperity which has resulted in improved educational attainment of women and their increased participation in the labor force, thereby creating the demand for the importation of female domestic workers.<sup>29</sup> In the early 1970s, foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong numbered to around a thousand, and the employment of ‘imported’ maids was confined to upper-class families. As more and more women in Hong Kong were absorbed in jobs outside the home and as more families needed two incomes in order to maintain a middle class standard of living,<sup>30</sup> the demand for imported domestic labor expanded to include even lower-income families who found no other mechanisms for child care. By April 1991, Hong Kong was employing 73,000 foreign female domestic workers, 90 percent of whom (almost 66,000) were from the Philippines.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Baseline Research on Racial and Gender Discrimination Towards Filipino, Indonesian and Thai Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong.* ( Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Centre, Asian Domestic Workers Union, Forum of Filipino Reintegration and Savings Groups, Indonesian Migrant Workers Union, Thai Women association, 2001), 14

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Heyzer and Wee, p. 37

<sup>31</sup> Lycklama a Nijeholt, p. 11

A more complex picture of the history of domestic labor importation in Hong Kong is presented by Constable, pointing out that Hong Kong's shift towards a service economy changed the female composition of its work force. The availability of jobs for Hong Kong women, first in the manufacturing industry and then increasingly in the service sector, rendered domestic work, and even paid domestic work, as an unattractive option for local women in search of employment. There was apparent reluctance among local women to undertake paid domestic work on a full-time basis, as domestic work was considered low-paid and offered little opportunities for increased income and upward mobility. Simultaneously, economic restructuring also induced changes in the household structure. No longer was the traditional 'extended family' available as a support system, given that the size of Hong Kong households had continued to drop. The shortage of space in urban Hong Kong further discouraged the sustenance of large extended families.<sup>32</sup>

There seem to be other socio-cultural factors involved, as Constable further notes. While the growing preference of an increasing number of double income families was for the hiring of domestic help, there was also an increased 'disenchantment with Chinese workers', a belief that "Chinese servants" or amahs, were "not as good as they used to be," that they have become more picky about what tasks they should undertake, more 'domineering, and demanding of higher pay.<sup>33</sup> It would thus seem apparent that the turn to foreign domestic workers was partly motivated by the desire to employ cheaper, more docile, and more cost-efficient labor that would be more suited to the needs of a modernizing urban Hong Kong.

When the market for foreign domestic helpers opened and expanded, Filipinas were among the first to fill in the niche. They provided the advantage of English proficiency, higher level of education, were 'cheaper,' and by 'modern standards' considered better – i.e. "more westernized" -- than their local Chinese counterparts.<sup>34</sup> This articulation of what makes an ideal "domestic helper" – and the image/perception of the Filipina as a more suitable embodiment of such – was perhaps congruent with the rising aspirations for a 'modern' globalized/globalizing Hong Kong which the middle class generally identified with. This seemed to displace the notion of the traditional "good Chinese servant" as embodied by the Chinese *amahs*. Later, as the "modernized/westernized" Filipinas would come to be perceived as more assertive and rights-conscious than their other foreign counterparts – and thus less desirable in the labor market – there would be a turn to other countries as sources of

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<sup>32</sup> Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong, Stories of Filipina Workers*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 25-26

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30

imported domestic labor, as well as a nostalgic revival of memories of the “good Chinese amah.”<sup>35</sup>

As of June 2003, Hong Kong was employing a total number of 213,910 foreign domestic workers, more than half of whom are from the Philippines. Comparing Filipinos with other foreign domestic workers of other nationalities, a study presents the profile of an average Filipino domestic worker as being a bit older (average age would be 33 years old), having stayed longer (at least five years), and having reached higher formal education (university degree vs. secondary level).<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the ‘average employer’ is a ‘woman, 42 years old, and a Hong Kong Chinese.’ The study reveals that majority (59 %) of Hong Kong Chinese employers hired Filipino domestic workers (as compared to domestic workers coming from Indonesia, Thailand, and other countries, while most of the British employers (98%), and almost all of other Europeans (98%) employed Filipinos.

## **2. Negotiating the geographies of work and time-control**

Filipinas who came to Hong Kong in search of a better life would soon encounter the rigid controls imposed on body/space and time that often largely defined employment in domestic work. It was an added burden to the emotional cost of physical separation from loved ones and families back home. The foreign domestic worker enters the intimate personal space of the family as a stranger and an alien to the household, and yet the running of the household would be resting on her shoulders. There is thus a ‘distant proximity’ to the employer and employer’s family. Often, her status as a family/household member would be ambiguous. Under the watchful gaze of her employer, her bodily movements, gestures are controlled, measured, and timed. Entering into this kind of employment relationship often means for the domestic helper the giving up of privacy and control of one’s own time, which would sometimes be felt as a surrender of dignity.

The home – normally considered to be private domain – now becomes the primary site of her economic activity, a territory that belongs to the ‘master’ (*amo*) who employs her. Living and working in her employer’s ‘territory’ she is often constantly reminded that this space is never really hers. It is a space in which she would find it difficult to feel totally secure, safe, free, at ease, at home. Without the facility of speaking her employer’s native language, she would constantly feel shut out of the family’s conversations, becoming instead an invisible and silent inside-outsider.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Baseline Research, p. 20

<sup>37</sup> Manipon, *Contesting Space and Identity* (unpublished), 1999.

Bound within the confines of the home in which she is an inside/outsider and in which time and body are under the careful watch and control of her employer, the domestic helper would resort to various strategies of coping with the situation, including imposing on herself various forms of self-discipline and control and accommodating certain forms of negative treatment from the employer and other agents.<sup>38</sup> Constable notes that Filipina domestic workers engage in public and private acts of resistance expressed at the discursive level as a form of personal release.<sup>39</sup> Domestic workers would sometimes use secret language to talk to each other so that their employers would not be able to understand, or discuss how they would circumvent their employers' rules, and so on. While Constable maintains that while such acts take place at the discursive level, they should be seen as forms of resistance that at least provide a source of satisfaction, pleasure and empowerment, though temporary in nature.<sup>40</sup>

One of the significant ways by which many domestic workers try to gain self-esteem and self-respect is by working towards 'professionalizing' their status. The desire for 'professionalizing' is congruent with a desire to present the image of a 'modern, career woman.' A proliferation of popular literature exhorting Filipinas to 'do their job efficiently and professionally', even giving tips on how to please their employers, are often distributed by various Filipina associations, religious groups, and often written by domestic helpers themselves. Constable argues that such attempts, however, succeeds only in promoting the very image of a disciplined and docile worker, which only conforms to the employers and agencies' ideal.<sup>41</sup>

The stifling and limiting conditions imposed by a nearly 24-hour confinement to the home, six days of the week, renders the weekly day-off and opportunity for leisure at a public place sacrosanct for domestic helpers. The few hours spent chatting with friends and other domestic helpers in public parks, and churches provide precious opportunities for release, for networking and renewal of ties with friends, and the recreation of a sense of community and 'home.' Thus, Hong Kong's public landscapes are momentarily transformed every Sunday as a place of gathering for thousands of migrant workers.

Statue Square alone is populated with nearly 15,000 migrant workers, mostly Filipina workers, every Sunday and thus instantly becomes a site for all kinds of social and economic activities (picnics, choir practices, manicures and haircuts, reading, taking a nap and so on). Hong Kong's geography is redrawn, if but momentarily, as groups of migrant workers mark out their virtual 'territories' in this public space, often according to ethno-linguistic

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<sup>38</sup> Constable, preface

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 210

<sup>40</sup> Constable, p. 210

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 197

groupings. For example, those coming from the mountainous Cordilleras in the Philippines would hang out along the steps of a government building, an architectural structure reminiscent of the sloping rice terraces for which their province gained world recognition. Under a long walkway could be found the hang-out of an organization simply called “Under the Bridge.” The way such organization is named and the ways by which different Filipino associations utilize physical landmarks as points of reference and markers of identity convey the profound significance that the migrants attach to the reclaiming of a physical space they could call their own, even for a day, and their desire for an identifiable tangible ground on which they could “re-root” themselves. Such public parks provide an essential space for the exercise of freedom, for breaking the isolation they are confined to in their place of work, and for providing a link to the ‘outside world.’

Responding to the negative reaction of various sectors of Hong Kong community, the Hong Kong government came up with various strategies to ‘de-congest’ the Statue Square by offering spaces, less visible to the public eye, where the migrants could spend their holidays in a more socially acceptable way. The main strategy pursued was to open recreation centers. While it was well-intentioned, it did not successfully prevent migrant workers from occupying the parks, however. One reason is that the recreation center is associated with structured space and regulated time. It segregates the migrants and renders them even more invisible. The park, on the other hand, gives a sense of freedom, though fleeting and illusory, as well as a sense of belonging and community. The relaxed ambience of the public park provides a space for engaging in certain practices that one would normally associate with private time and space, such as grooming, gossiping, taking a nap, even engaging in courtship rituals. Given that the ‘private’ becomes inaccessible to the worker in the home as place of work, she must now carve it out of a public space. In such moment, the spatial domains of the private and the public shift and reverse. This sharply illustrates the world of ‘difference’ occupied by the domestic worker.

Jun Tellez, an NGO worker/activist who has been organizing Filipina domestic helpers for more than two decades, points out that the recreation center strategy was doomed from the beginning: “You cannot pull out the Filipinas from the Square. *Iyan na ang bahay nila* (That is already their home). You cannot tell them to move out of it, as that would be tantamount to ‘uprooting’ them all over again. The recreation centers’ strategy will not work. First of all, in the Philippines we never had that culture of going to public recreation centers because our communities didn’t have any. Perhaps the recreation center idea belongs to First World culture – but that is not ours. Secondly, in the recreation centers the domestic helpers also have to pay for the use of some facilities and they have to follow so many rules and procedures. The domestic helpers are so sick and tired of rules and regulations because they

have to follow so many rules in the household. During Sundays they want to break away from that. They will use the recreation centers only for the formal business meetings of their organizations.”<sup>42</sup>

Tellez further relates that for many Filipina domestic workers, having their ‘attendance’ checked at the Square has become a sacred Sunday ritual. They would go to church at the St. John’s Cathedral only after first submitting themselves to an ‘attendance check’ by their own associations in the square. Within the Square, there are also certain norms of conduct and unwritten rules between and among various groups, such as, for example, respecting the territories of the other. It seems that while foreign domestic workers would seem to reject the notion of ‘rules and regulations’ imposed from above, they have also managed to reconstruct their own private world in the Square complete with its own rituals, norms and standards. In transforming spaces traditionally associated with mainstream commerce in Hong Kong, they seem to be exercising an act of resistance in a discursive field which they consider precious – a staging of an act of momentary disobedience that re-draws Hong Kong’s geo-cultural landscape and puts them at its most visible center. Indeed the migrant domestic worker must occupy a ‘transnational space’ in between that of her country of origin and that of her host country. She must successfully negotiate the bringing together of the two social fields – one that is remote and distance, and the other that is present and immanent. This negotiation often manifests symbolic expressions and spatial dimensions in such a way perhaps that the Park/Square provides a center-stage for ‘transplanting’ home/Philippines into Hong Kong and a platform for making that which is symbolic of Hong Kong’s urban mainstream – the distant unreachable horizons of the world of commerce – spatially and symbolically accessible if but for a day.<sup>43</sup>

A richer understanding of body/space politics is presented by Abesamis’ in her study of the role of sexuality in strategies for resistance. Abesamis’ study focuses on ‘tomboy’ relationships (same-sex relationships) which have become more visible among Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. Abesamis argues that for Filipinas articulating their sexuality as tomboys, it is an act of refusal to completely accept the dominant discourse about one’s being and acceptable gender roles, where the notion of ‘resistance’ in this case is the ‘enlarging of physical, emotional and psychological space.’<sup>44</sup> “It is against the closing in of personal, emotional and psychological space that the Filipina plays out her sexuality as resistance. Clearly, the domestic worker’s is a space that is pushed from all sides by the barriers of race, her colonial past, her country’s poverty, her family obligations, her debts, her being a woman, her having ‘feminine’ skills, and her being a subordinate in the job

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<sup>42</sup> Manipon

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

market. But through her body, she opts to exercise agency so that she does not become an object, but a subject of her own will. She articulates her sexuality so that she is not consigned in the margins of social power; so that she is not reduced to a role, but remain a person; so that she is not debased by her circumstances but is able to reclaim her dignity.”<sup>45</sup>

### 3. The *Banmui*/Philippine girl as ‘modern slave’ ?

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Filipinas became the target of criticism for their assertive and carefree attitudes that were now perceived to be incompatible with the ethics of Hong Kong Chinese society.<sup>46</sup> By that time, the number of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong had dramatically increased, their undeniable burgeoning presence had become more visible in public places. Public attitudes and perceptions towards Filipina ‘maids’ over time were likely affected in various ways by changing economic conditions affecting availability and scarcity of jobs in Hong Kong. By 1980s, ‘cheaper’ domestic labor from countries like Indonesia and Thailand had become available, and employers of Filipina maids begun to complain that Filipinas are far too assertive and contentious.<sup>47</sup>

Ironically, the democratic space that became part of colonial Hong Kong’s claims to modernity became an enabling condition for foreign domestic helpers’ assertion of rights and demands for legitimate representation and access to public space. While the ‘80s saw increased public disclosure of abuses on foreign domestic helpers, it also saw the rise of various organizations of migrant workers and non-governmental agencies seeking to protect the rights and welfare of foreign domestic helpers. Filipinas were among the first to associate themselves with such initiatives and came to be the most highly organized among the foreign migrant workers. This would result in a backlash of negative reaction from ‘the Hong Kong public.’

The staggering number of Filipinas alone made their collective identity more visible and transparent, and, under the gaze of the public eye, rendered them more vulnerable to being constructed and juxtaposed as Hong Kong’s minoritized and racialized ‘other.’ They had now become a ‘public nuisance.’ Too many to ignore, yet too few to count as an actor of significance or as Hong Kong’s ‘insider.’ Too ‘modern’ and ‘westernized’ (to read, too assertive) to be an ideal maid, yet too backward to really be counted as a legitimate constituent of modern Hong Kong. Thus, from symbolizing by extension-inversion the aspiration for a modern, ‘westernized’ Hong Kong, Filipina domestic helpers had come to

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<sup>44</sup> Abesamis, p. 38

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> Constable, p. 33

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 35-36

occupy the in-between spaces that constitute the ‘other’ of Hong Kong’s modernity – an annoying reminder of a modernizing desire gone out of control and, simultaneously, the embodiments of a backward and inferior culture intruding into and contesting Hong Kong’s modern and urban space. According to Constable, the high profile of Filipina protests and demonstrations against the New Conditions of Stay instituted in 1987 and the Philippine Government’s temporary ban on approval of new contracts for Filipino domestic workers in 1988, displeased some Hong Kong employers immensely. In their view, Filipinas behaved no longer as “grateful, humble, and accommodating guests but as disgruntled or demanding workers...”<sup>48</sup>

The trajectory in the ‘80s would continue well into the early 1990s as Filipinas would increasingly become the focus of a racializing and ethno-centric gaze. Under this gaze, domestic work would be associated with the word Filipina, Filipina with the word maid, and, in extreme cases, Filipina maid with the word dog. Constable points out that Filipinas are increasingly “seen as a group whose differences are not simply class based, or even ethnic or cultural, but racially, biologically, and “naturally” constituted. ...the Chinese term *banmui* or ‘Philippine girl’ is used interchangeably with ‘maid’ or servant...”<sup>49</sup>

Stories about the association between Filipinas and dogs would perhaps serve as the most compelling testimonies to Hong Kong’s racializing gaze. In 1997, a posh apartment building in the Mid-Levels put up a sign in an elevator which read, “No Dogs and Filipinas Allowed.” After it generated some criticism, the sign was taken away and instead a ‘backdoor’ elevator was set up, with an implicit understanding that it was for the use of pet dogs and Filipinas. Many domestic workers are hired for the sole purpose of taking care of pet dogs. It is also not uncommon for “maids” to be asked to eat with or sleep in the same room with dogs, cats or various other household pets. One Filipina domestic worker recounted the story of how she had worked for an employer who had 23 pet dogs. Suddenly, the Filipina’s contract was terminated abruptly for no reason. In her termination papers, the employer simply said that she didn’t really need the services of the Filipina and that she only employed her at first because she looked like one of her dogs.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Aida Jean Manipon, *Contesting Space and Identity, The Case of Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong*, 1999 (unpublished manuscript)

#### **4. From *Banmuis* to Street Activists: resisting racial, gender and class discrimination**

Tam points out that the tensions between (female) employer and foreign domestic helper may be largely due to the employer's ambivalent feelings towards the foreign domestic helper mainly because the hiring of foreign domestic labor is usually seen by the employer's family only as a compromise solution.<sup>51</sup> It is a measure to fill in a gap, an 'option out of no choice' in a situation in which there are no other available and more desirable mechanisms for childcare. Drawing her conclusions from a survey on married, female Chinese employees in a mid-size public service agency in Hong Kong, she further points out that "the expectation of mothers concerning the domestic helpers' performance, and concern about affectionate ties between helper and child revealed the implicit assumption that the helpers were perceived as mother-substitute." The source of 'ambivalent feelings' comes from the "contradiction inherent in hiring a low-paid helper to be in charge of childcare duties". The pressure that arises from the high expectation on the part of the employer, on the one hand, and the obscure nature of the status and role of the foreign domestic helper in the family on the other, is likely to be exclusively borne by the domestic helper. It is a situation which intensifies the foreign domestic helper's vulnerability to abuse.

Despite Hong Kong's relatively advanced mechanisms for protecting migrant workers, abuses of foreign domestic helpers and rights violations stubbornly persist. Asian Migrant Centre estimates that more than 20 migrant counseling centers in Hong Kong handle at least 1,500 cases a year. In the first eight months of 2000 alone, the Labor Relations Division of the Labor Department handled 1,447 claims from foreign domestic helpers (FDHs).<sup>52</sup>

Over the years, foreign domestic helpers of all nationalities are increasingly becoming conscious that these violations are linked to racial prejudices and class biases. A landmark study was jointly undertaken by several NGOs and migrant groups to compile and analyze baseline data on racial and gender discrimination against Filipino, Indonesian and Thai Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong. The overall findings of the study note, however, that violations and abuses are 'manifestations of the unequal treatment of FDH because they are foreigners, women, and domestic helpers' and that 'class discrimination' (low regard for domestic helpers) may in fact be the most significant form of discrimination. Foreign domestic workers believe that the main reasons why they are discriminated against are, firstly because of the nature of their job (class discrimination), and secondly, because they are foreigners (racial discrimination).

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<sup>51</sup> Vicky C.W. Tam, *Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong and Their Role in Childcare Provision*, in Momsen, Janet Henshall, ed, *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service*. (London: Routledge, 1999), 267-273.

<sup>52</sup> Press Release, Information Services Department, October 2000.

It is also perhaps interesting to note that the groups whom they feel discriminate against them the most are 'local women' and 'the public' in general. This is where Heyzer and Wee's analysis on possible implications of the 'transnational division of female labor' is helpful in understanding the divisions wedged between migrant and local women and which plant the seeds of tensions between employer and domestic helper.<sup>53</sup>The pioneering study was jointly undertaken by the Asian Migrant Centre, Asian Domestic Workers Union, Forum of Filipino Reintegration and Savings Groups, Indonesian Migrant Workers Union, and Thai Women Association and was completed in February 2001. The findings are contained in a report called, "The Baseline Research on Racial and Gender Discrimination Towards Filipino, Indonesian and Thai Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong."<sup>54</sup>The salient findings paint a bleak profile of racial, gender and class discrimination against foreign domestic workers:

1. Violations of FDH contracts in the aspects of minimum wage, days off and annual leaves are prevalent, affecting at least a quarter of all FDH in Hong Kong. Examples: underpaid, not allowed to take regular rest days, denied her legal holidays, contract violations are significantly related to both racial and gender discrimination against FDH ;
2. More than a quarter (26 %) of FDH suffer from verbal and physical abuse, and more women are verbally and physically abused than men. As many as 4.5 % are subjected to sexual abuse, including rape.

Examples of verbal, psycho-physical, and sexual abuse in the privacy of the home:

- shouting and use of abusive language
- slapping (this occurs more often among women domestic helpers than men)
- beating and kicking
- employer kisses, touches, makes sexual advances to FDH
- Employer shows naked body or asks FDH to touch him/her; displays around the house naked in underwear
- employer talks in sexually offensive language or shows pornographic materials to FDH;
- being asked or pressured to have sex

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<sup>53</sup> Heyzer and Wee, pp. 31-32

<sup>54</sup> Baseline Research, pp. 36-39, 49-52

Examples of discriminatory encounters in public, or situations in which FDH feel that they are the target of racial prejudice and class bias inside as well as outside the home:

- use of sexually obscene language, gestures against FDH (in Chinese and/or English words); ‘dirty finger’
  - use of abusive language, gestures, making faces against FDH (Chinese and/or English) – e.g. bastard, idiot, stupid, lazy, crazy, *panmui*, etc.;
  - being belittled e.g. “just a DH/maid,” “just a Filipino/Indonesian”, “from the third world”, Filipinos/Indonesians are bad”, “Filipinos are only DH”, “maid in the Philippines”, “no good Filipinos/Indonesians”; “poor country people”, “alien”, “ambitious people”; “nothing to eat in the Philippines”, etc.;
  - shops, market people are impolite, drive FDH out of the shop, entertain others first before FDH,
  - rude, don’t respond when greeted, ignore what the FDH say, don’t want to talk to FDH, stare FDH from head to foot;
  - insulting actions like whispering, rude gestures, mocking, shouting;
  - laugh, enjoy, when FDH is kicked or abused by kids;
  - separating the FDH food;
  - shouted at in public;
  - slave-like treatment
3. The FDH have identified the areas of public life where they are most often unfairly treated or discriminated against: markets/groceries, shops, restaurants/commercial establishments, and public transportation personnel; government offices like the HK Immigration Department and Hong Kong Police;
  4. Among the sectors of Hong Kong society, the FDH cited the following as the most discriminatory against them: local women, local men, and Hong Kong public in general. FDH believe that the top reason why they are discriminated against is because of the nature of their job (class discrimination), second is because they are foreigners (racial discrimination). (It is interesting to note that the groups that FDH feel discriminate against them are ‘local women’ and ‘public’ in general.)
  5. The FDH cited several policies/laws/moves by the Hong Kong government that they felt discriminated/unfairly treated them: two-week-rule, NCS (especially restrictions on mobility and residency); wage cut, wage freezes targeted at keeping FDH salary low; long working hours and having to be on-call any time; not allowed to work while a case is pending in court or at the labor department (even if the

cases normally stretch for months or sometimes years); not allowed to do part-time jobs; the proposals to remove maternity rights protection and difficulties in becoming pregnant as an FDH, including the risk of being terminated; FDH family not allowed to stay with FDH in Hong Kong; no voting rights in Hong Kong; no representation in policy-making regarding FDH matters.

The study also points out that foreign domestic workers feel that the Hong Kong government has been taking actions specifically targeting them, and hence discriminating against them. Migrant groups claim that Hong Kong government's "New Conditions of Stay" (NCS) policy discriminates against foreign domestic helpers because no restrictions of the same sort are imposed on expatriates in the professional fields. The NCS prohibits foreign domestic helpers from shifting to other employers without approval of the Immigration Department, from changing to other forms of employment, from seeking right of residency even after having worked continuously in Hong Kong for over seven years, and from staying in Hong Kong for more than two weeks after visa expiry and/or contract termination.<sup>55</sup>

It is clear that seen from the eyes of foreign domestic workers, the NCS has become a lynchpin that brings together the issues of class, race, and gender discrimination, and is brought upon them with the forceful hand of the state. The issue has been the galvanizing point for sustained protest among foreign domestic helpers across ethnic and national lines, and supported by various NGOs and activist networks. Organizations of Filipina domestic workers have been the most active in such protest.

Surveying the fields of activist discourse in NGOs in Hong Kong, Law examines Hong Kong as a site for transnational activism around issues of migrant worker and notes the growing positive tendency of foreign domestic helpers to form networks of solidarity around common issues and beyond national and ethnic lines. From this she suggests the emergence of a new domestic worker subject whose collective identity is forged around a common plight, rather than along national lines. At the same time, Law asserts that the work of several NGOs which have existed in Hong Kong illustrates the importance of NGO advocacy work in a variety of contexts and its significance is felt beyond the borders of Hong Kong. She notes that it is through the networking of Filipino NGOs around the world that the provision of welfare services for migrant populations takes on global resonance. It is in this sense that Hong Kong has become a site for transnational activism around issues of migrant workers.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Baseline Research, p. 16

<sup>56</sup> Lisa Law (2000), Sites of transnational activism: Filipino NGOs in Hong Kong, paper submitted to Gender politics in the Asia Pacific region, Brenda Yeoh, Peggy Teo and Shirlena Huang (eds), London: Routledge

Drawing on Appadurai's 'conception of 'ethnoscapes' –as landscapes of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live – and de-territorialization' – as the ground of experience around which the identities and of mobile populations are constructed, Law asserts that "without the nation as a primary point of identification, the subjectivity of de-territorialized groups brings together diverse set of people, ideas and cultures.." Within the context of de-territorialization and globalized issues such NGOs occupy a transnational space and provide a productive example of the tensions between nationalism and transnationalism in the global cultural economy. NGOs are able to articulate global norms of equality while stressing the need for solidarity with 'local workers.'

It is on the ground of this transnational space that the figure of the domestic helper as a worker-subject emerges, with a consciousness of collective identity and of the need to forge solidarity around this collective identity. Noting the networking that was built around the wage cut issue in 1998, Law points out that this type of networking mobilizes a conception of migrant women as workers based on shared values and common discourse such as economic identities in the Asian region. The political space that is created by this kind of networking challenges unequal geopolitical and economic relations in the Asian region, highlighting how transnational migration is thoroughly entwined with economics. The globalizing social/political space produced by NGO activism expands the discursive field of NGOs to include other nations alongside the Philippines as unequal players in the global economy. Conceiving domestic workers as 'workers' – rather than, for example, Filipino women –shifts the debate for Filipino activists in Hong Kong, and by drawing links between labor-sending countries, a new domestic worker subject is constituted.

Ironically, while the state of de-territorialization has created a 'job with no name,' it is precisely the shared plight of de-territorialization that has become the enabling condition for the emergence of a new class-subject, the common ground from which a new class identity is forged and claimed. While Law points out that the language of rights has enabled the coming to being of this new identity, this new identity has also become the basis for accessing and articulating the language of rights.

This positive development understandably has limits. The notion of 'worker-subject' may connote that the foreign domestic helper is one who is in a position to sell and transact her labor freely, though the reality is that foreign domestic helpers feel that they are in a situation of near-bondage. While the new conception of 'worker-subject' puts the 'de-territorialized' foreign domestic helper in a subject-position from which she is able to engage and confront the state on the basis of collective identity, it does not necessarily promise or offer a solution to the problem of the everyday struggles against her employer. Unlike factory workers whose collectivity is usually place-bound and whose unions

confronts/negotiates with collective and sometimes abstract entities (corporate entities representing capital), foreign domestic helpers are scattered, dispersed, and remain hidden and captive within the private confines of the home. While issues such as wages, conditions of work, benefits and the like could be collectively campaigned for and addressed through state legislation, studies also show that this state-centered response is not adequate in curbing abuses and violations. The strategic value of positioning the foreign domestic helper as a new 'domestic-worker-subject' enables and empowers her to gain access to a 'public space' – even perhaps a global space – however, the most significant part of her life as a domestic worker takes place within the hidden, invisible, isolated and private space of the household, a space which is not always accessible – and is often resistant – to the reach of legislation and official state discourse. The vulnerability of domestic workers to abuse lies precisely in the nature of domestic work itself. The largely ambiguous nature of domestic work requires the strict control of body, time and space, and often, the immediate point of control emanates from the employer and takes place inside the home, where the situation of near-bondage and servitude in which the domestic helper is placed is no more defined by state legislation than it is by norms of conduct based on notions of identity (race, class and gender) and relations with 'others,' notions which are produced from, but also help secure the existing relations of power.

Moreover, the larger majority of foreign domestic helpers remain unorganized and reluctant to join in organizations, sometimes out of fear of backlashes from the employer and other repercussions. In this context the strategies for everyday resistances waged by domestic helpers against their employers and in the discursive field even to the points of submitting themselves to discipline, as previously described by Constable, may be worth recalling: "The forms of discipline that domestic workers appear to 'buy into' are not indication of false consciousness or cultural coercion and oppression. Women strive to become 'superior domestic workers for their own reasons as well..." If power is something that works not just negatively but also positively by producing forms of pleasure, then, one can see, as Constable suggests, how Filipina workers "derive pleasure, or at least some satisfaction from attempts to organize their work better and maximize their productivity, to get along better with employers, and to 'professionalize' their image, even at the cost of becoming ever more obedient and hardworking. Their work, after all, is what allows them to remain in Hong Kong, a wealthy and cosmopolitan place that excites their imaginations while extracting their labor."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Constable, p. 210

**Chapter Three**  
**‘UNDERDEVELOPMENT’ IN THE PHILIPPINES**  
**AND ITS EXPORT OF FEMALE LABOR**

The Philippines, on its part, has been cited as one of the most ‘successful’ countries in cornering a large share of the international labor market, from a ‘modest’ 19,221 workers in 1976, to 523,000, in 1989,<sup>58</sup> to 3.12 million documented migrant as workers as of December 2002, spread all over the world.<sup>59</sup> Of the 3.12 million Filipino migrant workers, 173,889 are placed in Hong Kong, a majority of whom are working as domestic labor. Hong Kong ranks 7<sup>th</sup> in the top ten destination countries of Filipino migrant workers, after the US, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Malaysia, Australia, and Japan.

The high propensity for Filipinos to emigrate and travel overseas in search of ‘greener pastures’ has often been traced to its colonial history—more than three hundred fifty years of Spanish colonial occupation, nearly fifty years of American colonial rule, and a brief but intense period of Japanese occupation. The centuries of experience of colonial rule resulted in a state of economic ‘underdevelopment’ in which the national economic policies are defined largely in the service of neo-colonial and global capitalist interests, a political system that functions around the unwritten rules of patronage and corruption and the sedimentation of what has generally been referred to as a ‘colonial mentality.’ ‘Colonial mentality/consciousness’ takes on many forms and manifestations, but in its most dominant form, it adheres to the belief that anything made in/coming from America/West (or anything foreign made for that matter) is superior. It looks to the outside (the world of the ‘colonizer’, foreign master, foreign) for salvation and benevolence. It is in effect, a colonized mentality, for long after the colonizers officially left the Philippines, neocolonialism took over, and ‘decolonization’ as the process of achieving genuine independence from the state of colonization -- of a colonized state of mind -- would prove to be difficult, if not problematic.

The movement of massive numbers of Filipinos to emigrate and/or to seek temporary employment abroad has often been read, though sometimes somewhat simplistically, as a manifestation of a collective colonial mentality – of an act of desiring the ‘foreign-made’ and looking to the outside for solutions. It is not surprising that the most desirable destination for would-be émigrés is the United States. But anything closely resembling the American promise of opportunity for a better life would also do.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p,16

<sup>59</sup> Asian Migrant Yearbook, P. 135

The particular emergence of a large class of people entering into temporary employment overseas, the Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs) as a contemporary phenomenon, however, is also a direct result of labor and development policies of the state in the '70s and '80s. First encouraged by the Marcos government as a stop-gap measure to stave off economic crisis and address unemployment, it soon proved to be so lucrative for the government that the large-scale export of labor has been an integral part of state development project since then. It was also largely motivated by the desire to carve out a niche and maintain a competitive advantage in the international labor market. wherever there was shortage of cheap, skilled English-speaking labor. The OCWs, and later on the DHs – Filipina domestic helpers – were soon to be hailed as national economic heroes and martyrs.

The following section presents a background on the history of colonization, reviews the beginnings of Philippine labor export policy, and traces the construction and positioning of Filipina domestic workers as part of the wider diaspora of Filipino people and as 'feminine' citizen subjects of a nation-state.

### **1. Colonizing territories of lands, bodies and minds, and the rebirth of *Babaye***

Narrating the history of colonialism in the Philippines carries with it both the risk of repeating as well as the challenge of contesting dominant and competing narratives : on the one hand, the narrative that celebrates the coming of the colonizers as the inaugural moment in which history begins (and which thus represents the colonizers as the source of all that is good), and on the other hand, the narrative that points to colonialism as the sole, singular and original root cause of all social problems (thus blaming the colonizer as the source of all evils). The former has been invoked by various elite forces throughout time, often for the purpose of pursuing their own agenda for self-perpetuation. Meanwhile, the latter has lent itself useful for the mobilization of opposition to the ruling elite towards the transformation of the status quo as well as the articulation of a collective national, and specifically nationalist consciousness. Later, a nationalist critique of colonial history would be articulated by contemporary women's movements and give rise to particular ways of interpreting and analyzing the development of class and gender relations in Philippine society. Left unproblematized, however, both narratives if taken singularly, would prove problematic and provide an inadequate explanation for the complex layers of power relations that account for oppression, for the emergence of different and differentially oppressed and exploited 'subjects', and even the rise of various forms of resistance and accommodation. To reverse or even contest such problematic discourses, it would not be enough to cite the many specific instances of collective 'native resistance' to the colonizers during the period of

colonial rule as evidence of the colonizers' failure to totally control and govern the native subjects. But neither would be it be productive to totally disregard the sedimentation of colonial consciousness that seems to have not only survived but taken root and assumed many forms in contemporary conditions of capitalist globalization. The following section begins with a recollection of the colonization of the Philippine islands by Spain and America, moves on to a brief review of the production and contestation of colonial ideology, and ends with a note on the efforts of Filipina feminists to challenge and reverse dominant narratives of colonial history.

Under the colonial gaze of the Spanish who conquered the islands in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the various linguistic groups native to the islands, whom they called *indios* (Indians), were seen and thus represented as lazy, inferior, primitive, sub-human, backward, untrustworthy, uncivilized,<sup>60</sup> uneducated and uneducable – and the colonizers never failed to remind the natives that they were so. In the *Myth of the Lazy Native*, Syed Alatas quotes Sinbado Mas, a Spanish official who viewed his charge of administering the colony as essentially a mission to keep the Philippines 'in an intellectual and moral state that despite their numerical superiority they may weigh less politically than a bar of gold.' As Said further argues, under colonialism, the native was 'talked about, analyzed, abused, and worked, ...and covered with a discourse whose purpose was to keep him or her industrious and subordinate.'<sup>61</sup>

Filipina feminists decry that along with the cross and the sword, the colonizers brought with them patriarchy and misogyny.<sup>62</sup> Instructions to parish leaders in the colony were particularly striking: "Woman is the most monstrous animal in the whole of nature, bad tempered and worse spoken. To have this animal in the house is asking for trouble in the way of tattling, tale bearing, malicious gossip and controversies...Not only should the parish priest of Indians abstain from employing any woman in his house, but he should not allow them to enter it, even if they are only paying a call."<sup>63</sup> It is largely to the Spanish colonizers' credit and the colonial institutions, structures, values and ideologies that Filipina feminist scholars attribute the historical shift in the valuation of women from the pre-colonial era, in which women enjoyed a relatively higher social status, to the colonial period and up to present.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Syed Alatas, *Myth of the Lazy Native*, p. 6, as cited by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. (New York : Vintage, 1994), 297.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage 1994, p. 297

<sup>62</sup> Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB, *Woman and Religion*, in Mananzan, Sr. Mary John, ed., *Woman and Religion*. (Manila: The Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College, 1988), 7-8.

<sup>63</sup> Casimiro Diaz, as quoted by Mananzan, p. 8

<sup>64</sup> Mananzan, also, Lilia Quindoza Santiago, *In the Name of Our Mother, 100 Years of Philippine Feminist Poetry*. (Quezon City : University of the Philippines, 2002), 28, and Aguilar, Delia, *Towards a Nationalist Feminism*. (Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 1998), 4-6.

Economy and social life in the islands were slowly transformed with the advent of colonial rule.<sup>65</sup> Agricultural production was reoriented to cater to the consumption and production needs of the European colonizers. Policies to constrain the mobility of men and women were imposed. Educational institutions were established, for both men and women, but access was a privilege of the elite. The Spanish language was the lingua franca only of the educated and of those who were close to the colonial power. The introduction of Roman Catholicism by the colonizers through various means, including forced baptism, proved to be an effective strategy for securing economic, political and cultural foothold in the new colonized islands. The new European religion spread the belief that ‘salvation’ in the afterlife could only be possible by submission to and mediation by the powerful Church, whose close collaboration and identification with the colonial rulers positioned it as an essential part of the State. The Church taught and exacted from the natives the virtues of submissiveness, docility and absolute trust/dependence on the Divine/Master. Together with the imposition of Spanish colonial and masculinist values, Roman Catholicism brought notions of ideal femininity fashioned after the European standards in those times – maternal sacrifice, endurance of suffering, unquestioning servility, chastity and purity, timidity and submission to male authority.

Through the years, the elite that ruled the economy and controlled society’s political life, was a combination of officials and religious leaders from Spain, local landlords whose landholdings originated as gifts from the colonial rulers, a small but growing merchant class, and Chinese traders who had settled in the islands. The colonizers and the local elite sought to ingrain in the natives’ minds a sense that they are inferior and must thus be dependent on the ruler/foreign master.

Religiosity was quite strong; and while Christianity was at first used as a tool for colonizing/civilizing the natives, it also ironically provided a language for coping and negotiating with colonialism, and eventually even for waging resistance against it. Despite the best efforts to contain and pacify the natives, there were numerous outbreaks of peasant revolts and armed resistances directed at the twin-rulers, the Church and the colonial government. An ‘under-ground’ armed resistance soon grew across the archipelago, led by a combination of leaders from the educated, working and peasant classes. The construction of the notion of a Filipino identity and a ‘united’ Filipino nation could thus be traced in this anti-colonial resistance. The revolution against Spain was the first of its kind in Asia – it successfully declared an independent republic, though briefly. Unknown to the revolution’s leaders, the Philippines, as it was now known, was being ‘sold’ by Spain to the United States. It is the memory of this near-successful anti-colonial resistance that spread across and united

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<sup>65</sup> Francisco and Pagaduan, p. 19

ethno-linguistic groups that more than a hundred years later would continually be invoked in nationalist attempts to revive pride in national identity.

Despite the staging of popular anti-colonial protests, the influence of colonial ideology persisted and many of the patriarchal values and structures introduced by the colonizers would endure for a long time. Francisco and Pagaduan further point out that by the end of three centuries of Spanish colonial rule, the sharp division had been effected in society between a 'female domain' and a 'male domain.'<sup>66</sup> Native males held the reins of power in the 'public' arena of production and politics. Women by now had to carry the surnames of their fathers and had been socialized into accepting lower wages than men<sup>67</sup>.

The promotion and reproduction of a 'colonial mentality/ideology', now institutionalized in education, religion, and other agencies, found its most articulate advocates among the local elite. In a sense this prepared the ground for the new phase of colonization of the Philippines. Summarizing the psychology of the colonial mind, Aguilar says: "Ensnared within the master's field of vision, the native (usually male, the preferred object of colonizing efforts) exposes his self-concept to inevitable damage. Having accepted the former's rendition of history, he develops an awkward propensity for self-contradiction." In effect, what is constituted is a 'prototype of the schizoid colonial mind whose subaltern conditioning is finally capped with the illusion of freedom under U.S. tutelage."

The colonial occupation of the Philippines by Spain and America was presented to the natives as a civilizing and humanizing project in which the institutions of church, colonial state, local governments and later on education, played an important role. The production of a colonial consciousness – a colonized mentality -- assigning the native to a position of perpetual inferiority in all aspects of life and the foreign colonial master in a perpetual position of superiority – was thus effected through a process of reiteration and sedimentation. Made to believe in their 'natural' inferiority, the natives were also made to think that their salvation and the attainment of human development would only be possible through the mediation and benevolent acts of the foreign master and through the master's civilizing, humanizing, and later, developmentalist mission.

If Spain left the legacy of Christianity, the new American colonial rulers would leave the legacy of public education and the English language. The American project was very different from that of the Spanish. The new colonizers were conscious that the success of the project would depend largely on winning the support of the local elite and on transforming the masses, their "little brown brothers" into a replica of the American image. In 1903, a few years after the commencement of American rule, US President William Howard Taft

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 19

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 20

enunciated a new policy, “Philippines for the Filipinos,” and articulated the new colonial/imperialist strategy in his own words: “the promotion of the Filipinos’ material and intellectual welfare will necessarily develop wants on their part for things which in times of poverty they regard as luxuries, but which as they grow more educated and as they grow wealthier, become necessities. The carrying out of the principle, ‘the Philippines for the Filipinos’ in first promoting the welfare, material, spiritual and intellectual of the people of these Islands is the one course which can create any market here among the people for American goods and American supplies that will make the relation of the United States to the Philippines a profitable one for our merchants and manufacturers”<sup>68</sup>

The new American colonizers came with the conscious intent of establishing hegemonic control and using the Philippines as a dumping ground for its surplus products. The results were instantaneous, as Constantino notes – the barrage of tax -free American goods, drastically changed the consumption habits of the Filipinos and produced a “buy-stateside” mentality.<sup>69</sup> Constantino points out that the Americans were aware that the economic exploitation of the colony could be efficiently carried out only under the conditions of peaceful acceptance of colonial rule, which would require the transformation of the attitudes of the Filipinos toward their new rulers. Thus, suppression through military means had to be combined with ‘more sophisticated methods of subduing the spirit and seducing the mind of the Filipinos.’ Soon, it meant the total reinvention of Philippine society in the image of America, its conqueror. The process of colonization was pursued by winning over the local elite and through the massive “cultural Americanization of the population.” In this framework, the lynchpin for securing hegemonic control was the introduction of the public school system and the adoption of English as the medium of instruction. Constantino further notes that educational institutions, and later the mass media, would play a significant part in producing and reproducing colonial myths: that America is the land of opportunity and fair play, that America came not as conquerors but as friends and benefactors, that everything made in America is always better by and large.<sup>70</sup> Since then there has always been a belief, invoked by many heads of states, that a special bond ties the Philippines to the United States.

Feminists and women’s movements have sought to critique the impacts of the Spanish colonial and American imperialist projects on women. Francisco and Pagaduan point out that while the American colonizers introduced public education, this did little to disturb the patriarchal family system and entrenched religious ideology. Women were encouraged to

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<sup>68</sup> Henry F. Pringle, *The Life and Time of William Howard Taft, Volume 1.* ( New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1939), 234-235.

<sup>69</sup> Renato Constantino (in collaboration with Letizia Constantino), *The Philippines : A Past Revisited (Pre-Spanish-1941).* (Quezon City, 1975), p. 312.

take up professions, but they were oriented towards the ‘socially accepted values and roles of women’ cultivated by 300 years of Spanish colonial rule and now reoriented to suit the needs of new colonizers. These professions revolved around functions of social reproduction, in care-giving, service provision, nurturing. Later, the first major wave of emigration of women workers in the ‘50s would see Filipina nurses trooping to the United States.<sup>71</sup>

Francisco and Pagaduan maintain that it was the sexual division of labor institutionalized in Philippine society during the colonial period that generated the ideological basis and the enabling conditions for the ‘commodification of native women’s bodies’ and the widespread acceptance of a labor and market structure that reserved enclaves as their exclusive domain. They note, “For many, women’s bodies became the means for getting out of poverty, gaining access to colonial privileges, and later, migrating overseas. And since native women’s identities were strongly constructed around their allegiance and subservience to the family, women’s bodies functioned less as a vehicle for personal gratification and economic gain and more as a survival strategy for poor families in search of the elusive ‘colonial dream.’<sup>72</sup>

Through the years, the task of unmasking colonial myths and ‘decolonizing’ the Filipino mind would be projected and taken on as a ‘nationalist project’ by intellectuals and social movements who would support the project insofar as it serves as the expression of anti-American/anti-imperialist sentiments. It would also be supported and articulated by feminist and women’s movements insofar as it enabled the ‘disentangling’ of conceptions of ‘Filipino womanhood’ from the clutches of colonial ideologies.<sup>73</sup> Feminist-nationalists like Delia Aguilar would contend that the project to challenge assumptions about Filipino women and reconstruct their history ‘necessitates nothing less than the simultaneous defiance and destruction of imperial authority.’<sup>74</sup>

A comprehensive discussion of colonial history has not been the intention in this chapter of the thesis; rather, it was to recall it in this instance in order to frame in perspective the narratives of colonialism, and nationalism as opposition to colonialism, that have emerged. Against the grain and within the margins of the two opposing narratives, feminist thinkers in the Philippines have sought to construct a critique of contemporary class and gender relations. They have related and extended such critique to explain the emergence of female migrant helpers as subjects of an ‘underdeveloped’ Philippines in the era of capitalist globalization, a nation that has not totally escaped the clutches of foreign domination. This is

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 392

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, Francisco and Pagaduan, p. 20

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, pp. 20-21

<sup>73</sup> Delia Aguilar, *The Social Construction of the Filipino Woman*, in *Towards a Nationalist Feminism*, Aguilar. (Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 1998),10.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

not to say that such feminist critique cannot lend itself to interrogation and further problematization, but it is to describe the landscape of narratives of 'nation' which have emerged as its terrain, and which alternative discourses on history and collective subject-positions of a 'nation' and a 'people' have to negotiate with and confront. To reiterate the continued operation, deployment and employment of a 'colonial consciousness' in this instance is not to negate other or alternative forms of consciousness and resistance that are struggling to emerge, but to recall a history that is sometimes taken for granted as 'resolved' and yet whose effect in contemporary times has often been naturalized as part of common sense. On the contrary, what would perhaps be important to ask, is, how is it possible, and in what new social and material conditions, that 'colonial mentality' in its genderized forms would seem to persist or re-appear, and in what guises.

One of the ways by which Filipina feminists have sought to unmask colonial myths is to recover indigenous and traditional beliefs which placed women in a higher status than they have been accorded in the belief systems introduced by Spanish colonizers. Of particular significance is the indigenous myth about creation which, in contrast to the Christian tradition, contends that the first woman in the world, *Babaye*, was born simultaneously with the first man, *Lalake*.<sup>75</sup> Santiago points out that not only have Filipina feminists utilized this myth as a cultural norm to distinguish Filipinas' heritage from that of other women, but that "rebirthing *Babaye* in the postcolonial Philippines means reinventing Filipinas in multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious, and socially diverse identities. The reclaiming and rebirthing of *Babaye*, asserts Santiago, is crucial to "ending the predominantly colonial, Christian, urban, elitist, and Western definitions imposed on Filipinas by hundreds of years of local feudal and colonial patriarchy."<sup>76</sup>

Scholars have also pointed out that during the period of colonial rule, women played a role in undermining the influence of Catholicism by continuing to practice indigenous customs or incorporating folk beliefs into Catholic practices.<sup>77</sup> Resistance and revolution against the Spanish colonizers also produced women heroes. Although many of such accounts of 'women's heroism' under the Spanish colonial rule were from the perspective of 'male-dominated, urban-biased and elitist history-writing', Santiago points out that these examples nevertheless serve to challenge the dominant notion that the 'colonized Hispanized Filipina' was submissive passive, and weak.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Lilia Quindoza Santiago, *Rebirthing Babaye : The Women's Movement in the Philippines*, in *The Challenge of Local Feminisms, Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. Basu, Amrita, ed. (USA : Westview Press, Inc, 1995), 110.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 114

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 116-117

The debunking of the colonial myth of the ‘submissive Filipina’ has been a consistent under-current in the movements for women’s emancipation and empowerment that emerged in postcolonial Philippines. Santiago points out that early Filipina feminists in the newly independent Philippines envisioned political equality in terms of empowerment for women at all levels of public life. This, however, was a ‘subdued battle cry’ of women activists as they generally accepted that involvement in movements for social change would inevitably lead to women’s emancipation.<sup>79</sup> Women activists involved in the nationalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s began to question whether women’s liberation should be ‘secondary to national liberation. . They started to form women’s organizations as distinct from class-based and broader multi-sectoral organizations which had a multi-sectoral focus and to take up women-specific issues, thus inserting a ‘feminist perspective and agenda in the broad framework for national liberation’. Santiago points out that when martial law was imposed by president Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, women’s organizations were among those who organized and participated in a broad opposition front, noting that martial law threatened to ‘produce a militarized citizenry and to entrench authority, hierarchy and patriarchy in Filipino culture.’ In the succeeding years, the growing women’s movements, particularly those groups representing and organizing among the working classes would soon find themselves confronting anti-democratic policies but also addressing the negative impact of development policies and giving it a gender-sensitive perspective.<sup>80</sup>

Postcolonial Philippines would thus see the birth of women’s movement(s) that, Santiago claims, would always be acutely aware of its social, political, cultural and historical context. Women’s organizations and critical feminist thinking challenged dominant colonial discourses that position the Filipina as inferior and encouraged the participation of women in wider democratic movements working for social transformation and political change. They struggled to address women’s issues and gender-specific issues within and outside such movements. Reclaiming indigenous beliefs and pre-Hispanic culture that celebrated the feminine and valued women and women’s contribution to society, they would seek to present a different image of the Filipina – “a person born whole and separate from man”, who legitimately owns her body and herself and chart her own future and destiny.”<sup>81</sup> The effort to thus construct a more autonomous gender and cultural identity free from colonial patriarchal trappings could and would not escape from the necessity of confronting the conditions and effects of capitalist globalization as it helped shape the national economy, class and gender relations in contemporary Philippine history.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 119

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 121

## 2. Philippine labor export policy and the feminization of migration

Today, America continues to represent the ultimate land of promise for many Filipinos. The queues of would-be/wannabe émigrés at the United States Embassy remain phenomenally long, but the access to immigration is increasingly becoming narrower and more exclusive. Filipino diaspora has become more and more dispersed across an increasing number of countries all over the world. It is tempting to think that all these other countries of destination are mere ‘substitutes’ for America. But what may be happening instead is something that is more complex. The continued inability of a succession of Philippine governments to uplift millions of Filipinos out of poverty and reverse the trend of economic decline has resulted in the accumulation and sedimentation of frustrations from among the local population. The deep-seated but residual traces of the ‘colonial mentality’ of old – the belief that ‘salvation’ can only come from the outside -- are reinforced and imbricated with an increasing disillusionment with and rejection of the ‘local/national’ as the site of desire and the locus of salvation. Salvation can only come from the outside, only this time it is not through waiting and begging for America’s benevolence. Salvation, perhaps, can come elsewhere.

A noticeable shift occurred in the direction and nature of migration trends in the Philippines, from the ‘immigration type’ in the 1960s<sup>82</sup> – usually towards the US, Canada, Australia -- to contract migration in 1970s, towards the Gulf countries largely, and partly towards the newly industrializing economies in East Asia. The ‘export of labor’ soon became an important part of the nation’s ‘employment and manpower development goals.’ Ironically, it would be America’s colonial legacy of education and English-language that would later enable the Filipinos to gain a competitive edge in the international labor market, as Filipinos were viewed to be more highly skilled and better educated than their other Asian counterparts. The decade of the ‘70s saw millions of Filipinos journeying to far-flung places, to some 130 countries, to take on jobs as construction workers, engineers, accountants, nurses, midwives, domestic helpers. As the Gulf states embarked on massive construction and development projects during the period of the oil boom and faced labor shortage, droves of Filipinos – brothers, uncles, fathers and sons, and sometimes entire villages – many of whom had never traveled abroad before, queued up in employment agencies and rushed to get their passports, their contracts, and their visas. The market demand for female labor would soon follow.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 110

<sup>82</sup> Vivian Tornea, Esther P. Habana, *Women in International Migration: The Philippine Experience*, in *The Trade in Domestic Helpers, Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences, Selected Papers from the Planning meeting on International Migration and Women*. (Kuala Lumpur: APDC, 1989), 63.

In 1974 the Philippine Labor Code, which outlined an overseas employment program, was adopted. Soon the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) was set up to facilitate the efficient and speedy implementation of the government's labor export policy<sup>83</sup>. While the policy was economically driven, there were also political motivations on the part of the government, especially since this took place barely two years after the imposition of martial law in 1972. From the perspective of the Marcos government, as Francisco points out, to send the otherwise unemployed Filipinos to work abroad would be a 'sure way of containing the rate of domestic unemployment that could lead to social and political discontent of a graver magnitude than already exists.' The new labor export policy served the dual purpose of arresting economic crisis and strengthening the stability of the government. Francisco further notes that the policy complements the government's overall economic policy of import liberalization and industrialization which critically links the Philippines to the international division of labor and market structure.'<sup>84</sup>

The debt-strapped Philippine economy at this time was embarking on a process of economic restructuring according to the designs and conditionalities of multilateral agencies like the IMF and the WB. This restructuring would reorient the economy toward pursuing fast-track economic growth strategies and adopting free market policies. This would render the Philippines, like many South East Asian societies, more open to the incursion and 'penetration' of transnational capital.<sup>85</sup> This would result in 'new forms of controlling female labor and sexuality' and would also further expand to include the global dimension of women's labor.

While the export of labor provided some immediate economic relief and benefit to tens of thousands of families, the over-all development program pursued by the Marcos government aggravated the economic situation as a whole. At a time when nearly 65 % of the population were living below the poverty line, more and more men and women found themselves not only wanting, but desperately needing to find jobs elsewhere outside the Philippines. The pressure on women, with their 'keen sense of poverty and instinct for self-survival' increased and pushed hundreds of thousands of Filipinas to leave homes and families behind for work abroad.<sup>86</sup> Changing international division of labor and economic restructuring of national economies would, as Maranan points out, institutionalize the migration of populations from militarized poverty-stricken countryside, such as in the Philippines, into the cities, and eventually into other countries -- a phenomenon that persists

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<sup>83</sup> Josefa Francisco,

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 154

<sup>85</sup> Aida Maranan, An Alternative Way of Looking at Women and Migration: Why an NGO perspective, in *The Trade in Domestic Helpers, Causes, Mechanisms, and Consequences*, 1989, pp. 132-133

<sup>86</sup> Maranan, p. 133

to this day.<sup>87</sup> As such, Maranan traces the rural-urban dynamics of the phenomenon and notes the ‘direct correlation between the poor rural areas and the high unemployment rate in the cities, and the issue of migration.’<sup>88</sup>

It would eventually be clear that the Marcos regime and all succeeding governments would stand to benefit the most from the Philippine labor export policy. The most direct economic benefits to the state is in the form of remittances sent by migrant workers to their families. Facilitated largely by Philippine banks the state is thus able to monopolize foreign exchange transactions of massive proportions, enabling it to buttress its foreign currency reserves. The Philippine economy’s export-driven and import-dependent orientation, coupled with debt servicing of massive proportions has nearly always resulted in a dangerous situation of depleted foreign currency reserves and balance of payment deficits (BOPs). For many decades now, the remittances of migrant Filipino workers has been hailed as the country’s top ‘dollar earner.’ In 1975, migrants’ remittances totaled USD 103.00 million, in 1980, at USD 421.39 million, in 1985, at USD 687.30 million,<sup>89</sup> and by the ‘90s reached the billion mark. In 2002, annual remittance was USD 7.18 billion.<sup>90</sup>

Remittances are not only a major source of foreign exchange for the Philippine Treasury, they are also now a major element in international finance flows. Research findings show that they have played a role in reducing foreign debt, improving balance of payments, reducing the trade gap, facilitating the circulation of goods and services in the local economy, and in general, ‘keeping the economy afloat.’<sup>91</sup> It is one of the most important survival mechanisms for the country. It is in thus in this context that the Filipino migrant workers, now collectively referred to as OCWs (overseas contract workers), more than half of whom are women, have been mobilized by the state as ‘saviors’ of the country and hailed by presidents as its new ‘economic heroes’

### **3. Heroes, Martyrs and Spectral Presences:**

It is often said that Filipinos have a penchant for melodrama and the epic narrative, and often identify with the narrative of the ‘suffering Christ.’ ‘Passion, death and resurrection’ abound in popular literature and lore. It was perhaps the ‘Christ-figure’ that many Filipinos saw in Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina maid who was hanged in Singapore in 1995 for double murder and whom Filipinos widely believed was wrongly accused. Flor’s death not only

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> Francisco and Pagaduan, p. 22

<sup>90</sup> Asian Migrants Yearbook, p. 214

<sup>91</sup> A Preliminary Report: the Role and Process of Remittances in the Labor Export Industry in the Philippines, Asia Pacific Mission for Migrant Filipinos, *Asia-Pacific Journal*, August 2000. (Manila: IBON Databank, 1999), 21.

rallied widespread protest, it almost caused a diplomatic breakdown between the Philippine and Singaporean governments. Three popular films were inspired by her story which not only illustrates the impact of her death but gave yet another avenue for public mourning and expression of outrage. The most popular of such films, simply called “The Flor Contemplacion Story,” depicted Flor as a suffering wife and a beloved worker, a victim of injustice and a silenced martyr. She had been accused of killing best friend Delia Maga, who, in the film’s ‘truth’, was actually murdered by her own villainous employer. Two women unjustly killed. In a masterstroke of perfect casting, the film director had cast in the title role ‘superstar’ film veteran Nora Aunor, whose very own rags-to riches Cinderella story had elicited profound identification from masses of rural and working women in the ‘70s and ‘80s. If Flor and Delia did not receive justice in real life, the movie at least provided a venue for the representation of ‘truth’. Through the film, the ‘passion and death’ of a poor simple woman was narrated in near-epic proportion and in this immortalization she is resurrected as a martyr/hero.

In real life, the Philippine public’s response to the story of the real Flor Contemplacion was indeed phenomenal. Street protests drew huge crowds and became a massive outpouring of collective outrage and a ritual of public mourning. In Flor – suffering wife, mother, and migrant worker –millions of Filipinos saw themselves, sensed their connected histories; and in her death they could only read the failings and betrayal of a government who had once called migrant workers the new national heroes. This was one instance in which the ‘voices’ of the migrant workers, usually relegated to the peripheral realm of *pangmasa* (for the masses)’ culture, were at once solidified as one and allowed to disrupt, challenge, and influence public and official discourse. While the film industry received criticism for capitalizing on her story and cashing in on the nation’s grief, it was also apparent that there was a popular desire to witness and replay the unfolding of Flor’s story as a narrative of the *pasyon*’ (the folk ritualistic retelling of the Christ passion story, usually recited by women during Lent). Where the legal and diplomatic battles belatedly taken up by the government proved futile and unable to save her life, the public-at-large was at least able to witness the ‘truth’ and pass judgment through the film.

Rafael aptly explains the mythical proportions to which the Contemplacion story has been elevated and points out that the link between Contemplacion and the nation had to do with her widely presumed innocence and the purity of her suffering in the name of her family. “That Contemplacion was a woman, and that OCWs come across as feminized within the gendered contexts of nation-state formations, further reinforced the sense of public pity and outrage...The figure of Contemplacion appeared to furnish a benign basis for reconsolidating the imaginative borders of the Philippines. Whereas OCWs find a living and

sometimes die abroad, they not only return to but are usually buried in their *bayan* (homeland). Obscure and anonymous while alive, death provides them with a new identity...It is in dying that they can lay claim to respect...In this way are the roles of OCWs as sources of money and providers of sheer labor power mythologized.”<sup>92</sup>

Examining the construction of heroism in the Philippines, Rafael points to the dominant motif of the Christ-like figure that is at once pathetic and prophetic, and suggests that in the Flor Contemplacions and the OCWs in general, Filipinos have seen the figures of the Christ, in their “innocent lives forced to undergo humiliation at the hands of alien forces, of unjustified deaths both shocking and public; of massive responses of pity and prayer that would, in mobilizing alternative communities of resistance, finally drive away the forces of oppression and pave the way for some kind of liberation.”<sup>93</sup> But what is also perhaps ironic in this construction is the underlying and recurring contradictory themes, the colonial notion of viewing the force of the outside/abroad/foreigner as a source of salvation, on the one hand, and on the other, seeing it also as a force that must be cast away, an oppressive yoke from which one must be freed.

It is true that in moments of either great distress or phenomenal success, it is to the collective plight of the migrant workers that the Filipinos turn to read the plight of the nation. They are in other words, a mirror image of the nation’s collective destiny. As Maranan points out, “the collective stories of migrant Filipinos, not too uncommonly peppered with tragedies, is Philippine society in microcosm – a western-oriented culture with a patina of a long history of colonization, dispersed into varied directions, and convulsed by the chaotic re-arrangements in both the public and private spheres.”<sup>94</sup>

The Filipino diaspora, in general, have come to occupy what Rafael calls ‘spectral presences’; that is, their labor takes places somewhere else outside the country but by ‘their association with money,’ they continue to occupy a place in the nation state.<sup>95</sup> It is, once again, for the overseas Filipinos a place of outside-insider, only this time this in-betweenness relates to the country of origin.

Rafael, however, makes a distinction between two categories of Filipino diaspora, referring both to the socio-economic phenomena as well as to their discursive constitution: the *Balikbayan* (returnees to the homeland) and the OCWs (overseas contract workers). *Balikbayan* generally refers to a group of people who are in a position of economic and social mobility (achieved prior to or after migration), and are usually those who come from

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<sup>92</sup> Vicente Rafael, *Your Grief is Our Gossip: Overseas Filipinos and Other Spectral Presences*, in Rafael, *Vicente, White Love and Other Events in Filipino History*. (US: Duke University Press, 2000), 214.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 211-212

<sup>94</sup> Maranan, p. 130

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, p. 205

the middle classes and have successfully emigrated to countries like the US, Canada, Australia, and the like. The OCWs generally refers to those whose primary aim to go abroad is to seek temporary employment and sell their cheap labor. The Balikbayans, according to Rafael, are the ‘new colonizers’, because their ambitions lie in ‘setting themselves apart from the rest of the so-called natives rather than affiliating with them.’ The important point here is the laboring of difference – the conscious attempt on the part of the Balikbayans to construct their distinctiveness from the natives – that positions them as the new colonizers in a process that is merely an enactment of a ‘historical role laid out for them.’ It is in the enactment of this historically and socially assigned role that lie the bonds that link the Balikbayans, in a very intimate manner, with the people they leave behind. For after all, they represent the ‘fulfillment of Filipino desires realizable only outside the Philippines.’ Thus, they are often regarded as ‘tragic reflections of the nation’s failure to materialize itself as the locus of a people’s desire.’<sup>96</sup>

Ironically, it is the OCWs, rather than the Balikbayans who have of late emerged and have been celebrated as the nation’s ‘new heroes.’ In 1988, Philippine President Cory Aquino addressed a crowd of domestic helpers in Hong Kong and declared, “*Kayo po ang mga bagong bayani* (You are the new heroes!)” The president deliberately used the respectful address of “po” which is normally used to address elders and seniors. A gesture designed to convince the Filipina domestic workers that their sacrifice for their nation and families has not gone unnoticed by the highest leader of the land. To a large extent perhaps, the effect and power of this simple gesture is drawn from the fact that it came from Cory Aquino, widow-president, herself the very epitome of the feminized-hero of which legends are made. Rafael recalls the image that Cory had projected in her rise to power – that of a stoic widow and a pious Madonna. It was in this historical conjunctures Rafael observes, that overseas contract workers took on a feminine face as thousands of women journeyed overseas as domestic workers, mail-order brides, and sex workers, that they came to be known as the new heroes.<sup>97</sup>

Cory Aquino’s successor, Fidel Ramos, continued to pursue the same labor export policy and continued to deploy the language of ‘heroes’ in addressing the Filipino migrant workers. It would be clear that instead of serving to elevate the status of migrant workers and accord them a bargaining leverage from which they could seek government support, “new hero” would instead become the symbolic metaphor for their containment. Further, the feminization of the hero-image would serve only to valorize the ‘feminine’ traits necessary for producing the cheap and docile worker-subjects that the nation would need to export in

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 212

the international labor market. Calling them new heroes assigns them a deceptively enviable position in the political, economic and cultural imagination of the nation, and in the process condemns them to a destiny of fulfilling a historical task, of sacrificing their bodies for the nation in pious obedience. As heroes, the nation would not look to them as citizens to protect in the face of dangers, but would call upon them to offer their bodies and 'personhoods' in defense of the nation. In this interpellation, the process of according national prestige to their status also effectively seals through discourse their status of subordination within the hierarchies of the global economy.

In this sense perhaps, Contemplacion was indeed fulfilling her historically assigned role as hero/martyr. But in failing to save her life and thus failing the nation as a whole, what the government leaders failed to calculate was the deep, instant but enduring impact it would have on the collective psyche of the Filipino people. Government leaders would not have been able to grasp the difference between a hegemonic gesture of interpellation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the political act of a people claiming and naming a hero for themselves in an act of identification and resistance within a highly contested discursive field. The Contemplacion hero/martyr phenomenon was of the latter type, and it is Contemplacion's story perhaps, rather than Cory Aquino's gesture of institutional interpellation, that would prove to be more effective in galvanizing among the migrant workers and their families a sense of collective agency as subjects in history.

**Chapter Four**  
**AN OVERVIEW OF THE NARRATIVES:**  
**FIVE WOMEN'S JOURNEY TO HONG KONG**

This chapter presents a profile of five Filipina migrant domestic workers and an overview of the narratives of their journey from their villages and hometowns in the Philippines to the households that are the place of their employment in Hong Kong. It also seeks to introduce some of the ways by which certain themes and issues are traced and highlighted in the reading of the narratives. This chapter serves to foreground Chapters Five, Six and Seven which present a summarized retelling of the stories as narrated in oral interviews and codified as written text., and which also offers a reading of the stories as narratives that are embedded within and struggling against a larger social text.

In listening to the stories and reading the narratives, the first important thing the listener/reader/researcher tries to do is to listen to what the storyteller is trying to say. What she seems to want to say (or not to say) about herself, her 'life', her relationship with others, and what 'migration' means to her . How she constructs the meaning of the experience of migration – to herself as well as to others – may reveal the ways by which she understands her location and position as gendered subject. The narratives, however, are to be read as open texts of 'self-representation' in a particular moment and which then need to be read 'against the grain' and related to a larger social text. It is unfortunate that somewhere in the process of codifying the stories into written texts, many important elements in the storytelling are lost – the nuances of sound and language, the inflections of voice, facial expressions and body gestures -- smiles, laughter, grimaces, the fidgeting of fingers, the waving of a hand, the touch on the shoulder, the welling up of tears. They not only register emotions but are as much a part of the tapestry of meanings as the enunciated words.

In order to read the stories of Mader Irma, Gina, Esther, Miriam and Rosario and search for clues and signs that may reveal structures of feelings, discursive practices, and the vectors of power at work, the following are paid attention to:

- the ways by which she chooses to represent and name herself, the words and metaphors she uses to present her experiences ;
- the significant actors she includes in her stories and the way she relates with others;
- the events and aspects of her life which she chooses to recover in memory and represent in her storytelling;

- the feelings and thoughts she expresses about her experience of ‘migration’ and what it means to her;
- the emotional ‘minefields’ and watershed moments in which emotions are most intensely played out and/or suppressed;
- the significant events, crises and conjunctures which result in shifts or which mark the turning points in her life, and which may possibly reveal the sites of conflicts and conflicting positionalities behind or against which certain choices are exercised;
- the meanings invested not only in specific acts or gestures but also in certain objects and symbols;
- the multiple stories that unfold in each narrative, giving clues and traces to issues which could be related to theory

### **1. Memory and migration: in between the past and the future**

While the temporal frame of the stories begins with childhood and ends with the present, it is significant to note that all the women interviewed cited the day that marks the beginning of her departure to Hong Kong as the single most momentous event in her narration. All five women could vividly remember the day when they left their village or hometown, and the day when they arrived in Hong Kong. When asked about the year in which her husband died, Mader Irma, a widow of several years, said she could not remember. She struggled to recover it from memory, and then said, “it happened about two years before I came to Hong Kong, so if I came here in 1978, then my husband must have died in 1976.” When asked about what it was that first attracted Esther to her fiancée of more than nine years, she said she could not remember, because it was “such a long time ago.” Yet Esther could remember very well the day she arrived in Hong Kong nine years ago, how she met her employer, and what her employer first asked her to do as soon as she arrived in her employer’s house.

It is perhaps plausible that memory selects and that memory suppresses precisely those which are most painful, like the death of a loved one, or those events which produce the most difficult emotions to control, like falling in love for the first time. Such selection and suppression of memories may perhaps be part of the effort to discipline one’s emotions when confronted by the difficult experience of migration and separation from family and loved ones.

Nevertheless, it seems apparent that for all five women, the beginning of their journey as a migrant domestic helper marks an important turning point in their lives – it registers the crossing of spatio-temporal borders, demarcates the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of their lives, divides

the time of the past (“in those days before coming to Hong Kong”) and the time of the present (right now that I’m here in Hong Kong?), marks the boundaries of “over there, back home” and “over here in Hong Kong” of the geographical spaces they occupy, and perhaps of perceptions and choices of who one was and who one is in the here and now (“What was I before, like before I came to Hong Kong?” “Sometimes I wonder how it is that I turned out to be like this, how I have become what I am now.”)

## **2. *Pangarap* (dreams and desires) and a reimagination of the future**

The experience of migration also serves as the reference point that marks the boundaries between the present and the future. Echoing my question, Esther asks, What do you mean by what I want to do, what I want to become, do you mean in the future, after I go home for good?” “For good” has become a singular colloquial expression among Filipina domestic helpers to refer to going back to the Philippines, with the implicit assumption that it means to go home finally and permanently.

The imagination of the future begins only with “for good” and “termination of the contract,” which divides the here and now, and the thereafter, of what I am now and what I want to become, the spatio-temporal site for the possibility of the realization of *pangarap*. *Pangarap* is a Tagalog word used to mean anything or everything from dreams, hopes, desires, aspirations, wishes, deepest longing. *Pangarap* is also what is meant by the question, *Ano ang gusto mong maging* (what would you like to become), or *Anong pinakagusto mong mangyari sa buhay mo* (what do you desire to happen the most in your life). Unless *pangarap* is used in the sense, *mangarap ka na lang* (just go on dreaming), *pangarap* should be distinguished from the colloquial word *pantasya*, which means fantasy, or *ilusyon* (from the word illusion), which usually are used to refer to the unreachable, the unrealizable dreams which can only be possible in the realm of fantasy.

Four of the women had clear ideas about what they want to do “after termination of the contract,” or after “going home for good.” In some of the interviews, I get the sense from their ways they tell the stories of how they live lives in the present, “in Hong Kong (the time in Hong Kong as constitutive of the here and now of the present), that in between the “past” (the “prior to Hong Kong” past) and the future (the post-Hong Kong future), there seems to be a suspension of ‘time’ -- whether it is an epic period of 26 years (as in the case of Mader) or nine years (as in the case of Esther and Miriam), it is a long period of waiting, of anticipating the day when they go home for good. Four of the women expressed longings to “go home for good” for various reasons, even as they also think of wanting to stay on in Hong Kong and to do other jobs (in the case of Gina, to become a factory worker in Hong

Kong, and in the case of Esther, to set up a small retail shop at Worldwide House), to travel to other countries (to become domestic helpers in Italy, as in the case of Gina and Esther, or to become a factory worker in Korea, as in the case of Miriam ). Only one of them, Rosario, doesn't see herself going home "for good" in the near future. Before coming to Hong Kong to work as a domestic helper, Rosario was a political activist, organizing rural women and urban poor women in her hometown in the Visayas. Now that her eldest son is going to college and now that she has immersed herself in organizing Filipina migrant workers in Hong Kong, Rosario has found new reasons to stay in Hong Kong much longer – "for good" doesn't appear in her immediate horizon.

### **3. Profiles of five women – mothers, daughters, students, widows and wives**

Three of the women described their families as basically poor peasants. To this day, their fathers and brothers continue to live as farmers, tilling the land on which they spent their childhood. One woman's father earned his living as a mechanic. One woman was married to the secretary of the mayor of her hometown. All five women finished their high school studies, two of them received vocational training. One woman completed two years in a nursing college. One woman holds a Bachelor of Science degree. In all five women, the coming to Hong Kong had been precipitated by a crisis related to the family. Their coming to Hong Kong was done with the encouragement and assistance of sisters and sisters-in-law who had already been working here. One woman came to work in Hong Kong in order to support her children after her husband died. Two women said they came here because they wanted and needed to send their younger siblings to school. One of them said she came here to pay off the medical expenses of her father.

Rosario graduated from the University of the Philippines with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Sciences. In high school she won a scholarship for medical studies, but since she became an activist during her university days, she gave up her plans to be a doctor. In 1993 her father underwent two surgical operations and, having to pay off the hospital bills, she found herself deep in debt. Receiving just a meager allowance as an organizer, she could not imagine how she could pay off her debts. After a year of contemplating her options, she decided to come here to Hong Kong with the help of her younger sister. For the past nine years she has been working for the same employer – both husband and wife treat her well (like a member of the family), and don't make specific demands about housework but mainly expect her to tutor the children and to assist them in their research work for their post graduate studies. For the first two years in Hong Kong she immersed herself in her work under her employers, confining herself to her employer's house. After a while, she felt frustrated that she had been unproductive in terms of 'political work' (*sa dalawang taon na*

*iyon, imagine, wala akong nagawa, ni wala man lang akong na-organisa?* In those two years, imagine, I didn't do anything, I didn't organize a single migrant worker?!), and so she searched for networks and organizations to associate herself with ("it should be the right connection"). Today she is vice-president of a Filipino association whose main aim is "to fight for migrant workers' rights and welfare." It is only in her immersion in what she refers to as "political work" while being able to provide for her children's education and other needs, that she is able to 'recover' an old self, 'reconnect' with her old life, and find meaning in her life here in Hong Kong. In her own words, the social cost of her political choices – the insistence to continue her political work and the insistence to come here to Hong Kong in order to work – has been tremendous. Her defiance of her husband's desire for her to stay home and take care of the children ("He wants me to go home everyday at five o'clock and cook the meals for the children."), largely contributed to the outbreak of a crisis in their marriage. Rosario separated from her husband a few years ago.

Gina and Mader Irma are two widows, but with such contrasting experiences in Hong Kong. Mader Irma is 69 years old and has been working in Hong Kong for nearly 26 years already for the same "amo", which is the Tagalog word for master/employer. (It is the word used by Filipina domestic helpers to refer to their employers.). She has seven children. After her husband died, she tried doing odd jobs ("It's so embarrassing – I tried all sorts of things, like even selling salted fish on the streets."). Feeling sorry for her, Mader Irma's sister-in-law who was then working in Hong Kong found an "amo" for her. She turned out to be a good one. Living very comfortably like a kind of a socialite, her "amo" was very fond of traveling and going to ballroom dances. She treated Irma well, and relied largely on Irma to run the household and raise the three children. The children became so attached to Irma that her "amo" refuses to let her retire. For some years now, Irma's son has also been working in the same household. Now her daughter-in-law will also be coming to Hong Kong to work for the same family. Irma is happy -- when her daughter-in-law comes, she will finally be able to go home because she is now "very, very, very tired." In her hometown in the Philippines she has built a house and plans to set up a small business. Through the years she was able to accumulate more than twenty boxes of goods to sell, enough to fill up an entire room. Her sons have said, "Mother, it is time for you to rest. We now have a vehicle of our own. When you go home we will take you everywhere, anywhere you go." Her friends are looking forward to her homecoming so that they can take Irma ballroom dancing. Perhaps like Irma's *amo*, she can now enjoy a life of leisure. Irma is the epitome of a successful OCW/DH ---her younger relatives and fiends who are also working in Hong Kong, or aspiring to work in Hong Kong look up to her as their role model. The advice she gives them? Just be patient and endure the suffering, even if it's difficult. As the old people say, without endurance, one

cannot enjoy beef stew. But Irma attributes her “good fortune” to God’s mercy to a widow like her, because she has been blessed with a good *amo*.

Gina was not so fortunate. She came to Hong Kong in 1982, through the assistance of her sister-in-law. Her husband was a free-lance carpenter while she worked in a small factory. She never used her married name at the factory because the owner did not want to hire married women. With her husband having taken to drinking, and with three children to feed, married life was not easy for her. She thought, with what we are earning, we can feed our children but we will never be able to send them to school. And that’s when she decided to go abroad. Her husband was against it (“Just why has going abroad suddenly become fashionable these days,” he said). When she left, he prayed that she would get sick so that she would decide to come home. From the moment she began her work in Hong Kong with her *amo*, she was subjected to a long list of “do not do this and do not do that.”). The most difficult part of her job was being confined to the house all the time, not being able to go out, and feeling like she was constantly being watched and controlled. She stayed with her *amo* for eleven years and believed that her *amo* was ‘very kind’ to her because they didn’t abuse her physically. Later she opted for a stay-out arrangement with a new *amo* and stayed in a boarding house. She realized then how different it felt to be living in a house full of friends. She says now of her eleven years with her first *amo*, “I wonder how I could have endured that prison for such a long time!”

Separation from their loved ones and family was, and continues to be, the most painful cost of working overseas. The long nights were always the hardest. In her first few years in Hong Kong, Irma tried not to feel the pain of missing her children during daytime and kept herself busy at work. But every night, she would retreat to her room and spread a towel on her pillow to soak up the tears. Gina’s most painful moment was when she came home two years after she first left for Hong Kong, her youngest daughter could not even recognize her. Rosario tried to make up to her children by calling them up frequently and discussing their lessons in school over the phone. “I want them to know that even while I’m away I’m still fulfilling my responsibilities to them, she says.” “The most painful part,” she says, “is knowing that you are a mother but you just gave birth to them and yet you can’t even say that you know your own children.” Miriam, who came here to Hong Kong in order to send her younger siblings to school says that she misses her youngest sister the most because she and her older sister practically raised her. Whenever she feels the pangs of loneliness and longing for her family, she tries to find something to do to keep her busy – she would clean the house, fidget around, do all kinds of things to forget how much she misses home. Esther, who was able to send her three younger siblings to college with her earnings in Hong Kong, looks forward to family reunions because she knows that her parents are happy when they

see all eight children together. She misses home but knows that she cannot go home for good yet because her siblings are not yet finished with their studies. Her only comfort is that her siblings are doing well in their studies and are deeply grateful to her. Everytime she goes home, she yearns to cry on her siblings' shoulders, to tell them how life in Hong Kong has been difficult for her, but she stops herself from doing so. "I don't want them to see me cry," she insists.

For all five women, the 'voice' of male authority – its presence or absence -- has proven to be significant in many different ways. When Gina was a child, her father did not want her to go to school because, anyway, he said, you're just a girl. Secretly, Gina's mother encouraged her to go to school saying that she will save money, sell a pig or a chicken just so Gina would be able to continue her schooling. Rosario's husband tried to dissuade her from going to Hong Kong, but she was very close to her father and felt it was her responsibility as a daughter to support his medical treatment. When Esther's father had a stroke, it was Esther who footed most of the hospital bills. Now her father is no longer fit enough to farm. Esther's siblings told her that one day her father cried, saying, "I feel so sorry for Esther. If it were not for Esther I would have died. I feel so sorry for her, because if I die, she will be burdened with so much responsibility". Recently, Esther was able to purchase a small piece of land in her name, but which she offered to her eldest brother to till. She doesn't get any share from the harvest but, once in a while, because her brother is a "kind" man, he would also give her some of the harvest. Miriam and her older brother finished high school at the same time. She was very good in Math and wanted to go on to college but their "budget" fell short. So she gave way to her brother. She said, "You just go on to college, big brother. I'll just take up vocational training for now. Just go on, I can manage myself." Later she had an uncle who wanted to send her to college to study education so that she could teach their children. She said she did not want to be a teacher and wanted to study criminology. Criminology was her life – *iyon talaga ang pangarap ko sa buhay* (that is really and truly the dream of my life.) Her uncle said it was not possible for her at all to study criminology because she's a woman. Her big brother tried to placate her and said, "Little sister, I won't be able to support your studies anyway because I can't afford it. Why don't we just start saving some money first." She then agreed. So they tried to save and save until she landed in Hong Kong. Now she worries not only about the future of her siblings, but about the two children of her eldest brother because he's only a farmer. "How will they go to school?" She frets. So she and her older sister pooled their money and bought a second-hand vehicle for their eldest brother. That was one of the most emotional moments in their life, she said. When they presented the vehicle to their eldest brother, he broke into tears and refused to accept it. They tried to persuade him, but he still refused. "Big brother,"

Miriam finally said, “if you don’t want to take it for yourself, then put it in the children’s name. It is really for them, for their future, so that they can go to school.” At that point the entire family – all five sisters and brothers, father and mother – broke down and cried. Today her brother uses the vehicle to earn a living. Miriam says that everyday he carefully cleans the vehicle with loving care.

What about their male employers? What is their experience with them? Esther said, “Ah, he’s OKAY! He doesn’t talk much – when he comes home he just goes to the room to watch TV.” Miriam said the husband of her *amo* is very kind because he’s “very quiet”. A good male *amo*, it seems, is a quiet one.

#### **4. Woman as domestic helpers, migrant workers and diasporic citizens of a nation state**

The voices of women – women who played important roles in the storyteller’s lives – echo in the stories. They are the mothers, sisters and sisters-in-law who formed networks of support, nurtured them in their childhood and eventually assisted and accompanied them in their journeys to Hong Kong to inhabit the new identity of migrant domestic worker.

For these five women, the experience of migration/diaspora would continue to revolve around relationships to family and in which the crossing of geographical and cultural lines primarily means physical separation from family and place of origin. This doesn’t mean, however, a total absence of attachment to a collective cultural identity of being a ‘Filipino(a).’ Nuances of language give clues to the complexity of attachments. In referring to place of origin, the storyteller uses the ‘*sa amin*’ – the place that is ours – meaning the place where she grew up, where her family resides, the place which she considers home. In addressing the listener, however, the storytellers usually use the phrase, *sa atin*, to refer to the country the Philippines, homeland, our common place of origin, suggesting identification with a collective cultural and national identity and recognition that both she and the researcher share a common identity.

For the storyteller, the experience of migration triggers a kind of ‘cultural shock,’ which in turn brings into play cultural differences and puts cultural identity in sharp focus: “So, this is what Chinese food is!” (Miriam) Negative experiences sometimes lead them to universalize or essentialize cultural traits. “The Chinese people are different. What comes out of their mouths when they are angry are quite something!” (Esther)

The consciousness of being diasporic citizens of a nation-state is given shape to by feelings of frustration over the impossibility of a future in the country, and a certain recognition of dependence on income generated outside the country. It is Rosario who articulated most explicitly her conscious sense of belonging to ‘nation’ and a more

systematic political ideology from which she views and analyzes the connection between nation and migration. Nation is also a source of frustrated future: “I don’t believe in education. what’s the point of graduating when there will be no jobs in our country in the future...For as long as the political and economic conditions in the Philippines don’t change, Filipinos will continue to flee and seek jobs abroad.”

Esther sums up her feelings, attitudes and notions of ‘nation’ in a single utterance, “*paano na lang ang Pilipinas kung walang abroad.*” Just what would the Philippines be if there were no ‘abroad.’ Here ‘abroad,’ for Esther becomes a complex term that does not mean a geographical place – it signifies on one level the possibility of employment and abroad (in its literal sense), and on another level, it suggests the interiority of ‘abroad’ to the constitution of Philippine national life. ‘Abroad’ then becomes an integral part of the nation’s survival, life, and future. This thinking also suggests that the economic survival of the family, which depends on employment abroad, is extended to the logic of national survival through self-identification with a broader collective whose plight is similar to hers. The notion of ‘nation’ and national belonging becomes tied to the notion of a common plight and a shared future, rather than an abstract construct that defines the starting point for collective identity. It would seem that family and place of origin assume a more productive position from which primordial collective identity is understood, constructed and articulated.

**Chapter Five**  
**TWO MOTHERS:**  
**READING AND RETELLING THE STORIES OF MADER IRMA AND GINA**

The narrative of motherhood in the Philippines has often been portrayed as a story of a woman's sacrifice for the survival of her family and the preservation of the traditional kinship system where the male figure of authority prevails. Gender relations in the family have been the focus of conflicting discourses. Many have argued that women in the Philippines enjoy a more privileged status in the family than the rest of their Asian counterparts and have gone so far to say that in traditional Philippine family structures, women are "almost equal" to men<sup>98</sup>. Some have traced this back to the pre-colonial status of women in which women were recognized and prized not only for their role in the domestic sphere, but also for their contribution to the public arena as spiritual leaders of the community, healers, and even leaders.<sup>99</sup> The more widely accepted explanation for the subordination of women is the arrival of the Spanish colonizers who forcibly introduced and imposed Christianity and masculinist values, and who sought to 'mold' the native woman into their own ideals of femininity and instill the virtues of docility, submissiveness.<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, contemporary critiques of the discourse of "equality in the family" point out that while women have often employed individualized and covert strategies to exert their influence in the family<sup>101</sup>, earning them a place as 'silent but influential partners',<sup>102</sup> this position may not necessarily be able to compete with male authority which has been institutionalized in a more formal and visible way. Fathers and husbands remain as authority figures and women have been observed to be 'protective of male egos'<sup>103</sup> as to 'take pains not to appear dominant in the household or public affairs.'<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Aguilar, Delia. *The Social Construction of the Filipino Woman*, in *Towards a Nationalist Feminism*, (Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 1988), 35 and Chant, Sylvia and McIlwine, Cathy. *Women of a Lesser Cost, Female Labor, Foreign Exchange and Philippine Development*. (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995), 10-12.

<sup>99</sup> Sr. Mary John Mananzan, *Woman and Religion*, in Mananzan, Sr. Mary John, ed. *Woman and Religion*. (Manila. The Institute of Women's Studies. St. Scholastica's College, 1988), 7-8.

<sup>100</sup> Mananzan, and Francisco and Pagaduan

<sup>101</sup> Raul Pertierra, *Viscera Suckers and Female Sociality : The Philippine Asuang*, in Department of Sociology-Anthropology, eds. SA 21. *Selected Readings*. (Quezon City: Office of Research Publications, Ateneo de Manila University), 184-201; Mary Hollsteiner, *The Wife*, in Department of Sociology-Anthropology, eds. SA 21. *Selected Readings* (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Ateneo de Manila University), 251-75.

<sup>102</sup> Sylvia Chant and Cathy McIlwine, 1995. *Women of a lesser cost, female labor, foreign exchange and Philippine development*. ( Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995), 275-80.

<sup>103</sup> Buenaventura-Ojeda in Chant

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

Surely the large-scale out-migration of women and their entry into the labor force impacts profoundly on gendered power relations in the domestic and public spheres. Just as surely, it also reveals the cracks in the traditional patriarchal family system that is trapped within the increasing failure of the state to ensure the survival of its citizens and secure their future. The outward-bound journey of migration is also a narrative of mothers' journeys – of mothers leaving behind their own families and children to take care of families and children of strangers, if only to ensure the survival of their family. It is a complex journey, they realize, for in the process, motherhood and womanhood take on a new meaning.

Though the stories of Mader Irma and Gina are very different, what weaves them together are the narrative of a mother struggling against rural poverty, the inadequacy of social security systems, the machismo embedded in family and governance structures, the male voice of authority directing and confining women, the exclusion of women from public life, the marginalization of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, and the feeling of being devalued as mothers and as domestic workers. Their particular positive and negative experiences while working in Hong Kong as foreign domestic helpers influence their notions about self and others, about how they relate with the family/community in the Philippines, and shape their ideas about what possibilities the future may hold.

### **1. “When you come home, we will take you wherever you want to go”: The Story of Mader Irma**

Mader Irma is 69 years old. She has been living in Hong Kong for nearly 26 years and working for the same *amo*. Mader (colloquial for mother) has earned her name from her many Filipina friends, most of whom are younger than her, who look to her with respect, admiration and fondness. Mader Irma's *amo* is a widow like her. But unlike Mader, the *amo* never had any need to work for an income. Mader Irma points out with admiration, and perhaps a bit of envy, that all her *amo* ever does is to go ballroom dancing and shopping in China for her dancing clothes. It is Mader Irma who practically raised her *amo*'s three children. With pride, she declares that her *amo* loves her very much and doesn't want to let her go. When the children were growing up, Mader Irma's *amo* traveled a lot, confident in the knowledge that for as long as Mader is around the house, her own children will be able to eat well and to eat on time. Mader Irma herself left behind seven children of her own in the Philippines.

Mader Irma came to Hong Kong in 1978. By then her husband had already died. Mader has forgotten what year her husband died, but recalls that it was about two years before she came to Hong Kong. Mader Irma was born in Quezon province where her father and mother

had settled. Her father worked as a tailor while her mother 'just stayed at home.' When she was in high school, she met the young man who was to be her husband. She recalls shyly but with pride that when he first saw her, he didn't want to let her go anymore, because he said he wouldn't want her to fall into someone else's hands! They got married in 1954. Her husband, who was then a law student in a private university in Manila, gave up his studies in order to settle down in Irma's hometown.

Mader Irma's husband served as the town mayor's secretary for twenty years. He was quite fond of politics and would attend to the mayor's needs, organize his appointments, entertained his guests, supervised his electoral campaigns. Since her husband loved to drink and had to drink a lot in his work, he soon fell quite ill. You see, Mader points out, it's because he has to do this public relations for the mayor. It was with a mixture of naive pride and regret that Mader recalled her husband's life in politics. It seemed that it was her husband who enjoyed the limelight while she herself stayed in the background as a dutiful wife.

With seven children to fend for, Mader Irma was at her wits end! You know what it's like in those days, she points out. There was no family planning then! No radio, no TV, so when the corners of the house turn dark....her voice trails off with laughter. Oh my God, she says, you can't imagine what it's like to have seven children! One would be asleep in the corner, the other one you wouldn't know where he was, and at 4:00 in the afternoon I would start cooking already!

Mader points out that some people said that she would be able to get a pension of at least PhP 2,000 a month because her husband had once worked for Vietnam. She doesn't really know what her husband's work in Vietnam was – all she knows is that some people were working under his supervision. But she was never able to get any pension because she didn't know how to go about applying for it. She doesn't seem concerned at all about this, and neither did she have the desire to know exactly what her husband was doing in Vietnam at that time.

Widowed just when she turned forty, Mader didn't know what job to do so she scraped a living selling salted fish in the streets. Her sister-in-law took pity on her and found an employer for her in Hong Kong. A very good employer, it would turn out. The Lord is wise, Mader Irma says, for the Lord gave me a good employer. It was not easy for Mader Irma to prepare for her journey and employment. In those days, there was no recruitment agency to turn to. She had to travel all the way to Manila from her province to attend to the paperwork. It took several months before she finally flew off on the plane – the newborn baby who was to be her *alaga* (Tagalog word for the child in your care) was by then three months old.

Hong Kong looked so different in those days, Mader Irma recalls. The streets to the Star Ferry were still muddy, the buildings in TST old and decrepit. The entrance fee to Ocean Park was only twelve dollars! Instead of the throngs of foreign domestic helpers strolling in the parks during Sundays, there was just a handful of four or five Filipinas, Mader and her friends. And for Mader Irma, the journey to Hong Kong was a journey of many “firsts” – the first time to ride on an airplane, the first time to travel outside the country, the first time to be employed on a full-time regular basis, the first time to be separated from her children that long.

Mader Irma was overjoyed when her sister-in-law found an employer for her. The days of hawking salted fish in the streets would now be over. She would be able to feed her seven children and send them to school. When she finally landed in Hong Kong and immersed herself in her work as a maid, she was so shocked – *Diyos ko, ganito pala kahirap!* Oh my God, so it is this difficult! The most painful thing of all was being separated from her seven children. She immersed herself in work so that she wouldn’t have time to feel the pain of loneliness. But the nights were the most difficult of all. Part of Mader Irma’s bedtime ritual was to lay a towel on her pillow to soak away her nightly tears.

She recalls that her youngest child had just started primary school and even had to stop schooling for a while. The children took care of themselves, with the eldest one who was already married by that time checking in on them once in a while. Knowing that Mader Irma was ‘working abroad’ and was thus earning in ‘dollars’, the shopkeepers in the neighborhood would invite the children to purchase their necessities on credit. The neighbors were so good to my children, Mader Irma pointed out. But she also knew that in those days, in the late seventies, village folk looked up to overseas workers with absolute faith in their purchasing capacity.

She would eventually get used to life in Hong Kong. Soon her amo employed two of her children. And then it was not long before other friends and relatives came. Mader Irma no longer felt lonely because she was soon surrounded by many young people who, like her many years ago, had left home and families behind to work in Hong Kong. When her amo was in Australia to supervise the children’s schooling, Mader and her friends would organize weekly barbecues in her *amo*’s garden. Thus she found a way to enjoy the life in Hong Kong.

Mader Irma draws a striking contrast between life in Hong Kong and the Philippines – Here you can paint your lips red and people will even mistake you for a tourist, but in the Philippines you would just be going around in a shapeless housedress and flat wooden slippers! Mader points out in good humor. It is obvious that in Hong Kong she enjoys a certain way of positioning herself that she never had in the Philippines She said she is happy

in Hong Kong because she is always surrounded by her youthful friends, and in their company she herself feels young.

Once when her *amo* was preparing to move to a new house, they all had to live in a hotel for a few months. You can go on a holiday in the Philippines first, if you want, her *amo* told Mader, because there's nothing to clean here in the hotel. So off to the Philippines she went. After two months she wanted to go back to Hong Kong, for her pocket was soon empty. You know what it's like in the Philippines, Mader said. No matter if you bring a sack full of money – it will all pour out. No money comes in, all of it goes out! So I told myself, I should now go back to Hong Kong and start scrubbing toilets again so that I can have money. At least in Hong Kong you know that during pay day you will be counting dollars. Whereas in the Philippines, you'll only have the hairs on your body to count!

Mader Irma feels that her *amo* and *alaga* love her so much that they won't let her go. The children treat her like a grandmother. The youngest one, now 24 years old and married, would hug Mader everytime she would visit -- but she doesn't even hug her own mother, Mader would point out. She is so close to the children and so confident in her own place that she can scold them herself and refuse their requests. Once, the 27 -year old son asked her to make her coffee. Why? Mader Irma said, you can do it yourself, you're very big already! Are you not getting married? Mader Irma asked him. Because I'm going home for good very soon but you're still not married! The young man asked her why she wants to go home to the Philippines. Because I'm very old here in Hong Kong and I'm very, very tired! Mader Irma answered back. No, *waaahhh!* The young man said.

At this point, Mader pauses in her storytelling, and extends her hand to show off the pictures of her grandchildren. She is beaming with pride. Then she fishes out an old faded photograph, kept in her wallet for a long time. That is my *amo*, you see. And that baby there is my *alaga*.

Mader Irma also feels rather close to her *amo*. When her *amo*'s husband died, she told Mader, Irma, I'll just be like you. I won't get married again. And whenever her *amo* sees her feeling tired, she would ask, Irma, are you okay? Now her *amo* has sent for Mader's daughter-in-law so she can work in the same house. Thus Mader Irma saw her chance – she told her *amo* that when her daughter-in-law comes she will go home to the Philippines for good. Her *amo* said, "No way you are so quick, Irma. You know I miss you. Why don't you just stay here in Hong Kong. I will not give you salary but I will give you money for shopping! Mader Irma feels her *amo* wants her to stay, even if she's just hanging around the house. Imagine, Mader Irma says, she will give me shopping money! But Mader says they cannot do anything to stop her this time.

After twenty six years of scrubbing toilets Mader Irma is now she ready to go home “for good.” She is “very, very tired.” Besides, she is excited about her future in the Philippines. A warehouse of huge packing boxes filled with products from Hong Kong to sell to the Philippines awaits her. Her children are waiting to take her around in their tricycle, in their jeepney, to take her anywhere she wants to go, for this time, they said, she deserves to enjoy a life of leisure. Other friends are waiting for her, too – one of them beckons her to come back for she plans to take Mader Irma out to go ballroom dancing.

The interview with Mader Irma had taken place in a crowded restaurant, surrounded by a circle of friends. It took a very long time before she finally spoke to narrate her story. Just what is there for me to say? When she began, there was no stopping. It seems clear that she is bravely trying to present her story as a narrative of success. After all she did successfully stay in Hong Kong for 26 years straight! Wouldn't that be considered success enough? Indeed, she is a role model for other younger Filipina domestic workers, to whom she would give only one piece of advice: you have to be patient and endure the hardships. She invokes an old Filipino saying, without patience, one cannot enjoy any beef stew. But she whispers that the key is always to have the right *amo*. Of course, she points out, if your *amo* is not good, if your *amo* is like the other *amos* who are always so demanding, then naturally that negatively affects your work performance as well.

Mader Irma presents a picture of traditional gender roles in the family – her husband providing for the family while she ‘just stayed at home.’ Neither did she have a clear idea of what exactly her husband's job was, except for the time when he was the mayor's secretary, and even then her most significant memories of his job are the ‘public relations’ events of wining and dining the mayor's guests. The home was Mader Irma's domain and she seemed content not to step out beyond it until she had to fend for herself and her children when her husband died.

Mader Irma's religiosity is also striking. Every good thing she has she feels she owes to the wisdom and generosity of the Lord, to a transcendent being. Her luck and fortune she attributes to having a good *amo*. Nowhere in her narrative did she show any self-pity nor exaggerate the pains of her sacrifices. It is a portrait of a ‘good mother’ accepting and enacting her role with wisdom, quiet courage and a good sense of humor.

Mader Irma was indeed fortunate to have found an *amo* who was perfectly compatible with her – a mirror image in the sense that while Mader Irma was the ‘quintessential good wife’ in rural Philippines, her *amo* was the ‘quintessential good socialite-wife’ in her upper-class world. A perfect match -- what the other lacked, the other provided, each one understanding perfectly the other's need. Her *amo* knew that the secret to keeping the ‘equilibrium’ was to enable Irma to have a family life of her own, and thus the hiring of

Irma's own children and close relatives. It was a perfect pair of two families supporting and depending on each other, each one enacting its socially assigned role.

It is only in hearing her admit that she is 'very, very tired,' that one gets the sense of her weariness and her eagerness to come home. To go ballroom dancing. To be taken around in a tricycle. To set up her own business. Like most returning domestic workers, the only other possible subject-position they can imagine in the future after going home 'for good' is to be entrepreneurs and petty capitalists. What is inspiring, however is Mader Irma's optimism. When she finally goes home for good she will most likely be 70 years old. But then for her that would only mean a new beginning.

## **2. "If only my dreams were just a few": The Story of Gina**

Gina is 45 years old, a widow, and has been living and working for the past nineteen years in Hong Kong. She was born to a family of eight children. She recalls that since the beginning of time her father was already tilling the land of a rich landlord in their province. Her father was a farmer while her Mother was just helping him. Gina describes in great detail the tenant-landlord relationship between her father and Pablo Cordero, and how, every harvest season, they would have to give twenty *cavans* of rice to the landlord (one *cavan* is equivalent to 50 kilos of rice), whether in time of good harvest or in time calamity. An average harvest would comprise 90 *cavans* and, after deducting the 20 sacks as rent paid to the landlord, the rest is used to pay debts owed to others for the purchase of pesticides, fertilizers, etc. Usually, what is left is just enough for their own consumption. When her father died just two years ago, her brother-in-law took over the tilling of the land, and to this day this kind of feudal relationship with the landlord is in place.

Of her childhood, Gina says that as children they were only happy when they were in school because at home they would have to help out in the field or do housework. A constant source of tension between her mother and father was the issue of schooling for her and her female siblings. Her father would say to her and her sisters, Just why is it that you girls have to go to school? You will just end up getting married, anyway. You should stop your schooling now! Her mother, however, encouraged them and would secretly whisper to them, "You will go to school. Don't worry. I have many pigs and bananas to sell." Gina went on to reach her third year training as telephone operator.

Gina then went on to tell the story of how she got married, how she was employed as a worker at a desiccated coconut factory, how she ended up in Hong Kong, how she coped with her life and work in Hong Kong, how she helped organize a union, and how she sought

to nurture her relationship with her children. What is striking is how the 'voices' of the people who played a role in 'controlling' her echoed throughout her narrative - her father's voice, her husband's voice (Just why is it that this 'going abroad' has become so fashionable nowadays?), and later the voice of her employer. Aside from all these 'voices,' the only other 'voices' that she directly quoted throughout were that of her mother and that of her children.

In her narration, she seemed to depict the image of her father as a dominant figure whom she somewhat feared. In fact, the reason why she ended up getting married at age 18 is out of fear of her father. One night she came home late with her boyfriend. In those days, and in the rural areas, coming home at six o'clock pm was considered late, and staying out that late with a boyfriend is taboo. She seriously believed her father would run after her and hack her into pieces: "Really, that is true! He's serious! He will really come after me with a hatchet. Those really happened in those days in the villages!" So what she and her boyfriend, Danilo, a carpenter's son, did was to declare their intention to get married. Danilo went through the proper rituals of asking her hand for marriage. Her father was very angry with her and refused at first, but was prevailed upon by Gina's older siblings.

Gina learned the virtue of sacrifice and resourcefulness from her mother. She said she saw how hard her mother toiled in spite of the fact that she was very sickly, how she constantly worked and found ways to supplement the family income by planting vegetables in their backyard and raising pigs. It would be the income from such endeavors that would sustain the family, as the harvest from the rice hardly brought in any cash. Like her mother, Gina, too, turned out to be very resourceful and made sure she had a vegetable patch out of which she could make some money. It was Gina who, after only three months of marriage, managed to buy a *bahay kubo* (a small one-room ready made nipa hut) from her aunt which they set up in her mother's backyard.

Marriage was not her dream, she said. "*Nagsisi nga ako, eh,*" she said (*I regretted it later*). Her only dream, her only desire, ever since she was a little girl was to earn a little money so that when her mother would get sick they would have the money to take her to a hospital. But, it seems that her dreams and desires never ended. The whole narration of her story was marked by the shifting 'dreams and desires' that somehow shaped her life. Gina said, "*Hindi na maubos-ubos ang pangarap ko.*" (*My dreams and desires never finished, never ended.*). She used the term "*pangarap*", which is a Tagalog word literally translated as dreams, but is also used to mean desires, hopes, aspirations, deepest longing.

When she was married, her greatest desire at first was to earn and save some money in order to change the roof of her house from nipa leaves to galvanized iron. This was because everytime the typhoons or the rains came, the water would drip into the cottage. So she took on a job as a peeler in a small, Chinese-owned factory. She did manage to save some money

to change her roofing. But life was hard for Gina and Danilo, especially when three children came after two years of marriage. Danilo at that time was working with his father as a 'free-lance' carpenter. If he had any earnings at all, it would be something like ten pesos a day (perhaps with the exchange rate at that time, this would be the equivalent of one US dollar), sometimes, rather many times, there would be none. Whenever there was any spare money at all, she would immediately buy some clothing as Christmas presents for the children, even if the money came as early as September. This was to make sure that there was something for the children during Christmas. For isn't that what Christmas is for? Gina points out. Christmas is just for the children only! Never mind if the grown ups don't have anything during Christmas. Gina simply points out.

Was married life happy? Married life was happy because my in-laws were good to me. This was Gina's simple definition of a happy married life. It was, in fact, her sisters-in-law who encouraged her to go to Hong Kong to work as a domestic helper and who found an employer for her (under a "direct hire" arrangement). She finally agreed to go because Gina's next dream was to see her children go to school. At first she was reluctant, she said, but she was thinking, What about my children? How will I send them to school? Maybe I could feed them, but I will never be able to send them to school. Her husband did not want her to go: "*Ayaw niya, talagang ayaw niya. Sabi niya: Bakit pa kasi nauso-uso iyang pag-aabroad na iyan?*" (He didn't want me to. He really didn't want me to. He said, just why is it that going abroad has become so fashionable these days?) She did go, anyway. On the day she left her village she was so nervous she broke out into cold sweat.

Throughout the narration of her story, Gina's dreams are consistently represented as dreams of what she wanted for others: money to take her sick mother to the hospital, roofing for her family's house, money for her children's schooling, and later, a jeepney for her husband so he could have a regular income, then even much later, some savings which her husband could use as capital for a small business, then even much later, money to send her children to college, and right now, money to send her grandchildren to school. All these dreams she would achieve, "little by little," she said, but in her own words, the dreams were never exhausted. It is apparent in such dreams that, like her mother before her, she would take it upon herself to bear the burden of raising the family, this despite the hovering yet clearly distinguishable presence of male authority in the family.

Gina stayed with her first employer for eleven years. Upon her arrival at her employer's home straight from the airport, she was already given a written list of what she calls "*Do nots*." "*Do not sit on the sofa in the living room. Do not watch TV. When there are guests in the house, do not leave your room unless we call you...*" Gina sighs: "*Ang daming do nots!*" (There were so many do nots!). But the very first thing she was asked to do was to sort out a

huge pile of socks and to find the pairs; and then she was immediately told what and how to do the house cleaning, what and how to cook the following day's breakfast. She had her own room, but it was many months later that she found out that it was also the prayer room. Gina stayed with her employer for eleven years because she said they were kind to her.

This seemed to be another trait of Gina - her generous way of judging the goodness and kindness of her employers. She also said the same thing for the owner of the factory for which she worked. 'The factory owner was kind.' It was only when she continued narrating her story that she would point out the unfair practices in the factory, such as the quota system, which disadvantaged the workers especially during frequent electricity black outs. She said the same thing for her first employer in Hong Kong, that they were kind to her. Then it would later on come out in her story how she would be given food in small portions, "*parang pusa*," she said (*like a cat*), how she never received any cent beyond the minimum wage nor received any salary increase, nor, even after eleven years, received any long service payments.

Why would you say that your employer was kind to you? Gina said, They were kind to me because at least they didn't physically abuse me. It was as if the norm was to expect physical abuse, such that if your employer doesn't physically abuse you, then they must be kind. Gina adds, Also, they were kind to me because when my husband died, they took me to the airport and they even personally arranged for my reentry permit with the Immigration Department. It was only after a moment's reflection when Gina would exclaim, Oh, but I suppose that is because they really needed me and they really wanted to make sure that I come back to Hong Kong. Because really, when I went home to the Philippines for my husband's funeral, I didn't want to come back to Hong Kong at all.

After some more reflection, she finally says, I can say my employers were kind to me because they trusted me. That is so important. I knew they trusted me because they would leave money and jewelry around. It is significant to note how Gina values, above all, the question of 'trust' and yet it is also interesting to note that the fact that the employer found her above suspicion was, to Gina, a sign of kindness and goodness, as if, again, she had expected that she as a domestic helper, would be distrusted from the very beginning. This seems to reveal the inferior position on which she had put herself in at the onset. From the very moment she decided to come to Hong Kong, she had already the preconceived idea and acceptance of her subordinated and 'inferior' position. This self-image is reminiscent of the colonial subject who, under the gaze of the colonizer, is seen as an object of distrust. .

One of the most difficult things for Gina to adjust to was being confined inside the house all day, with no one to talk to, especially at night. She said she envied other domestic helper who had children to care for as every morning they would have a chance to go down

and into the street to take the children to the school bus. Staying inside the house for six days a week with no one to talk was really, for her, most oppressive. She notes that at least nowadays domestic helpers have mobile phones and they could call each other up and chat with each other at night in the privacy of their bedrooms. Much later, she would have the experience of 'staying out' and she stayed in a crowded boarding house. It was very expensive to keep, but for her it was paradise. She and her roommates could stay up late at night and tell stories and this, for her, was most precious. They are my family now, she says. Later during the interview, she said that when she looks back to the first eleven years she spent with her first employer, she would ask herself, Just how could I really have lasted there for eleven years, as if I was in a cage?

She observes that domestic helpers here in Hong Kong are treated as if they were 'things' or objects, and not people. What does she mean by this? You know, when you are doing something and your employer asks you to do something you have to immediately get up and do it, even if you are already doing something else. Then your time is also very limited and controlled. The truth is, domestic helpers look forward only to two things: their monthly salaries and their lai see. If not for these, why would they endure all these treatment? Now I wonder whether I will ever get used to a situation in which I won't be receiving a regular salary. That thought frightens me.

After her first two years in Hong Kong, Gina came home for the required two-week holiday. By that time her youngest daughter, whom she left as a baby, was already three years old. Gina cannot forget what her youngest daughter said. Turning to her older sibling, the youngest said, Nini, Nini, is this the mother you were talking about? Is this our mother? The youngest did not even know her! Then Gina's mother said, Go on, go on, go to your mother. Isn't it that you have always wanted a bicycle? Go to your mother and ask for a bike from her. And Gina indeed lost no time in buying a bicycle for her youngest daughter. Gina said, I wanted to buy her the bike, or anything she wanted, to make up for my absence, so the bike could replace me and make up for my absence.

These terms of endearment would continue. Gina laments now that every time her children call her up it's because someone is sick or they need money, or to tell her what clothes and other things they would like her to buy for them. She would of course lecture them about this, telling them that they shouldn't ask too much, that if they keep asking her for things, then indeed she would never be able to go back to the Philippines because she would never be able to have some savings. But deep inside she would feel very guilty and she would tell herself that she should give in to her children's desires because, Isn't this why I am in Hong Kong in the first place, so I could give my children what they want? Her children are very lucky, she says, because they at least don't have to endure the hardships she

herself had to endure when she was a child. While the children are the center of her dreams, they could also be the source of her deepest pains. She sadly points out that it hurts her to know that it seems the children take her for granted. It is as if my absence means nothing to them anymore, she whispers. "I am called a mother, but I don't even know my children. I don't know what their wants are. Once I cooked something for them and my children said, why did you cook this dish? We don't eat this. Grandma knows that we don't eat this dish!"

But Gina finds comfort in her network of Filipina friends in Hong Kong, whom she treats as her family. They are my family now. I can talk to them at night about my work, my life in Hong Kong. With my family in the Philippines, I can't talk to them about my work and my life here. What could they say about it?

If her children have always been the center of her deepest longings, it is 'work' that now seems to constitute the center of her life and her body. It is work that preoccupies her time and consumes the energies of her body. It is the friends who are engaged in work like hers with whom she has the most intimate conversations and closest ties. Gina's conception of time and labor have also changed while in Hong Kong. She points out that every time she goes back to the Philippines, she would get a bit bored by the slow pace of living: When I am there I wonder why is it that people seem to think it's okay to just be hanging around and sitting around? My body is already conditioned to work, and when I am in the Philippines, my body yearns to work.. She also said that her body would also look for the soft beds she had gotten used to in Hong Kong. The first time she went back to the Philippines she told her mother that she couldn't sleep because the *papag* (a traditional wooden bed with no mattress) was too hard.

Gina constantly uses the body or bodily experiences as reference point or metaphor for her notion of confinement (or literally translated, "imprisonment"), of cultural conditioning, as well as freedom or autonomy. In the latter part of the interview, she would say, My body is tired now. I want to go back to the Philippines. And then she would say again later, "*Hinahanap na ng katawan ko ang lumaya...*" (My body is now yearning for freedom.). What does freedom mean? You know, when I wake up in the morning and my body still doesn't want to get up, then I don't need to get up. But I know I'm not free because I know my body has to get up even if it doesn't want to.

If it was ever made possible, Gina would opt to apply for permanent residence in Hong Kong, for after all, she has spent nearly half her life in Hong Kong. She said that she knows however that foreign domestic helpers would never be allowed to become permanent residents in Hong Kong. She would like to be one, she said, so she could change jobs, and if she had a choice, she would like to be a factory worker. Being a factory worker, she said, is so much better, as she would have her own time, she would have better pay and perhaps she

could send more money to her children as she wants to send her grandchildren to school, and so on. It is interesting to note that 'factory worker' has come to symbolize an unattainable dream for Gina. It is just the latest among her endless dreams. She scolds herself: Perhaps if my dreams were just a few, then I would be able to finally return home.

But what of herself, what does she dream for herself? She was startled at the question. For myself? But I already told you my dreams.! But it seems those are your dreams are for others, or so that you can help others, like your mother, your husband, your children, your grandchildren. Gina did not seem to have a notion of 'dreams for herself.' After some thought, she finally said, What do I dream for myself? I want to go home. I want to be with my children finally. Now I want to be with my grandchildren.

Gina has been away from 'home' for nineteen years, and by home she refers to her village and community, rather than homeland, or nation as an abstract concept. To this day, she still calls her village her home. She has lived here in Hong Kong for nineteen years - nearly half her life - her closest friends are here in Hong Kong, her body has become 'conditioned' to life and work in Hong Kong, and Hong Kong is the locus of her dream of being a factory worker, which perhaps, from her position has come to symbolize the 'modern' ideal of upward social mobility. This she dreams of even as she seems to be resigned to the 'permanence of her impermanence.' When she is in the Philippines she longs for Hong Kong (I have already become attached somehow to Hong Kong.) Yet while in Hong Kong she expresses the longing, the desire to 'return home.' The longing to 'return home' perhaps symbolizes a longing to return to the past she has left behind, to recover time that has been lost. The desire to be a factory worker in Hong Kong, something she knows she will never be, perhaps symbolizes the deepest longing to break away from the confining, imprisoning present. Why these conflicting desires? Perhaps it is because, whether in the Philippines or in Hong Kong, Gina continues to be 'neither insider nor outsider.'

### **3. Reading the Stories of the Two Mothers:**

For both Mader Irma and Gina, the initial and immediate motivation to seek contractual employment overseas is primarily economic. For Mader Irma, it is basically the only available option for the survival of her family – she has seven children, never had a job outside the home, she had 'little' education, and plus, she is single parent. No options available in semi-rural hometown. For Gina, it is a step in preparation for the future, an investment toward her children's education, economic security, and the fulfillment of dreams. However, through the years, the experience of migration came to mean much more than a means to fulfill economic needs.

### *3.1. Transiting between two life/worlds*

The journey to Hong Kong as a foreign domestic worker would enable them to inhabit spaces and identities not accessible to them back home. In the process they would become acutely conscious of the difference between the life/world in Hong Kong and that which they left behind in the Philippines.

Both women would use the body as metaphors and registers of difference. Mader Irma says, You can paint your lips red and go out to the market as if you're 'dressed to kill.' Here there is the shifting between the image of a domesticated housewife (symbolized by the wooden slippers and shapeless housedress) to that of a 'smartly dressed modern woman, with a public life' (symbolized by the painted lips and the smart dress). With Gina, it is the body that notices the difference between the two worlds: I cannot sleep on a hard bed anymore. My stomach has problems with the water in the Philippines....When I am in the Philippines, my body yearns to work...I don't know just why it is that they think it's okay to just hang around doing nothing all the time.

Unknowingly perhaps, Mader Irma and Gina, from their location in Hong Kong acquire a new position from which they turn an eye to the Philippines, a look that closely resembles a colonial gaze – for it sees the Philippines in its image of backwardness, an image of its people as lazy, domesticated, dirty, dependent, untrustworthy, and unproductive. It is an acquired gaze that seems to mimic a colonial eye, turned towards the Philippines from a position of economic power and the superior location of Hong Kong as a symbol of progress and modernity. But whereas the colonial gaze is imposed from the position of an intruder, a force from the outside, Mader Irma and Gina's gaze is turned back to the motherland in a gesture of return. Unlike the colonizer, Mader Irma and Gina are intimately bound to the motherland, a homeland of backwardness and (un)promise – it is the land of their past and the land of their future, the womb from which they and their children were borne. Their gaze is that of a 'spectral presence'. If the colonizer turns its hegemonic gaze towards the place of backwardness in order to consolidate its position and identity of superiority, the 'spectral' migrant worker turns its gaze and sees the backwardness of the place that she has temporarily left in order to justify the 'sacrifice' of her journey and consolidate the identity that she must inhabit so that she could carry on with her life of subjection.

Mader and Gina may perhaps symbolize two sides of a psyche emerging from a colonized state --- fragments of the image of ideal Filipina motherhood – one tends toward the 'old and the traditional' virtues of motherhood (Mader Irma) and the other (Gina) symbolizes what is pre-emergent, the possibility of the 'new' that struggles against the old and yet remains captive. Gina's life itself is metaphor for Philippine subaltern history – it straddles the transition between rural poverty, life as a factory worker, and then life as a

migrant domestic worker-subject.

### *3.2. Voices of change and reaction*

Since childhood, Gina has exhibited a certain willingness and ability to resist confinement and defy male authority. As she struggles to escape the figure of male authority, at each turning point she is confronted with another. But at each step of the way she is aided and supported by a network of women who would also defy male authority for what they deem to be in the best of her interest, or her family's interest – her mother egging her on to study, her sisters persuading her father, her sister-in-law convincing her to come to Hong Kong and in the process defying family allegiance to her own brother. The bonds of sisterhood would prove stronger in this case.

For these two mothers, migration is seen as a way – the only way – into the future. A way to escape and break from the past – and the backwardness and misery that is in the place of the past. To journey to another place is to find the way to the future. While they look outward for the future, both Mader Irma and Gina still seem attached to the notion that, for their children, education is the key to a better life. They take pride in being able to send them to school and to college. At the same time, ironically, both of them would eventually bring their children and other kin to Hong Kong to work as domestic helpers. Mader Irma is proud to say that four of her children have gone abroad for work. Unknowingly, they reveal a stronger trust in migration, in 'going abroad' as the way forward, even for the future. What had started out as a 'temporary' means of survival would eventually become permanent and they themselves would become links in an endless migration chain. Migration would then come to be understood and realized as a natural and inevitable trajectory of personal as well as national history.

The option of migration first comes as an unnatural interventionary 'force' from and of the outside. It is at first seen by the 'patriarchs' as an unwelcome disruption of the order. Gina's husband enunciates it all: Just why is it that going abroad has become fashionable these days...just why is it that going abroad was ever invented in the first place . 'Going abroad' symbolizes change and could thus be seen as a threat to the patriarchal order in the family.

If Gina's voice comes to symbolize resistance and the unbeatable will to hope for the future, to do what needs to be done (If I stay here, my children will never have education.), her husband's symbolizes the voice of reaction. Between Gina and her husband lies the tension between resistance and reaction. On the other hand, inside the husband's reaction is a mixture of resignation and questioning (why?). It recognizes the 'unnatural' character of the state of things – going abroad as an invention coming from the outside. Rather than

welcoming it with open arms, there is skepticism and defiance, though tempered with a recognition that there is no option but to submit to this larger force (Notice that the husband did not say, just why is it that you want to go abroad. He said, just why is it that going abroad has been invented. He attributes it to a larger force rather than to Gina's individual whim.)

### 3.3. *Amos, alagas, and the Filipina domestic worker*

Gina's experience with employers in Hong Kong is radically different from that of Mader Irma's. Mader's *amo* is the archetypal mistress – to whom she looks up with unconcealed awe, admiration and envy: My *amo* doesn't need to work. All she does is go ballroom dancing and shopping. 'Ballroom-dancing' would come to symbolize the apex of a life of leisure and later, like a mirror image, Mader's friend would beckon her to come home so that they, too, will go ballroom dancing, for now it is Mader Irma's turn.

Mader's *amo* tries to lure her into staying in Hong Kong by offering to give her shopping money – it is an act of generosity marking the invitation to Mader to transit from the position of servant to household member, a reward to Mader for a life of servitude and servility. In this instance, Mader Irma's *amo* consummates her role and duty as the 'feudal master/patron' – dispensing privileges and rewards, enacting a lifelong responsibility of caring for those at her service and employ. It is also for Mader's *amo* an effort to maintain the equilibrium in the household, one which revolves around the perfect balance between Mader Irma and her *amo* – each one depending on the other and providing what the other lacks, each the extension and reverse image of the other.

Gina, on the other hand, had once experienced working in a factory and thus perhaps felt terribly confined in her life of service to one *amo*. Nevertheless she was able to bear it for eleven years. In Gina's case, what she found most difficult was not so much the attitude and treatment of her *amo* – for with her rural background as a peasant woman she would not expect for more – it was the control and confinement of body/space which would become the metaphor of her captivity. In this sense, the image of the *amo* is not only that of a figure who buys labor, but one who territorializes, defines the boundaries of space and time. This suggests a reenactment of a colonial relationship. The master then becomes the symbol of the foreign, the superior and powerful, the more advanced civilization, the captor. Within the intimate confines of the household a reverse colonizer-colonized relationship is reproduced, for in this instance, it is the foreign domestic helper who is an alien intruding into private space, entering the boundaries of the master's territory of dominion. Gina puts it simply, I feel like I'm captive in a cage.'

Thus the silhouette that emerges is that of a colonized figure embodied by Gina. To

displace this relationship of power, this ‘colonizing’ relationship, the name Mother is invoked by the *amo*’s children – When my *amo* treats me badly, her children just tell me to treat her like a mother. In this instance, the language of familial loyalty and affect is deployed in an effort to appease and co-opt Gina. At the same time however the Mother/child relationship, which is also not one of equals, is not enough to displace the power relationship that essentially defines the *amo*/servant dynamic.

#### 3.4. *Notions of self, motherhood and dreams for the future*

Mader Irma attributes her good fortune to the wisdom and generosity of a transcendental Being who knows where to place her and acknowledges that she indeed deserves a good fortune. She lives a life of piety, religiosity and service. Gina is almost equally pious. But for her suffering – and thus perhaps lack of good fortune – she blames only herself, her own incessant and endless dreaming. She thinks her dreams are an unnecessary excess, a baggage.

Both Mader and Gina demonstrate an almost infinite capacity for hard work and endurance and shyly exhibit a certain pride about their competence. Their endurance is made possible by their willingness to accept and submit to the discipline required of the job – perhaps an exercise of power which becomes a source of pleasure and satisfaction, as suggested by Constable, or a demonstration of the instinct for self-survival, as pointed out by Maranan. It is interesting to note that in their self-representation, the word victim does not enter the vocabulary of their narrative. On the other hand, neither does the notion of a self that is separate from that of a self who serves/provides for the needs of others – of their *amos*, *alagas* and their own family. Neither do they seem to feel that ‘domestic worker’ is the only position they occupy – it is a temporary identity they inhabit in the course of their work, no matter that they have had to do it for the past twenty or twenty six years of their productive life.

The identity of ‘mother’ remains strong for both women. For Mader Irma, being allowed to continue her labor of mothering, a role she that is quite confident and comfortable in, is perhaps what has enabled her to endure her life in Hong Kong. She performs this role well, either by substitution, toward her *amo*’s children – or by extension, toward her own children who have joined her in Hong Kong. The semblance of a family life, to which her notion of ‘self’ is so strongly attached, is perhaps what has provided the stable grounds for her survival in Hong Kong, despite the situation of her uprooted-ness and confinement in her *amo*’s home.

Gina, on the other hand, feels a tension and questions, what kind of ‘mother’ is she when she doesn’t even know her own children. She is aware that for her children, ‘mother’ is

now a word that has attained a new meaning, as a distant provider for their material needs and wants. She senses a kind of devaluation or even negation of her 'motherhood', (You know that they need something from you – you see that is the only time when they call up, when they need money). Gina continues to grapple with this but is content with the knowledge that her children's future is far more secure than hers ever was when she was their age. This is also perhaps because she herself has transgressed the traditional role of a wife/mother. In her economic productivity she finds a sense of fulfillment and she is able to inhabit her identity as a worker quite well – and she also senses that it is an important marker of the difference between her life/world in the Philippines and her life/world in Hong Kong (When I am in the Philippines my body yearns to work..)

Gina is also more vocal, conscious and articulate about questions of domination and exploitation: Here in Hong Kong domestic helpers are treated like objects, not like human beings...My amo gave me morsels of good, bit by bit, like feeding a cat.. Having had the experience of being a factory worker and of organizing a union, Gina is able to project a 'class consciousness' with a critical outlook (She criticizes the union she joined for its non-inclusive policy.). It is Gina also who is able to have a clear perspective on what needs to be changed in her present condition -- and that is, to be allowed to seek employment in Hong Kong as a factory worker. Though there is always in her a longing and desire to go home to be with her children and grandchildren finally, still she is also able to articulate her imagination of the future and project a notion of an alternative subjectivity.

On Mader Irma's part, her basic belief is that for so long as the domestic worker finds a good *amo*, then everything would be fine. Indeed, a good *amo* may be all that it takes to make the job a viable option. On the other hand, what is left unproblematized is the issue of exploitation that is intrinsic to the power relations. On an individual/micro and personal level it may be rendered invisible, or considered insignificant in such harmonious relationships as that of Mader Irma and her *amo* where there is a mutual recognition and satisfaction of each other's interests. And yet, when one takes into account the discursive practices that are produced and deployed in the larger arena, the multiplication of such discursive practices may further embed the collective psyche of a people, a nation, in a perpetual submission to a colonized position, of subservience to a foreign master, to the exterior forces of the outside. It suggests a continuity of the colonial narrative of a master/servant relationship produced in the matrix of capitalist globalization, and where the colonial master inhabits and co-opts the 'feminine.' The 'master' takes on the figure of a woman, the female *amo*; and *amo* and servant, female both, become intertwined in an intricate bond, enacting roles which history has assigned them.

**Chapter Six**  
**TWO DAUGHTERS:**  
**READING AND RETELLING THE STORIES OF ESTHER AND MIRIAM**

The large-scale migration of women from the countryside to the cities and then to other countries in search of jobs has been linked very directly to the crisis of rural economies, the persistence of poverty in the countryside, unemployment in the cities, the unavailability of options for young people and the narrowing access to educational opportunities. It is also linked to the structures of traditional kinship systems which remain strong in the rural areas which, on the one hand, are confronted with the pressure of a failing rural economy and, on the other hand struggles to preserve itself insofar as it can provide a survival mechanism in the absence of other support systems.

Young unmarried women are often caught within these tensions. Excluded from the privilege/responsibility of inheriting farmland which is traditionally passed on to male heirs, they are seen as the mobile and excess labor. Because they need not be tied to the land and they are not yet 'tied down' to a family of their own, they could be relied on to be more mobile, to travel on to other places where they can take on jobs as wage earners. Not having children of their own, they would also thus be expected to support their younger siblings and contribute to the general income of the clan. Investing in higher education for women is also considered to be the least priority for families in the rural areas.

Troubled over their family's economic insecurity, finding themselves disavowed by an educational system and excluded from the local labor market, thousands of young unmarried women are driven to seek unemployment overseas where their cheap domestic labor is in great demand. Leaving home at a young age, they would however, find themselves in a time-bind. They desire to be economically productive for as long as they can, which they know could only be possible overseas. Yet at the same time they are anxious over the possibility that most of their marriageable age would be spent away from their families from whom they draw emotional support. They would also be radically dislocated from the only places where romance and future life partnerships could be found and forged. The stories of Esther and Miriam depict these harsh realities. Theirs are narratives of the failure of an educational system, the crises of 'underdevelopment' in the countryside, the sacrifice of dutiful daughters whose only possibility to live out their dreams is enjoy them vicariously through the lives of the younger siblings they are expected to support, the dilemmas faced by

young unmarried women facing pressures of family responsibilities, modernizing and capitalist influences, and the pressures of their own emotional needs and desires for fulfillment as individuals.

The 'average Filipina domestic worker' in Hong Kong fits the profile of a young woman in her '30s who has spent at least five years in Hong Kong, five precious years in which, under normal circumstances, romance and marital relationships would have traditionally developed. The stories of Esther and Miriam poignantly depict such challenges faced by the 'average 'Filipina domestic helper' in Hong Kong. There are many similarities in their background. Both grew up in the rural areas in the Northern part of the Philippines. Both came from families of a farming background. Both women decided to seek employment as overseas migrant workers in order to support their younger siblings and their siblings' education. Both women came to Hong Kong through the help of older sisters who had already been working in Hong Kong as domestic helpers.

The interview with Esther took place within the familiar setting of a friend's house. Quiet, shy, but always smiling, she was at first a bit hesitant to speak. When first approached with the request, "Please, tell me the story of your life," her spontaneous response was reluctance: *'wala naman akong masasabi sa buhay ko, e!'* (I have nothing to say about my life!) The storytelling session itself was at first marked by many pauses and silences, then when she became more comfortable, some quiet laughter and enigmatic smiles, then towards the end, the storytelling turned into whispers and the holding back of tears.

The session with Miriam took place in a public park on a Sunday afternoon, amid the singing of a Filipino choir rehearsing among the benches. When first approached for the interview, Miriam's immediate response was one of puzzlement, Why me? Let me introduce you to someone older. She's the one you should interview. She's the one who has a story to tell!.' And when later she did agree to the storytelling session, she cheerfully opened up and, with good humor, narrated "*ang totoong nasa buhay ko, ang kuwento ng buhay namin*" (that which is really in my life, the real story of our life).

Miriam explicitly calls herself 'an obedient daughter.' While Esther stops short of naming herself a good daughter, it is clear that her sense of duty and obligation to her family comes first in her priorities. In the traditional family structure in the Philippines, which remains very strong especially in rural areas, the 'father' enjoys the position of privilege, authority, and respect as the primary breadwinner. It is common to expect children to defer to the authority of the 'father,' and next to the father, the eldest child, especially the eldest male child. In the absence of the father, the eldest male child, who often inherits the largest share of property or is expected to serve as custodian of the family property, usually takes over the father's place of authority. It is also common to expect older unmarried children to

care and provide for the younger siblings. Once married, both sons and daughters are understood to have families of their own, to have entered into or belong to ‘another household,’ and are thus seldom expected to give priority to their siblings. In this context it would perhaps not be surprising, therefore, that, for Esther and Miriam, the good daughters that they are and wish to be, their sense of responsibility over their younger siblings is so strong that they would see themselves as the vehicles for their younger siblings’ access to a future. In turn, it would seem that they would also view their younger siblings as the embodiment of the possibility of a future that was once denied to them.

### 1. “I wish I was the youngest daughter”: The Story of Esther

Esther’s father was a farmer while her mother ‘just stayed at home,’ to take care of the children. Before he fell ill, Esther’s father was tilling the very same land he was working on for as long as she could remember. It was land that belonged to someone else – ‘the rich man’ in Esther’s village. Her father planted rice and vegetable crops. When he died, her eldest brother, who now has four children of his own, took over the task of working on the land. Her mother, meanwhile, would supplement the family income by selling vegetables in the market, despite the fact that they didn’t even have a stall of their own. It was from her mother that Esther learned her entrepreneurial spirit – for when she was a child, she would accompany her mother selling vegetables. “I was always so happy when I sold something, because then I would have some money to buy my own personal things.”

Esther recalls helping in the rice fields when she was small. They would wake up early in the morning and go with their father to clear the field, pull the grass, and so on. After harvest, the landlord would come to the house to get his ‘share.’ Two parts go to the farmer, to Esther’s family, and one part would go to the landlord. And why would the landlord have his share even if he did not till the land? ‘Because he owns the land!’ is Esther’s simple answer.

Esther’s father managed the farm well and the harvest seemed adequate for their needs. During harvest, her father would already set aside what they needed for their food till the next harvest season. It was the purchasing of *abono* – fertilizers, pesticides, and other inputs – that was the most difficult part. To be able to buy the *abono* they needed, Esther’s mother would raise pigs to sell at the market, her father would raise a cow. When they needed *abono*, the pig or the cow would be sold off. When the cash would not be enough, her mother would go to her regular creditor, and would give the *abono* on credit, to be paid off during harvest time.

Childhood was happy and fun, because she didn’t have anything to worry about except her studies. Her favorite subject in school was Math. Yes, I was a bit good in Math, Esther

shyly admits. She went to college in a nearby city to take up nursing. With very little money to go around in the family, she couldn't afford to buy her own books and had to go to the library. Because she didn't have the proper textbooks, it was difficult for her to 'study properly.' At the end of her second year in college, she failed chemistry. She felt so hurt and disappointed -- she had wanted so much to finish her studies. Repeating the course would mean waiting for another year. It was not an option for her, so she stopped her studies. That was when her older sister said, 'well, why don't you just go to Hong Kong then.' Her older sister had already been working in Hong Kong by that time.

Esther's father mortgaged their land in order to pay the application fees required by the employment agency. Eventually she was able to pay it back and recover the land after several months in Hong Kong. She was so excited to come to Hong Kong because she would finally have a job and be able to help her family. 'If I hadn't come to Hong Kong, my younger sisters and brothers wouldn't have been able to continue their education...'

Life in Hong Kong did not turn out to be quite what she had hoped for. When I traveled to come here, I was so happy. But when I arrived and went to my *amo*, I told myself, 'Oh my God, so this is how it is -- it is so difficult after all! Esther's *amo*, it turned out, had a huge four-storey house! In addition to the house that needed cleaning, there were two kids, 12 and 8 years old, three cars, three dogs and big garden to care for! She had to do everything.

Esther vividly remembers the day she arrived. Her *amo* picked her up from the agency, brought her to the house and told her to have 'a little rest.' Then they immediately explained what she had to do: "...wake up the children in the morning (6:30 am), prepare breakfast, clean the three cars, then wake up my *amo* (11:00 am), make them some tea, then clean the house, clean the garden, do the laundry, then after that iron the clothes, then cook again and so on..." Prior to Esther's arrival, the *amo* had already given the agency a written list of 'things to do.'

The nights were the hardest. Esther's *amo* would often wake her up for even the smallest things -- to make some tea, or when the *amo* was looking for something that she couldn't find. Often it was the noisy racket that the dogs made -- Esther's *amo* would wake her up to ask her to make the dogs shut up. She would then have to chase the dogs and lock them up in her own bathroom. Once she even accidentally caused one of the dogs to go blind while she was desperately trying to catch it!

How was Esther's relationship with her *amo*? It was just okay, she shrugs her shoulder with a smile. It was just okay except that her *amo* had fits of temper. Even if you didn't do anything bad, she would get mad at you. Like when she's looking for something and she can't find it, ay what comes of our her mouth! *Iba talaga ang Intsik!* (The Chinese people are really something else!) I don't really understand what she's saying when she's in a bad

temper, because when she's mad then she breaks into Chinese. I don't know what she's saying, so what I'd do is, I'd just smile.

In contrast, the *amo's* husband was, "OKAY!" because Esther didn't see him often. "I have nothing to complain about him because he's nice. He doesn't say anything much, she says. The kids were good to her, Esther claims. They were 'very good' to her because 'when they have food, they would share it with me. Like when they come home from school, I would prepare some snacks for them. And then they'd ask me, What about you, have you had your snack?"

Esther, it seems, has a very different notion of rest. She said that she is able to complete her housework and duties during the day. When asked whether she has time to rest, she said, yes, she is able to rest during the day, like while waiting for the soup to simmer, she will sit down on a chair, or when she is ironing clothes, she tries to sit down while doing so. 'Isn't that already rest?' she points out.

While she said she doesn't get very lonely in Hong Kong, she does miss her father, her mother, her siblings. She seems to be resigned to her father however: There is nothing I can do.

Her next *amo* lived in Tsim Sha Tsui. She calls her 'that old big mouth', because her *amo* would yell at her everytime she makes a small mistake: I kill you! I kill you! She also had to take care of her *amo's* cat. Her problems began when her *amo's* daughter came to live with them. Esther then had to share her room with her *amo's* daughter and granddaughter. Many times her *amo's* daughter would bring her boyfriend to the room and engage in sexual intercourse at night, even with Esther's presence in the room. Esther hated those times. She only stayed for more than one year with this second *amo*.

During her days off, Esther would go to church in the mornings, then have lunch with her friends, then go to Central. Soon she was able to find a live-out/stay-out arrangement with another *amo*. She stayed in a boarding house with several other Filipinas. This was paradise for her. During Sundays they would just stay in the boarding house after going to church, and then they'd watch Filipino movies and chat the whole afternoon.

During the SARS outbreak, she felt very anxious. She was thinking, if ever she would get sick of SARS, she would not want to go home for fear of spreading the virus to her family.

Esther tries to go home to her family every two years. After many years in Hong Kong she was able to save some money finally to buy a small piece of property. She offered the land to her brother to till for free. Once in a while, Esther's brother sets aside some share of the harvest for Esther – you, see, she says, my brother is very kind.

Esther dreams of getting married someday. Her fiancée has been waiting for her for nine years. When she gets married, she wouldn't want to leave the Philippines anymore. But not yet. She feels she still has an obligation to her family so she won't get married yet.

If she had a way to change the situation of her work in Hong Kong, she would like to see herself opening a small business, like the one at World Wide House, selling Filipino goods. But she's aware that this is a remote possibility. If only there was a better job for me, she says wistfully.

Esther feels proud that she has been able to send three younger siblings to college. One of them has finished already, and one is about to graduate. The third one, due to Esther's influence, is studying to be a nurse. Esther misses the life of being a student. But she doesn't see the possibility of her being a student again. I feel that my mind has been empty, blank, unused. I'm afraid that if I go back to school, I might end up writing down housecleaning in my subjects.

Things became even more difficult when her father suffered a stroke and could no longer work on the fields. Esther shouldered most of the medical expenses of her father. Her father has become very sad, and often he just sits in front of the house, weeping. But he doesn't want Esther to see him crying.

Esther's younger siblings are indeed very grateful to her. She tells them how fortunate they are, compared to her. But what she doesn't tell them is how hard her life has been. She doesn't want them to see her cry. I just wish I was the youngest daughter, Esther says.

She doesn't see herself going home 'for good' in the immediate future. Maybe after two years, she said. And when she goes home for good, she would like to set up a small business. As for now, she contents herself with waiting for a chance to go home to the Philippines for holidays. She feels very happy whenever she goes home for family reunions because those are the moments when her parents are happiest. In her prayers, her parents and grandparents come first. She prays for their health, she prays for the salvation of her entire family. And what does she pray for herself? All she prays for is that God would give her strength so she can continue to use her body for work.

## **2. "You go on, big brother, I can manage by myself": The Story of Miriam**

Miriam was born in a village that was named after a gold mine – Lepanto mines – up in the mountainous province of Benguet, where many indigenous people live. Her father, a mine worker, took them down to the plains in Pangasinan when he was laid off from work. Miriam was then six years old. Her father then became a farmer while her mother 'stayed out

home' to take care of the kids. She narrates how she was practically raised by two women – her mother and her unmarried aunt. So you can say I have two mothers! Miriam says proudly.

Miriam was the fourth child. Her older brother had rheumatic heart disease and was a sickly child. She and her older brother ended up graduating from high school the same year. Like Esther, Math was her favorite subject and was hoping to go on to college. But there was not enough money for both Miriam and her older brother to go to college. So she told her brother, You go on, big brother, I can manage by myself. I'll just take up vocational training for now.

Thus, Miriam went on to finish a vocational course on dressmaking. After some time she felt 'bored' so she told her mother she would like to go and live with her aunt in another province to help her take care of the kids. Her aunt and uncle were very good to her, Miriam recalls. They had three children but they treated her as their 'eldest daughter.' You see, I was an obedient daughter so they always let me get away with what I want.

Miriam worked hard, but was the object of envy by other relatives. Soon her aunt's relatives would come to live with them to look for jobs. In order to have enough money to buy food for the relatives, Miriam then decided to make some iced sweets to sell in the streets. Through the help of her aunt who provided the initial capital, Miriam managed this small informal business quite well. However, when her uncle found out, he was quite unhappy, so the business was stopped.

At some point, Miriam's aunt and uncle wanted to send her to college. They wanted her to study education so that she could become a teacher and so that she could also teach their kids. But Miriam refused. She said she didn't want to be a teacher. Her uncle asked, so what do you want? Miriam said she wanted to study criminology – that was the dream of her life. Her aunt and uncle said it's impossible because she's a woman. Her eldest brother, who knew of her strong desire to take up criminology, finally said, Dear little one, what if we save some money first? And so she said, Okay. After some time, Miriam ended up in Hong Kong.

Miriam's sister had gone to Hong Kong to work as a domestic worker, and soon after a year persuaded Miriam to join her. The sister-in-law of the *amo* of Miriam's sister was pregnant and needed a helper. Miriam recalls having to travel to and from Manila to arrange her papers. She remembers very clearly the day the agency informed her that the working visa was already available and that Miriam should pick a day for the flight to Hong Kong. Miriam was ecstatic. On that very same day, she called her youngest sister and said, Go and enroll at Urdaneta now. She knew then that she would be able to send her younger siblings to school, now that she has a job waiting for her in Hong Kong.

On her first day at her *amo*'s house in Hong Kong, Miriam was asked by her *amo* to eat a very strange Chinese dish. It was a traditional medicinal dish offered to women who had just given birth in order to purify their blood. Miriam grimaces every time she remembers the dish – it was dark and tasted very strange. Lord, is this what Chinese food is like? she asked in a prayer. Older sister prodded her to eat it – you should show your *amo* that you like it, Miriam, her older sister said. Though she felt like she was choking, Miriam forced herself to swallow the dish.

Miriam and her *amo* got on very well. So well that she has been working with the same *amo* for nine years. From the beginning, the *amo* told Miriam to treat her like an older sister, and that they should be frank with each other. Miriam organized her work in the household quite well and enjoyed cooking the most. Her relationship with the *amo* was so manageable that she could even be very frank with her. Once she told her *amo* that her *amo*'s friend, who went to their house regularly to play mahjong, would go to the kitchen to inspect whether the shelves had been dusted, right in Miriam's presence. What? Her *amo* asked. She did that to you? Yes, she did that to me!. Miriam told her *amo* that some people are like that. You don't even do that to me because you said the kitchen is my territory, Miriam told her *amo*. But what about your friend? She did that to me! Soon after that, Miriam's *amo* never invited that friend to play mahjong anymore.

Apart from her daily housework, Miriam keeps herself busy with handicrafts and various seminars and courses. She's taken a YMCA course on handicrafts, a course on commercial baking, seminars on business, and so on. Usually she spends her day off by going to church with her sister and then having lunch at Shatin with her other friends. She doesn't spend very much and manages her 'budget' very well.

Like Esther, Miriam is very much attached to her family. She misses them and misses the most her youngest sister, whom she helped raise as a baby. Whenever she feels the pangs of loneliness, she would keep herself busy. *Gumagawa ako ng paraan* – I find a way to ward off loneliness, she says.

Miriam came to Hong Kong so she could help provide her family a life she never knew. *Ang hindi ko nalasap noon, ipatitikim ko sa kanila*. Whatever I did not have a taste of in the past, I would make sure they would savor it. That was her vow to herself.

Her sense of responsibility extends not only to her younger siblings but to her niece and nephew as well. She and her older sister worry about their future. How could my niece and nephew ever get an education, when their father is just a farmer? They asked themselves. Soon they decided to buy a secondhand vehicle for their eldest brother so he could use it to earn a living. When they presented the vehicle to him, he burst into tears and refused to accept it. Miriam and her sister perhaps knew that their brother would be too proud to accept

it as a gift to him. Instantly they thought of a way to save their brother's face. They said, Big brother, if you don't want to take it, that's fine. But put it in your children's name. It's really for them. It's really for their future. At this moment, the whole family, touched by this gesture and yet aware of conflicted emotions on big brother's part, all broke into tears. It was one of the most emotional moments in their lives, Miriam recalls.

Miriam narrates that her family's farm is now doing very well. When they were young children, their harvest would always fall short and they would have to run to neighboring farms for help. Now, according to their mother, it is the other way around -- the neighbors who used to do well are now turning to them for help. Miriam said that she and her sister always reminds their family to 'budget' their resources. Budgeting is something they learned from business seminars they attended in Hong Kong.

Now Miriam's youngest sister has graduated from college and is now planning to take up postgraduate studies. When she finished college, Miriam thought she would finally be free! That she would now be able to have a social life and look for a suitable mate. Alas, her sister said she would like to continue her studies and earn a master's degree in business. Then Miriam knew her responsibility was not over.

Miriam is also beginning to be conscious of her biological clock. She would really want to get married someday. People tell her that if romance comes, then it comes. Miriam said that all she looks for in a husband is that he will be able to provide for their children and their children's future, never mind about her, because she has already prepared for her own future. She has just recently completed the payment for a pension plan. She was so happy when she finally got her certificate of completion of payment. So, Miriam says, even if she doesn't end up having a husband, or even if she doesn't have her own children, her future is already taken care of. That is the only great thing in her life, she says.

She said she thanks the Lord because the Lord has "accompanied" her in budgeting her resources. That is why she says when it comes to money she manages quite well. She is proud to say that she doesn't owe any debt. It is true, she doesn't have any savings, but at least she doesn't owe anyone.

Miriam's *amo* said her contract will probably end in a year's time. Her *amo* has said that Miriam will receive a long service payment, but maybe only fifty percent of what is due her because Hong Kong economy has not been doing well. Miriam told her *amo* she doesn't care about her long service payment, just her monthly salary. She also told her *amo* that if her contract doesn't get extended, she won't look for any other employer. You're the first and the only one, Miriam told her *amo*.

If the contract doesn't get extended, Miriam would like to try her hand again at being a factory worker. She is thinking of going off to Korea to find work in a factory. She wants to

work in a factory because she wants to learn how things work. That is, if she doesn't get married yet, she said. And when she goes home for good, she would also like to set up a small business. She also hopes to learn how to use the computer someday. Maybe she'll enroll in some computer course when she returns to the Philippines, she says. She doesn't want to do it in Hong Kong because it's "too expensive." What she's slightly worried about is that she gets bored easily. She has a passion for learning, but once she's learned how something is done or made, then she gets tired of it. That is why she said she ended up not staying long as a factory worker in Manila. She still likes to tinker with her hands, learn to solve problems and master a craft, though she doesn't quite know really what to do with all the things she learned from her handicrafts seminars. She said she is always curious about how things work and she would try and try and try until she learns about it.

Sometimes Miriam does indeed worry that she doesn't have any savings, and she does wonder, what if I had just saved the money I spent for my seminars? But she herself answers her own question – if I saved the money I spent for my seminars, then I would not have learned anything! And if people ask me, where are your savings? Then I will point to them, there, my sisters who finished college, my brother's vehicle, those are precisely my savings.

### **3. Reading the Two Stories**

Both Esther and Miriam are conscious of their gendered positions as 'middle' daughters in the patriarchal order of the family structure. It is an order that defines their relations with others, and within which they must locate the positions available to them. The patriarchal values that govern this order privileges the position of 'male' authority; as such the absence or presence of the 'male' voice/figure of authority becomes significant. Within this, there are certain unspoken rules of conduct and norms of behavior that also determine to a certain extent the possible ways by which forms of individuality may be expressed. This patriarchal structure of the family becomes the immediate arena in which the ways of being woman, daughter, and to a large extent, 'migrant worker' are first understood and acted out. This structure is not necessarily stable, as there would be gaps and contradictions, especially as the family would face economic insecurity amid modernizing influences. In both women, however, there is a certain degree of recognition and tacit acceptance of the limits of the position to which they are assigned in such order. But each would deal with it in a different way. It would also become apparent that while the experience of migration is primarily understood and publicly articulated as voluntary fulfillment of duty to family, it also offers the possibility of transgressing traditional roles in the family, or at least the possibility of other ways of enacting such roles.

Reading the stories of Esther and Miriam, the following section looks at the gendered structures of power in the family and the ways by which migration enables the transgression of traditional roles, highlights some of the strategies for resisting and negotiating power within the family and the household of employment, teases out the notions of self and subject as constituted in between the life/worlds of past and future, and traces the limits of the discourse of emancipation/control through resource management (budget/budgeting) which cannot escape a capitalist and patriarchal frame.

### *3.1. Tradition and transgression – gendered roles in the patriarchal family structure and possibilities for transgression*

From the very beginning of her narration, Esther clearly presents her father as the head of the household – he is the chief provider and the breadwinner, the one who works on the land from which their food comes, and as such he occupies the place of honor. ‘Mother’ just stays at home to take care of us.’ Relegated to the background as a minor detail is the fact that the mother consistently found ways to supplement the income in a substantial manner and to find ways to pay for the *abono* (fertilizers, pesticide and other agricultural inputs). In a rural economy, this should not be considered an insignificant, for it is that which primarily ties the peasant to the cash economy. Neither could one consider insignificant the agency of the mother in finding ways to make it possible for the family to gain access to credit. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that Mother plays an important role, not only on the economic life of the family but on imparting skills and values on Esther herself.

In the story, Mother is portrayed as someone who is resourceful, creative, hardworking. While the father works on the land, it is the mother who goes out in the streets to peddle vegetables. It is mother who would find ways to solve problems, make ends meet, gains ‘credit-worthiness’. In Esther’s representation of her family, the relegation of this ‘detail’ to the background may be consistent with a thinking that is largely shaped by patriarchal values. Equally possible, it may also faithfully represent the undervaluing of such economic contributions from the mother, which would be consistent with the logic of a structure in which the father occupies the place of honor and power -- the act of going around looking/begging for credit may be seen as something that is beneath the father, and by delegating such task to the mother, the father’s honorable ‘face’ is preserved.

It thus becomes evident that there are several stories in the narration, and at least two levels of representation. On the one hand, there is the story (the official story ) in which the father is represented as the chief provider and head of the household (mother just stays at home). On the other hand, there is the other hidden story that unfolds, and it is that, in fact, mother didn’t just stay at home but on the contrary was an active participant in the family’s

economic life. Later it would be Esther who would take over the role of purchasing *abono*. The representation of the father as the head of the household is made manifest and reinforced as Esther's narration suggests that the dealings with the landlord, or public transactions with figures of authority, are done chiefly, and perhaps exclusively, by the father. In such dealings, other members of the family remain distant and voiceless. In fact, in her storytelling, Esther could not even remember the landlord's name.

It would also be considered quite normal and acceptable that the landlord, who owns the land, should be entitled to a share of the harvest even if the landlord did not work on it, simply because he owns the property. It would turn out, however, that such logic – the logic of 'who owns the land gets a share in the harvest' – would be selectively applied. When Esther eventually was able to purchase a small piece of property, she offered the land to her eldest brother, for him to work on -- the very same brother who had also taken over the work of tilling the land her father tilled when the father suffered a stroke. What is striking is that, Esther, though she is technically and in reality now the new landlord -- does not expect any share from the harvest. In fact nobody expects her to expect a share. In the few occasions in which her brother thought of setting aside a small portion of the share of harvest for Esther, she attributes this to her brother's goodness – a gesture of kindness on the part of the brother, rather than to her right as a property owner. Obviously, what is operational here is another set of logic, and not the logic of entitlement on the basis of ownership of property, but rather the logic of patriarchal kinship ties.

Miriam is also keenly aware of the gendered hierarchy in the family and of what is expected of her. When it was time for her and her older brother to go on to college, it was she herself who told her brother, You go on, big brother, I can manage by myself. It was also, in a way, a gesture on Miriam's part to spare her brother the embarrassment of having to ask her to give way to him. When she admitted to her uncle and eldest brother that what she really wanted to do – *ang talagang nasa buhay ko* (the real desire of my life) – was to study criminology, she was told that she couldn't because she's a woman. The way she narrated this, however, is to emphasize that it is what they say, suggesting that she does not necessarily agree: You see, THEY said, it's impossible because I'm a woman.

On one hand it seems that through her acts and gestures, Miriam herself participates in maintaining the gendered hierarchical order. On the other hand, she also takes things in her own hands, asserts what she thinks needs to be done and cleverly negotiates her way by seeking the support of other women, like her aunt, for example (as in the incident when she took up selling iced desserts on the streets). In the end, she admits in her story that people say she always gets what she wants. Her own explanation is that it is because she is, after all,

an “obedient daughter,” and that is why she is allowed to get away with what she wants. Obedience then is deployed as a strategy for negotiating her position.

### *3.2. Negotiating power and stabilizing subject positions through the strategies of speech and silence*

Being unmarried daughters and ‘middle’ children at that, Esther and Miriam have to constantly negotiate her positions through and across hierarchies of power whether in her own family or the household of her employment. This position is distinct from that of a family member who would be able to exercise power from the position of a mother, for example, or an eldest daughter. There are obviously certain differences between Esther and Miriam in terms of how they demonstrate their submission to or rejection of the gendered hierarchy in the family, and the strategies that they use to deal with it.

Silence and the reference to the absence/presence of speech are constant sub-texts in Esther’s narration. Silence seems to be the strategy she uses to suppress and hide her feelings, to don the mask of a stable self in order not to ‘rock the boat, to preserve her dignity.’ Sometimes I desperately want to weep before my siblings, but I don’t want them to see me crying, I don’t want them to. Silence is the strategy she uses to avoid confrontation. In response to her *amo*’s angry cries of “I kill you, I kill you,” Esther merely offers a smile and keeps silent. But rather than reading this as an act of submission, it could also be seen as an act of self-preservation. Painful memories and emotion-laden thoughts of loved ones are not spoken of, excluded from the text, shut out of memory, buried in silence. I don’t want to talk about marrying...I don’t really remember what attracted me to him – it was such a long time ago.

Refusing to allow pain to be expressed and denying emotions the access to speech could be ways of controlling emotions and thus preserving the stability of the existing order in the family. It is not that there are no emotional moments in Esther’s narration. She tells about how her father cried, how her father felt sorry for her, how her father felt indebted to her. But her father never mentioned this to Esther herself. She only learned about it from her siblings. In this case, the father’s voice – the male voice of authority now expressed in emotional tones – is not directly addressed to her, though it was meant for her, a recognition of her significant role in the family. Perhaps it could also be said that, the ‘silence’ which the father directs towards Esther -- silence meaning an unspoken voice – is the father’s strategy to ‘save’ his honor and his means of ‘self-preservation.’

In listening to Esther’s story, what she does not say, what she is unable to find the language to express, is just as important as what she says in words. The degree to which she is unable to give voice to an emotion could perhaps be a measure of the intensity of emotions

behind that which could not be spoken of. An extremely unpleasant memory for her is her experience with her previous *amo* in which she had to sleep on the floor of the daughter's room. It was not really the sleeping on the floor that she minded – it was that at night her *amo's* daughter would bring her boyfriend to the same room and that they would engage in sexual intercourse, right while she is there lying on the floor. She feels very offended by it, but could not find the words to express the intensity of her feelings. When asked exactly how she felt during those times, she said, “ *para akong, para akong...*” (It is as if I am...as if I am...) She is unable to complete the sentence. The tears welling up in her eyes as she tried to control the anger that was triggered by the memory, expressed what she could not give voice to. Perhaps, for Esther, that two people would engage in an act of intimacy in her presence would signify a denial or negation of her presence, a non-recognition that she is someone whose feelings and presence are even worth considering. “*Di yata nila naisip nandoon ako pero alam naman nila nandoon ako.*” (They did not think of the fact that I am right there, though they knew that I was there.)

For Miriam, however, it is through the clever manipulation of speech that she negotiates her way, and it is in speech that she makes manifest her effort to present a stable self in front of others. There are many voices present in Miriam's narration of her life story – her brothers, her older sister, her aunt and uncle, her *amo*, and her own. Her storytelling style is marked by reenacted dialogues, hardly pausing for a moment. In her own representation of the ways by which members of the family negotiate their different positions, the different characters' speech acts reveal the strategies they each employ (e.g. the incidents when aunt and uncle tried to persuade her to go to college in order to become a teacher, when older brother tried to pacify her). In speech, reason is used to reiterate and justify the inevitability and acceptability of certain things as part of common sense within the existing order (You see, it's because they say I'm a woman.) as well as stabilize positions and relations (So what if, dear little one, we save some money first ?).

Speaking to each other and voicing out feelings also play an important role in how Miriam and her *amo* relate with one another and stabilize their relations. Between *amo* and domestic helper, the pattern of speech becomes an expression of mutual respect, thus solidifying a bond of trust. From the outset, Miriam recalls, her *amo* had already made it clear that Miriam should treat her as an elder sister and that they should be frank to one another. A relationship of familial trust and respect is thereby established in which the primacy of the spoken word over the written word is invoked, where the written word is deemed perhaps inappropriate or redundant for it is symbolic of a public and more formal relationship (e.g. the incident when her *amo* said they will not put in black and white their

agreement about the long service payment, because a 'black and white document' can be easily torn up.)

### 3.3 *Constituting self/subject in between the past and future*

In narrating the 'story of their lives', both Esther and Miriam would make remarks about what they were in the past and their questions and self-doubts. The storytelling exercise then becomes an engagement in self-reflexivity and a process of retrieving back a memory of a 'past self' – of who they were before they became domestic helpers. The past is not only a temporal issue – it represents a self/world that is no longer present and accessible. The past is not only constituted by events that took place before time, but is marked by what they once used to be, a 'self' that was also understood as one that was only still in the process of becoming.

For Esther, it was a matter of once having been a student on the way to becoming a nurse, of being a fiancée on the way to becoming a wife. What she is now, between the past and the future, is a migrant domestic worker. And what of being a wife in the future? On the question of whether she will indeed get married or not, Esther is ambiguous and ambivalent. Not yet. Not now. For she continues to be tied to an obligation she feels she needs to fulfill. On the one hand, she clings to the notion of getting married someday – her fiancée waits for her. In the meantime, she is reminded by others of the passage of time – her fiancée's parent already died without having seen them get married, and perhaps the other parent will also die; her fiancée remarks that maybe he is waiting for nothing.

What of life in Hong Kong? Esther says she is happy here because she is able to help her siblings. When asked about how she lives her life here, and what about life here that makes her happy, she ponders very briefly on the question, and wonders, What do I enjoy doing here really? I don't really go around much. I don't really go out shopping. It doesn't sound much of a 'life' when compared to common notions of what makes a life enjoyable. For Esther happiness is not derived out of a sense of her own pleasure, but of the knowledge that while she is working here, she is able to help her siblings.

To even entertain the idea of possibly renewing her studies is, for Esther, inconceivable. She feels that, because of the passage of time (it has been such a long time since she was a student), and more importantly because of the nature of the work that she has pursued for the past nine years, that of a maid, it would be impossible for her to be a student again. For she feels that through the years of working as a maid her mind has been empty, blank, unused. She jokes that, if she goes back to her studies, she just might end up writing down "housecleaning" in her subjects. She is aware that a process of de-skilling has taken place.

For Esther, it seems that the journey overseas in search of employment as a domestic helper has come to mean an act of leaving behind a past life and giving up an old 'self', a self that can no longer be retrieved except through memory, for the journey leads to a road where there is no turning back. To 'become' a maid in Hong Kong then would suggest the foreclosure of the possibility of other subject-positions once imagined to be realizable in the future.

Esther said that maybe she could be freed from her obligations to her family after two years, when her younger siblings finish college. But right now, the desire, once a plan in the past, belongs to the realm of dreams, of somewhere in the indefinite future. Between what was once imagined and what in the past could have been, and the possibility of the fulfillment of desires which is yet unreachable and unconceivable, is the present that is constituted and made possible only through the postponement and deferral of dreams. Between the past and the future – the time lived in Hong Kong as a domestic helper – there seems to be a suspension of time. There is only a life that could perhaps be seen as a long interlude of waiting for the fulfillment of her own dreams. The 'self' that is constantly present, struggling to tie together the past, the present, and the immediate future that is visible, is that part of Esther that makes her a good daughter. In one brief moment, her face takes on a sad and slightly tormented look – "*Kung minsan iniisip ko nga, bakit ba ako nagkaganito?*" (Sometimes I think and wonder, how, why did I end up like this?)

From the early part of Miriam's narration, she presents herself as someone who is aware, conscious and confident of her capability, and to whom the ability to 'manage' her emotions and be in 'control' of her actions is important. Yet, as her narration suggests, she is able to use this self-awareness to negotiate her way into and around power relations around her without radically altering or destabilizing the order. In this regard, the statement "go on big brother, I can manage by myself..." is a complex utterance in which she: a) recognizes the hierarchy of big brother, b) asserts her own ability (as suggested by the word "manage" – Tagalog word used is more succinct but complex – *kaya ko naman* – I can do it. I am capable.), and c) spares the big brother from a potentially awkward situation. In this instant, her gesture of sacrificing her own opportunity for education is diffused and obscured. The gesture was to have been provisional, for she did say, "*mag-vocational muna ako,*" (I will just take vocational training for now) which suggests that she was not at that moment foreclosing the possibility of going into further education nor implying that she was giving it up entirely.

What could Miriam have meant by *kaya ko* at that very moment? (I can manage by myself. I can do it. I am capable.) Could she have meant that she would be able to manage her disappointment and emotions? That she would be able to get by even without a college

education? Or find other means? Perhaps she meant all of the above. Or perhaps it was also mainly an affectionate strategy to protect her big brother. (Note that this particular big brother had rheumatic heart). She obviously demonstrates a certain pride in her own capacity to 'manage' and make do. From her experience she knows that her efficiency and capabilities are the ways by which she could consolidate a position from which to assert herself (I am an obedient daughter and that is why they let me get away with what I want). This is also demonstrated in how she relates with her employer with whom she has stayed for more than nine years, an indication that there is a certain degree of mutual satisfaction with the current arrangement between Miriam and her employer.

Like Esther, however, Miriam worries about her future and especially her biological time clock. From the onset of her narration she already disclosed that several of her relatives remained unmarried in their old age. Perhaps she was already foregrounding her own destiny of possible spinsterhood, justifying it by suggesting that it may be an 'inherited' fate passed on by other family members, rather than something that is a result of her own lack and inadequacy. She thus prepares for a future of possible singlehood by buying pension plans and making sure that she remains self-sufficient and economically independent even in old age.

There is, however, something unfulfilled in Miriam, it seems. A restless spirit -- she says that she gets easily bored, especially when she has already mastered a new skill. She has thus embarked on a seemingly endless search for fulfillment and 'skills enhancement' by attending all kinds of seminars and courses, from handicrafts, to baking, to seminars on business. When she goes back to the Philippines, she plans to take up computer lessons. In her narration, the efforts she makes to reconcile conflicting subjectivities unfold through her own words. Referring to moneys she spent on the seminars she attended, the gift of a vehicle that she and her sister presented to their eldest brother, she sometimes wonders, What if I just saved all my money? She herself overcomes this self-doubt by providing words to reason -- then I wouldn't have learned anything, if that was the case! In this instance she seeks to demonstrate her desire and ability to regain control -- if not of her agency and ability to radically change her destiny -- at least, of how her present subject position is discursively rationalized.

#### *3.4. The limits of 'budgeting' and /resource management' framed within capitalist and patriarchal discourses*

The logic of recognizing the limits of available resources and managing/making do within those limits is something that seems to appeal strongly to Miriam and 'budget/budgeting' would later be a recurring trope in her narrative for regaining control and

mastery of the circumstances surrounding her. When she expressed her desire to go into criminology, it was only within the logic of 'limited resources' that she was finally convinced to defer it. Later, this discourse of 'managing within limited resources,' would get more pronounced, organized, consolidated and expressed through the trope of 'budget/budgeting' in capitalist logic 'Budgeting' – the technique and discourse of allocating and managing financial resources within limits -- is something that Miriam learned from the different business administration seminars she took in Hong Kong. It suggests the sense of being in control and being able to "manage" within limited means. The ability to 'manage within limitations' – as in, Go on, big brother, I can manage by myself – is a significant trait she tried to emphasize in her self-representation. When it comes to money, she says, she is good at managing it – she doesn't spend too much, she doesn't get into debt. And even when it comes to things that her family asks of her, her common reply is, so long as it is within the budget. She is thankful that she learned how to 'budget' in the seminars she took in Hong Kong. She is thankful to the Lord for 'accompanying her to budget.' This utterance may sound a bit strange considering that thanks and prayers usually revolved around the promise of salvation and the fulfillment of desires. In this case, gratitude is expressed to the transcendent Being for helping her to "budget", accept, make do, endure, and successfully work within limited means. In this discursive field, 'budget' and its promise of salvation at once become the means for regaining control and agency in finding a solution to a given problem, suggesting emancipation. But at the same time it becomes the means for accepting (and enduring), and thus being defined and controlled by the limits of a given situation . Notwithstanding the immediate practical benefits gained from acquired skills in financial management, 'Budget' now becomes the new mode of reproducing docile and domesticated bodies for the needs of capital and circulating a discourse of controlled emancipation within the logic of a capitalist/colonial/patriarchal frame.

'Budget' as an exercise of agency and power is a contested issue in the feminist debate. It's worth noting that in the traditional family structure in many households in the Philippines, the role of budgeting, safekeeping and managing the purse strings is commonly given to the wife/mother. It is usually seen as a 'woman's role.' Often this is used by apologists for the convention as an indicator of the empowered status of women in the Philippines – that it is the wife/mother who actually manages the family's treasury.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, 'managing within limited resources' while it does require skills, resourcefulness, and gives a certain feeling of being empowered, also reinforces and operates within a framework of 'accepting the limits of resources and working to survive within limited means.' Rather than seeing it as a position of power and privilege, it is a position that

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<sup>105</sup> See, Aguilar, Quindoza Santiago, Sylvia Chant and Mcylwine

confines and puts the burden of problem solving and ‘making ends meet’ squarely on the wife/mother. When things get out of hand – when the budget is out of control, or when expenses go outside the budget – the wife/mother is thus put into question and gets the blame for it.

The traditional paradigm of father as provider and mother as manager of the purse strings (which gives the impression of check and balance) appears to be unraveling as roles and functions become more dispersed and confused. Miriam, like many others, are implicitly recognized as chief providers for the family on the basis of the actual value of money that is turned over through remittances, coverage of costs of education and medical bills, if not day-to-day sustenance of meals. It is Miriam who constantly reminds her family to work within the budget, to learn how to budget (*Ibudget niyo ang pera niya*. You should budget your money). Budget in this sense becomes the magic word, the key to salvation. It can be seen as a way of passing on new capitalist skills and techniques her family, yet it could also be seen as placing herself in a certain position of control, not unlike that of the father figure of authority in the traditional paradigm.

The position of ‘provider’, and the figure of authority who demands the ‘budgeting’ of resources, is now occupied by Miriam and in this set-up the relations of power between the ‘financier/provider’ and the ‘manager’ (the one who manages the purse strings) is reproduced. Yet in this instance, it is a female figure – at once ‘emancipated’ yet a spectral presence -- who occupies the position of authority from whom the enunciation of ‘*ibudget niyo*’ (you should budget the resources) becomes an exercise of power and the consolidation of a new identity. Unwittingly she becomes an agent for the circulation of a discursive capitalist practice (resource management as a technology of control) and a pastoral form of power in which salvation is promised but is conditioned on control.<sup>106</sup>

This, however, does not necessarily translate into a radical reconfiguration or transformation of gendered power relations and its associated discursive practices. Miriam tacitly recognizes and enjoys the new position of economic power she has in the family structure, but she does not seem keen to rock the boat altogether. Like Esther, she is careful not to be seen as trying to replace/displace the male elders in her family structure, and in fact, like many women, takes it upon herself to protect the male ego when it feels threatened, thus becoming an agent for the stabilization and preservation of the existing order. The incident in which Miriam and her sister presented her brother with a vehicle as a gift is most revealing.

Miriam and her sister had been very worried about the future of their nieces, given the fact that their brother earns little as a farmer. How about their education? They asked

themselves. So they decided to purchase a second hand vehicle. But when they presented it to the eldest brother, he burst into tears. It was an awkward moment. Once again, in a clever gesture to save the situation, Miriam and her sister said, "Big brother, if you don't want to accept it, then put it in your children's name. It is really for their future." The act of presenting the gift to the eldest brother, rather than demonstrating it as an act of generosity or pity/kindness on the part of little sister to poor big brother, is then reinvented as a fulfillment of the responsibility of an aunt to her niece and nephew, thereby saving the face of the big brother. At that moment the whole family cried. That it was an emotional moment for the whole family reveals the sensitivities touched and the potential tensions and crisis it could have triggered. What could have touched the big brother was that the vehicle served as a reminder of the destitute position in which he was (his inability to provide for the future of his own children), as compared to Miriam and her sister who are earning more. Miriam and her sister are sensitive enough not to put him in a position of subordination to them and thus cleverly found a way for him to accept the gift without losing face. The vehicle is of course used by the brother and lovingly cared for and occupies a special place in the family's mythmaking. For Miriam and her sister it symbolizes an accomplishment – the acquisition of property, the investment for the future of the family, and the demonstration of their ability to occupy a position of power without necessarily destabilizing the gendered order of the family from which they, too, draw comfort and emotional sustenance.

Out of the realities of rural underdevelopment in the Philippines and patriarchal family structures caught within modernizing influences, thus emerges the gendered figure of the domestic-worker subject who, from a position of subordination in the family and exclusion from the labor market in the Philippines now finds herself transacting her labor within the field of a gendered and racialized international labor market. Inside the home of her employer she is domesticated and subordinated, the limits of territorial body/space simultaneously demarcated and violated. Inside the home of the family she leaves behind and supports, she is at once a dutiful daughter whose obedience is required and a 'spectral presence' whose economic power is recognized -- and the gap in between is the space from which she tries to carve out new identities. This ambiguous space is also a contested arena. In the overlapping fields of 'dutiful daughter' and 'spectral presences in the nation', the forces of capitalism are at work, mobilizing the domestic worker's skills, savings, social currency, and allegiance in order to circulate 'new' discursive practices of emancipation/control (under the trope of 'budgeting capital) and prefigure a new generation of female petty capitalist/entrepreneurial class in the Philippines. However, this discourse of

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<sup>106</sup> Michel Foucault, "Omnes Et Singulatum": Toward a Critique of Political Reason, in Rabinow, Paul. *Michel Foucault on Power, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. Three. (New York:

emancipation/control through 'resource management', though it produces a new subject position for the domestic worker, presents its limits in radically transforming the power relations intrinsic to capitalism and patriarchy and which are its enabling condition.

**Chapter Seven**  
**WIFE, DAUGHTER, MOTHER, ACTIVIST:**  
**READING AND RETELLING THE STORY OF ROSARIO**

It is no coincidence that in the mid-1980s, when the Philippines was witnessing a sharp increase in migration of Filipina domestic workers to Hong Kong and other places, it was precisely also at that very same moment when the popular anti-dictatorship movement was burgeoning. The country then was severely plagued by economic crisis and discontent was everywhere. Unemployment rates were critically high, inflation was causing misery, driving tens of thousands of Filipinos to seek jobs overseas, amid inspiring thousands of others to join the anti-dictatorship protest movement. One could probably say that in that particular historical conjuncture, the Filipino seemed to be left with only two options – to join the anti-dictatorship movement in the hope of bringing about political and economic changes, or to join the mass movement of Filipinos finding their means of survival abroad as economic refugees and ‘laborers in exile’. In the story of Rosario, – daughter, wife, activist, migrant worker mother -- these two parallel streams in the country’s history would meet and converge.

Since the late 1970s through the early 1980s, opposition to the Marcos regime and its policies was growing from all sectors of society, from members of the local elite to the grassroots communities, from urban to rural. The popular protest reached a turning point in 1983 when Ninoy Aquino, jailed because he was Marcos’ longstanding political opponent, was brutally assassinated in public view. (It was Ninoy’s wife, Cory, who would later serve as the first post-Marcos president of the country). Overnight Ninoy became a martyr-symbol for the popular movement. The single largest organized group leading the protests was the national democratic movement which espoused an analysis of the Philippines society as being semi-colonial and semi-feudal and which advocated revolutionary change. It drew its followers from several mass organizations operating both in the ‘legal’ and underground spheres. The Communist Party of the Philippines was its leading influence, together with its armed group, the New People’s Army. While the focus of the popular movement in the urban centers was to put an end to the Marcos rule, the national democratic movement linked the Marcos rule to US imperialist domination and to a semi-feudal system in which the control of land and resources is concentrated in a handful of local elite landlords. The national democratic movement, while largely being peasant and worker-based, drew a lot of support from the student movement, who had always been seen as a leading force among the

movement's intellectual base. Among the most active in the student movement were students of the University of the Philippines (UP), especially those who came from lower-income families and who were deeply familiar with problems faced by rural populations and the working class. The UP was known for espousing academic freedom in pursuit of excellence. Within this liberal atmosphere, an intellectual ferment developed, affecting the entire academe, and soon the notion of *'iskolar ng bayan'* (scholar of the people) was constructed and deployed by a radical student movement to inspire and politicize UP's students. "*Iskolar ng bayan'* is derived from the recognition that the students of UP represented the country's very best students – its very own 'scholars' -- and therefore its hope for the future. But more importantly, *'iskolar ng bayan'* asserts that as students of a state university, UP students benefit from the 'people's money' and must therefore 'give back' to society by being of service to the people. *'Iskolar ng bayan'* constantly critiques, questions and interrogates the larger issues in society, but it does not pursue academic work for its own sake alone, but rather situates it within the larger people's struggles and utilizes it for social transformation. This notion would animate the spirit of the early '80s popular student movement which emerged in the campuses of the University of the Philippines across the country.

Soon, around the mid-1980s, a coalition of women's groups and mass organizations was formed under the umbrella front called GABRIELA. It has been recognized as the largest legal coalition in the radical movement in the Philippines for many years<sup>107</sup> With its members in almost all principal cities in the countries, it has played no small part in the political mobilization of women and in bringing women's issues to public attention. In the 1980s, GABRIELA would be known for its slogan, "The women's place is in the (national) struggle" – (to read, the women's place is in the national struggle for liberation.), positing women's role in the national struggle, but at the same time subsuming the struggle for women's oppression under the struggle against the dictatorship. In GABRIELA-led initiatives, therefore, a distinct 'nationalist' consciousness (rejection of neocolonial control) intersects with consciousness of class and gender. Its stated aims are to have women's rights recognized in the context of democratic and participatory governance free from neocolonial influence and foreign intervention.

Silhouetted against this historical backdrop is the figure of Rosario --- child of a mechanic, *'iskolar ng bayan'*, women's activist, organizer of peasant communities, wife of a comrade, mother, and eventually, migrant domestic worker. In her life history, the script of women's liberation framed within a national democratic movement would be rewritten into a narrative of feminized migrant laborer in her journey overseas – in turn, Rosario would

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<sup>107</sup> Sylvia Chant and Mcywline.

struggle to rewrite the social text of Filipino diasporic labor, seeking to expand and reconfigure the spatial and cultural boundaries of the national democratic project

### **1. “My dream is not impossible to achieve” – The Story of Rosario**

Rosario holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology Science. She had entered the University of the Philippines as a scholar preparing to study medicine. Second of five children, she describes her family background by explaining that her father is a mechanic and her mother, a plain housewife. Growing up in Panay island, she would be the only one among her siblings who would finish college. She was able to enter the prestigious University of the Philippines (UP) only because she was able to qualify for it under the democratization scheme – As you know, they say, Rosario shrugs, it’s only for the scholars. Her studies were supported by a scholarship mechanism for students aspiring to be doctors, and in which a foster parent would subsidize the scholar’s education. Her foster father was an American doctor. Rosario’s father, she explains had no stable job and could only afford to support the children’s schooling till high school, as public education up to high school was free and because they lived quite close to the school so they didn’t have to spend for any transportation money. You see, my father was a mechanic – and how much would he earn, do you think? Rosario points out. It wasn’t even enough for our food, no?

Unlike other families, Rosario never felt any pressure from her own parents to stop schooling just so she could get a job and support her younger sibling’s education. It wasn’t like that at all in her family, she explains. Rather, if you want to go to study, then you have to find a way for it yourself. The only good thing is that all of us did go to school, she says. No one had to stop just so the other finish”

It was as a student at the university that she became more acutely conscious and critical of social realities in the Philippines, and that education is the privilege of the elite. She looked around her and began to question, Why is it that only the rich students get to the university ? Why is it that students from very poor families are unable to graduate ? It was out of this questioning of her own experience in relation to what was happening in the rest of the country that she decided to join the student protest movement: I also come from a family that’s struggling for basic survival. Joining the militant League of Filipino students (LFS), she led and initiated consciousness-raising activities. She points out, Our education is really just for the privileged students. It is such that those who come from rich families, they’re the only ones who are able to study in good schools and whose parents are able to support and sustain their studies...those who come from the poor, well, naturally, it will be difficult for them to compete with those coming from more privileged families.

Like in many other parts of the Philippines, the LFS would lead many student demonstrations in the island of Panay, and Rosario was one of its most committed and active members. In those days when political repression was at its most intense, involvement in the student movement meant taking risks. Student organizations were favorite targets of the military. The island of Panay at that time was one of the most heavily militarized areas and activists had been known to have disappeared in an instant. Arbitrary arrests and detention and summary execution of suspected activists formed part of the pattern of political repression. Rosario's family would begin to notice changes in her – she would be gone for days and stop going home regularly. Rosario believes that her father must have understood why she was an activist. If there was any objection, it came from two of her uncles who were both working for the military and who, Rosario narrates, “know what they were doing to the students at that time.”

Eventually, Rosario's life would take many turns. From being a student activist, she would become a research assistant at the university, then an organizer of peasant and ‘urban poor’ women. Along the process she married a ‘comrade’ and eventually had three children. While working ‘full-time’ on voluntary basis for all these various organizations, she would take up contractual research jobs from time to time in order to earn a living. Her husband was also an activist and was working for an NGO which conducted training seminars. Eventually, her husband would take up the larger share of raising the children because during those days, Rosario's “center of preoccupation and attention” was her work with GABRIELA. GABRIELA was just in the initial stage of setting up its Panay chapter. It organized women in the urban poor communities, peasants, students, and professional sectors. You know, Rosario says, our society really has to know about the situation of women in different sectors – we need to recognize their rights, their contribution to the development of society.

It was her own choice to concentrate on organizing women because she was “really challenged by the situation of women everywhere: I was challenged by what I saw in the situation of peasant women -- they have such a big contribution to production, but it is not recognized. The housewives have a big contribution to our labor force, but the work of a housewife is not recognized as productive labor in our society. So I thought it would be better perhaps if this was given attention to. That was like the driving force behind me, because I could see the same situation in that of my aunt, my mother, and it was as if there was no recognition for what they were doing. For example, what about housework—how does our society view it? If there were no housewives, well our society will not really move, will it? Even among the students, as women students, I could see that we're also

marginalized. Women are really a marginalized sector in our society. So maybe that's why it was a driving force for me.

Rosario laments that as a mother, she “never really developed a close relationship” with her children because she had focused her attention to her activist work. Her memory of her early experiences of motherhood was, You know, it was like, you're a mother who just gave birth to your children,, you don't really neglect them but you don't really seem them frequently. It was something that pained Rosario: You see, it also had an effect on me...the fact that I wasn't close to my children anymore...when I was at home, my child would look for his father. He was close to his father naturally because they were together all the time....That also pained me! but the way I also see it is, it also has something to do with how the child is raised, and how one explains it to the child. Like, how one explains that if I'm not with him, this is what I'm doing. It's really hard, you see.

The life of full-time activists in those days was certainly not easy. Hunted down by the military, activists would have to move from one house to another. It was a lifestyle which children usually found difficult to adjust to and cope with. Rosario and her husband would sometimes leave their child with the day care organized by GABRIELA for activist parents. This would take its toll not only on the child but on the marital relationship as well. As more children came, Rosario's husband eventually became more and more involved with raising the family and less and less involved with activism and NGO work. It was then that they decided to stay with the family of her husband. While this move was aimed at giving a more stable environment to the children, ironically, Rosario saw this as one factor that caused instability in their marital relationship.

In 1994 her father underwent surgery and Rosario shouldered most of the expenses by borrowing from friends and from organizations she was connected with. Her unpaid debts amounted to PhP 65,000. In order to pay off her debts she decided to look for employment in Hong Kong as a domestic worker. Her sister, who had been working in Hong Kong already for a year, finally found an employer for her in 1994. It was a difficult decision for her to make and it had taken her almost a year of contemplating whether or not she would come to Hong Kong before finally making up her mind. She explains. You see, it was absolutely necessary for me to pay off the debts. It was being taken out of my allowance by installments, but it was not really working out. At that time my husband was also a full-time organizer so I really had no other way to pay off the debts.

She knew that it would mean a drastic change in her life. She points out, That's why when I came here, sometimes I also thought about that...but you see that was really an enormous amount of money in the Philippines, those debts I had to pay back...so what else could I do? Yes, it's true – I really thought long and hard about it, about what really are the

priorities in my life. How would I really be able to pay off those debts if I just stayed in the Philippines? Even at that time, Rosario would manage to find some work. She was the Marketing Information officer of the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, a government agency, from 1990 to 1992. She would also have some part-time research jobs. But with the coming of their second child, and then the third one, their expenses multiplied exponentially.

Rosario's husband was not supportive at all of her decision to travel to Hong Kong. Her original plan was just to stay in Hong Kong for two years and that was why she returned home in 1997. Rosario explains. But the problem was, I was not able to unite my husband with the idea of my coming here just for the purpose of paying off the debts I incurred on account of my father. Naturally of course, since we have differences in our notions of giving help to our families, perhaps he could not comprehend me, or he understood me but denied it to himself! You see, of course the matter of helping your own parents is a kind of personal responsibility. So he really absolutely did not agree to my coming to Hong Kong. If it was just us, with our subsistence level of income, well that was just okay for us. In fact we were even able to give some help to your parents. But then I was also determined to pay off my debts in my own way. And also, you see, my father's medical expenses did not end there – in fact he needed another operation. So it was really still necessary for me to help him with his next operation.

She was thus torn between allegiance to her husband and the responsibility of a daughter to her father. Here we see the competing allegiances in which eventually she gave priority to the fulfillment of her duty as a daughter. She attributes this choice to her close relationship with her father, largely because she grew up with her grandmother and felt that her father was not very close to her mother's relatives because her mother's family was relatively well-off.

Rosario describes her first two years in Hong Kong as a time when she was 'lost.' She came to Hong Kong purely for work and nothing else. From 1995 to 1997 she concentrated on working for her employment and taking in part-time jobs to augment her income. She did not join any organization in Hong Kong, though her comrades in the Philippines continued to update her so that she "wouldn't be totally cut off from the mainstream of the movement." Her hesitation to approach migrants' organizations in Hong Kong was partly because she was not confident about whom to approach, for by that time, the national democratic movement in the Philippines was becoming fragmented, and the divisions within the movement were reflected in the migrants' organizations in Hong Kong.

Rosario points out that her employer in Hong Kong didn't really treat her like a domestic helper. Her *amo* always told her that she should treat them like sister and brother. Rosario proudly says, And that's why at home, we called each other by first names – there

was nothing of this “sir” or “madam”!’ Rosario believes that her *amo*’s civil, courteous and understanding attitude towards her could be attributed to her *amo*’s level of education and professional training as an insurance worker. My *amo* could be considered as coming from a middle income family, Rosario remarks. She was able to complete her education and now works in the insurance field. That’s also why I always see her relating to other people, all kinds of people...she’s also able to relate with domestic helpers.

Rosario’s *amo* had one child at that time and though her work was as an “all-around” domestic helper,” her main work was actually as a tutor to the child and to provide some kind of research and editorial assistance to the couple who were also studying at that time. Rosario explains that Our house was quite small and they don’t really demand that I do housecleaning. They don’t also demand that I prepare the food. And that’s why I still don’t know how to cook even until now! The woman is an insurance agent and my male *amo* is a civil servant. there was really a time when they were both studying. So what we would do was, I would help them with their lessons. With their thesis. You see, my male *amo*, he is not very good in English. So he would explain to me what he wanted to do. And then I would do it. And then I would explain it back to him. What we would do, my female *amo* and myself, we would teach him. You see, he would have presentations to make, you know? And that’s why our relationship is also quite good. Actually, with all their homework, their papers, I really helped make all of them. And that was also why, Rosario explains, they were quite “liberal” and “lenient” toward her.

She returned home after completing the first employment contract. Upon her return, however, the conflicts with her husband intensified. By that time her husband had stopped his NGO work and instead had taken over the farming of his family’s land. A ‘small landlord’, his husband’s family employed farm workers to plant rice and watermelon as an in-between crop. The brothers would take turns managing the farm, but Rosario’s husband gave up his turn when he was doing activist and NGO work. By the time Rosario returned from Hong Kong, her husband was given his full turn to manage the farm. The farm earned a lot of profit, according to Rosario, because the salaries of the workers were quite low and it was fully equipped with the necessary ‘modern’ machinery.

When Rosario first returned to the Philippines in 1997, her husband had expected her to stay home for good. But upon coming home she immediately immersed herself again in full-time peasant organizing. Rosario reflects on this and says. We didn’t really have a leveling off of expectations and that’s why when I went home, we quarreled a lot. Actually he didn’t have any questions about the political issues. He was even supporting the movement by giving money, offering the use of his house for meetings. giving donations in kind, like that. But he was no longer really involved politically. You can see that the characteristics of his

'class', his traits as a 'landlord class', are really making a comeback, isn't it? Rosario would say.

She recalls that during that period, her relationship with her husband was "really rough." They quarreled about a lot of things. He started questioning her about her schedules. "I told him that I just couldn't give up what I was doing. Of course I couldn't compromise my principles just so I could conform to the life he wanted to pursue. He wanted me to look for another job...to go home after 5:00 pm, to help the kids with their studies...to cook dinner...Well, during that time, I would go home only after one week, sometimes after two weeks. That's why I told him I would think and reconsider our relationship, but that this wouldn't be an obstacle to my activist work.

Meanwhile, Rosario's employers continued to write her to convince her to come back to Hong Kong and work for them. At first she refused. But after facing problems in her relationship with her husband and feeling the constraints he was trying to impose on her, she decided to go back to Hong Kong. Rosario recalls, There was really no big reason for me to return to Hong Kong but I felt suffocated by my relationship with my husband. So that was one reason for me to return to Hong Kong...so I could have some breathing space...you see we were quarrelling all the time! Yes, I do have some space here in Hong Kong which I don't have over there.

Upon returning to Hong Kong this time, Rosario made sure that she was connected to the "right" migrant group. It was at this point that her life in Hong Kong took on a meaning beyond employment as a domestic worker. Even while being employed as a full-time domestic worker, she found a way to continue her activism in Hong Kong as an organizer of Filipino migrant workers. Rosario says with emphasis. When I came back here, I made sure that I really found a link with a group so that I could continue my activist work. You see I cannot really abandon that. What I experienced in the past, you know, those first two years when it seems that I was not doing anything here in Hong Kong, of course, it was just like...you know, it's as if your life, the life you had since you were in college, until you came to Hong Kong was all about organizing people, and then suddenly for two years you didn't do anything, you didn't organize anything?! What a waste of time that was!

Things happened very fast and her work as an organizer would bear fruit. She recalls how she arrived in October 1999, and by November she along with a few others started organizing the an association for Filipinos coming mainly from her province and who spoke the same language (Ilonggo). Two months later, in January, they organized the assembly. And there was no stopping since then. Today she serves as the vice-president of the association.

In the meantime, Rosario and her husband eventually parted ways. Rosario says, It was I who asked for the separation. You see, perhaps as his way of rebelling, he engaged in womanizing. He would spend the money I sent on other people – and naturally it had a bearing on our misunderstanding. As for me, I don't think that's the way to face the problem because anyway, you see, I would go home every year. But we also didn't really talk to each other anymore. The only thing we would talk about was the children, and mainly their financial needs.

When Rosario first brought up the idea of separation, her husband did not think she was serious and tried to use the children as an argument against it. But she was adamant. She could sense that her husband was not even apologetic for what he did to her and the children. I really stood firm on my decision, Rosario says. It's a question of commitment and trust in the relationship. Infidelity, you see, is not just the prerogative of the male. Even a woman can engage in it, can she not?

At first the children seemed to take the side of the father. The father continued to dutifully undertake his responsibilities by going home everyday at five o'clock in order to cook for the children. But eventually the father would introduce the children to the women he was involved with and began staying away from the house. There would be several nights when he wouldn't even come home.

Of course the children know that I did not fail them, Rosario insists. I always talked to them. If ever it was possible for me to go home, I would really try to go home if I could. You see it wasn't just the financial needs that I tried to respond to, but also the need to really talk to them. Even just on the phone, we would engage in lectures about their lessons in school, you know, just so they could see that despite the fact that I was far away, I was still attentive to their needs, that I was still fulfilling my responsibilities to them. They could really see that, you know.

Rosario recalls that eventually the children 'got angry' with their father, though they still live with him. Proudly, she points out that she has already 'developed' and trained her eldest child to be responsible over the two siblings. The children's father continues to perform his duties especially since he noticed that the children were not so close to him anymore. Rosario explains that she told her children that, "actually, it's just me and your father who separated." He is still your father, she pointed out to them. She notes that she and her estranged husband are 'better friends' now. Migration really exacts a huge cost" Rosario says sadly. That's what really happens to families. It's just really like that.

Now that her eldest child is already in college, Rosario doesn't foresee herself going home 'for good.' Her eldest son is studying computer engineering at a private university. If I'm just working in the Philippines I wouldn't be able to send him to college, she points out.

He still wants to study so, let him study. That is possible, perhaps, for as long as I am here. Rosario, however, adds that she always reminds her children that even the work in Hong Kong is unstable.

Rosario draws comfort from the fact that her friends and comrades continue to check on her children, talk to them, visit them in the house, and explain developments in the situation to them. She adds, And I still go on trying to explain to the children what my situation is like over here so that they know...so that they are aware of the difficulties in my work. You see, it's not all the time that work here is easy. There are times when your relationship with your employer is also difficult.

What she finds most difficult now is her employer's demands about their children's education. She is expected to tutor the children especially since English is now being used as the medium of instruction in the elder child's high school. Well, the child is very hard-headed! Rosario complains. So whenever his grades turn out bad, they ask me questions! And that's why it's difficult for me.

Rosario points out that the second child is also still very small: My *amo*, she even gave birth to a second child – her elder one was already quite big and she even had another one! Ever since the little one was born, he already stayed in Rosario's room. Rosario had to take care of the little one herself, get up one he was sick. The only good thing, she points out, is that “they don't really demand any housework from me.” They would often dine out when Rosario would not be able to cook because she was tutoring the children. They had hired a private tutor, but when Rosario came, they asked her to take over. They pay her a little extra money for the tutoring, but, as Rosario points out, the amount is not even one-fourth of what they paid the regular tutor. Rosario says, I also told them that it's okay for me if there's a lot of work in the house – just don't make me tutor their child who is so hard-headed! It's really difficult to motivate them to study! But they relieve me of housework whenever I have to do the tutoring. It's as simple as that – our arrangement is just that simple. Rosario describes her relationship with her employer's children as ‘okay,’ since she practically raised them.

Tutoring her employer's child is what Rosario finds most difficult in her work, not because she is uninterested in tutoring work per se but because the child himself is difficult to motivate. In contrast, what Rosario enjoys the most is helping out her employers in their own studies. In addition, her employers allow her to engage in extra-curricular activities, even letting her use the telephone during the weekdays so she could organize her organization's events and meetings as long as it doesn't get in the way of the child's study time.

The freedom and space which allow her to be involved in her union's activities even during the weekdays is what keeps Rosario from being bored and what takes away the

drudgery of life as a domestic helper. It is what she cherishes the most in the simple arrangement with her employer in which a certain equilibrium has been maintained because both she and her employer find their interests satisfied. In this arrangement, communication lines between Rosario and her employer are kept open and made possible by a kind of 'intellectual' compatibility if not parity which generates mutual respect on both sides. My *amo* doesn't engage in verbal abuse, Rosario emphatically says. Really, that's never done in our house. If there's anything that they don't like about you, well, they really talk to you and tell you that they didn't like this or that. And if they don't have time to talk to you, well, they write you a letter and you really have to respond to their letter!

Clearly, Rosario's passion lies in her activist-organizing work. It is what gives meaning to her life in Hong Kong and allows her to recover her sense of self and feeling of connectedness to her past and to her movement in the Philippines. She proudly explains that the union which she helped organize aims to protect the rights and welfare of migrants and to achieve their 'political and economic empowerment.' Rosario explains: The way we see it is that empowerment is done mainly through the organizing of migrants -- because it's only through this, when they are united, that the strength of the migrants can be felt.

Her union initiates campaigns on migrants' issues in Hong Kong and organizing leadership training activities in order to 'explain why Filipino people are migrating' and to discuss issues that affect the migrant workers. The union also discusses issues about the Philippines and initiates activities aimed at developing skills for public speakers among the migrants. You see, we need a lot of speakers! Rosario declares emphatically. She adds that their union also engages in solidarity actions with other migrants: You see, it's not just us Filipinos who are oppressed here. It's not just us who are being marginalized in Hong Kong.

What she finds most challenging is precisely the task of organizing the migrants themselves, because 'one learns so many things -- the problems they face, their conditions, and how one could persuade them to join organizations. You see, it's not that easy at all, Rosario explains. . One thing you have to deal with is the reality that Sunday is really the only rest day for the domestic helpers. So many of them just sit and hang around, Rosario adds. The biggest challenge is how to convince them to take action on their own problems. You see, most of them are already overworked, have very little sleep, have little food to eat...and of course the problems in their own families that they have to deal with constantly! But then you have to have a lot of patience.

Rosario acknowledges the change in lifestyles which takes place among Filipina migrant workers and which poses a challenge for their union: Since they live and work here, their income is bigger than what they were used to. Their lifestyle also changed, even if in the Philippines they come from peasant families. Sometimes they think that when they have

a fixed income, it's enough for them to send money home, to be able to call up their families, you know...that's enough for them, But to engage in other activities, to be involved in finding an answer to their wage problems, in demanding rights protection, well. those are not their priorities. And that's where the organization comes in, to explain our rights and what we can accomplish when we are united in struggling for those rights. So you have to employ different approaches and methods in organizing migrants.

Rosario believes that working in Hong Kong as a migrant domestic helper is really 'a viable option if you can find a good employer.' You see, she says, there's really no option to find a good job in the Philippines and to have a stable income like one has here. That's why we don't really entertain the thought of going home for good. Even I myself, I don't really entertain the thought. If your *amo* here is good, then you won't really think of going home to look for work over there. You would prefer to overcome your own suffering – the pain of being separated from your family, from being far away from your own children, your own emotions and feelings – you would rather overcome all these just so you could fulfill the financial needs of your family. It's as simple as that. So I'm not really thinking of going home for good. Actually, it's still within the context of my own financial needs and the fact that there are still so many migrants who need to be organized over here!

Rosario doesn't really regret not having pursued her much earlier plans to study medicine because she gave it up in order to go into full-time activism: I don't really regret that at all! Actually, in those days, when you are a student, your idealism is really very intense!

What about her sense of fulfillment as a 'woman', her emotional needs for intimate relationships? Rosario replies: Actually, even when I was still with my husband, I wasn't really that kind of a very sexually active person. Maybe I'm really abnormal! I'm not really abnormal, do you think? Because I don't really think of those things. You see, when you are thinking of a lot of other things, when you're constantly thinking of what you're going to do next Sunday, and your mind is full and preoccupied with it, well then, you don't really think of those things like relationships. Naturally, among women friends there's a lot of bantering about it and of course one also gets to joke about it, you know. Do I feel fulfilled as a woman? You see, one's sense of fulfillment is relative. On my part, when I realized that women have a big role to play in our society, well that's really a big leap on my part...So on the whole I'm okay, I already feel fulfilled, that I even gave birth to my children and that I am also fulfilling my responsibility to them. I also look at the question of equality between men and women in terms of our roles in society – one should not be more superior than the other. And I also try to convey that to other women by carrying those principles in whatever I do.

What's the point of having good principles if you don't apply them to your own practice? If you don't then they don't have any meaning!

What then are Rosario's deepest longings and desires? Rosario responds with a smile: What are my dreams? Well, of course, as a mother, my dream is just for my children to finish their studies. But the truth is, even if they don't finish their studies, that's fine. You see I don't believe in education anymore because even if you finish your college education you won't be able to find a job anyway. For me, as long as you are educated, that's all. Because you see, as long as the political and economic situation in the Philippines doesn't change, the Filipino people will really continue to migrate, to be constantly on the move. When it comes to dreams, for me, it's not really like the others, you know, like dreaming of having a nice house. Because you see I already have a house. And actually I can also live just anywhere. But what I really dream of is to be of help in organizing my fellow migrant workers and in raising their political awareness. That's really where my attention is focused on right now – to multiply the membership of my organization. That's not really aiming too high, isn't it? It wouldn't really be like reaching for the stars, is it? It's not really impossible to achieve – it can definitely be achieved!

## **2. Reading Rosario's story**

Like Esther and Miriam, Rosario's familial affinity and strong sense of duty as a daughter (to a father) strongly influenced her decision to come to Hong Kong as a domestic worker. But unlike Esther and Miriam, Rosario has to negotiate her subject positions around several layers of identities – as wife, mother, daughter, political activist, intellectual, domestic helper/tutor, organizer. Rosario successfully fulfills her obligation to shoulder her father's medical needs after the first employment contract. When she returns to the Philippines she finds herself caught in a greatly strained marital relationship. The journey back to Hong Kong for re-employment then becomes a means of 'escape' from her marital relationship, a means for enlarging her personal space and strengthening her economic position which would enable her to contribute greatly to her children's growing financial needs. In the process she is able to reclaim her 'past' identity as an activist and reinvent herself as a passionate organizer of Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong.

### *2.1. the subaltern intellectual/activist as domestic helper*

Rosario's working class background and exposure to a highly charged intellectual atmosphere as a student made her sensitive to the growing popular anti-dictatorship movement in the '80s. She developed a class and political consciousness at an early age. It is

from a subaltern position that she develops her intellectuality and thus presents the image of an '*iskolar ng bayan*' (scholar of the people) in its many senses – a scholar with subaltern roots who critically questions and interrogates relations of power, who commits a life of 'service to the people', who locates her agency in collective struggle, and inevitably questions the very nature of an educational system that reflects and caters to the need of the Philippines' elite-dominated class structure. She thus passionately develops an allegiance to a national liberation movement, devoting a significant part of her time and skills to organizing grassroots sectors. The movement then not only becomes a site of collective resistance but becomes a self/life-defining experience from which an 'intellectual' self develops, from which she forges her relationship with 'others', and from which she defines even her personal and intimate relationships. From this subaltern position, the intellectuality that is developed is one that seeks to interrogate and transform social conditions that produced oppressed subjects and which simultaneously rejects dominant social institutions, such as 'education' as the agents of liberation/salvation. This intellectuality,, overlaid with deep-seated consciousness of familial duties, does not inhibit but rather makes possible a rationality that would eventually justify if not lead her to the decision to seek temporary employment as a domestic helper in Hong Kong. Faced on the one hand with a movement-organizing vocation that showed promise in a situation of urgency, and on the other hand, a situation of insurmountable debt, Rosario carefully weighed her options. (It took a whole year of contemplating, of asking myself what are really my priorities now. So I finally decided to ask my sister to look for an employer for me).

Fortunately, she found an employer who was not only 'liberal and lenient' but was also quick to recognize and appreciate her intellectual skills and talents. The family of her employer comes to value and benefit more from Rosario's intellectual labor than from her domestic skills, and she becomes the children's tutor and the employer's research assistant. Given her employer's liberal values and their recognition of her intellectual skills, Rosario is put in a position from which she could relate with her employers with self-confidence. A 'simple' arrangement thus develops between Rosario and her employers – an arrangement of mutual respect and of recognition and satisfaction of each other's needs

She is aware that the arrangement is more profitable for her employers because she does not get paid for her tutoring efforts as much as they would normally pay a regular privately hired tutor. But she accepts this because in this 'simple arrangement' with her employer she is given the space to continue her activist involvement and the opportunity to utilize her intellectual skills. This affirms her self-worth and connectedness with a 'past self' that even her identity as wife and new identity as a domestic helper cannot erase.

Rosario's views on migration are shaped by a critical consciousness of historical-structural issues and her own personal, though unique and limited experiences as a domestic helper. Speaking as an intellectual/activist, she declares that for as long as there is no political and economic change in the Philippines, Filipinos will continue to migrate. At the same time, because of her relatively positive experience with her employer, Rosario is able to echo Mader Irma's judgment: that contractual employment as domestic helpers is a viable option for Filipinas as long as she finds a good employer.

Rosario's own personal and accumulated experiences -- as a holder of a science degree from a prestigious university who turns into an activist and then later becomes a migrant domestic worker -- have caused her to condemn her country's political, economic and social system for its failure to provide for its citizens, and to lose faith in its educational institutions for its inability to produce subjects with a secure future: I don't believe in education anymore. What is the point of it when you cannot find jobs even if you have a degree.

## 2.2. *'national liberation movement' as site of collective and individual agency*

Rosario's involvement in the national democratic movement stemmed from a belief in the collective agency of a people organized around the identity of 'Filipino', in transforming the conditions that oppress them. The national democratic movement presents itself as a project of 'national liberation' and offers itself as the means for a people's salvation. Ironically, the story of Rosario -- national liberation activist turned domestic helper -- illustrates the movement's impaired capacity to deliver 'liberation' from personal struggles. Faced with the need to pay for her father's medical expenses, Rosario turns to her movement comrades and her friends in NGOs for help and borrows money from them. The moneys loaned out to her are precious and therefore Rosario must pay them back. (You see, I have to pay it back because they are money for the allowances of full-time activists.). The 'creditor-movement' thus reveals its other side -- fixated on pursuing its own political project at all costs, it reveals in this instant a denial of its own proclaimed knowledge of the subaltern's condition and offers Rosario no recourse but to rely on her own individual agency and network of family support, and eventually to seek employment overseas. In that instant, the 'liberation movement' seems unable to present itself as a locus of agency for working out concrete alternatives or solutions that would address the needs of its own members beyond the interest of its own economic sustainability. Through many years of involvement as an intellectual/activist, Rosario had proven to be a valuable leader and member of the movement. And yet, faced with her own personal struggles, she is left with no option but to turn to exterior forces -- the outside/abroad -- for salvation. It is in this turn that Rosario

rewrites the script of individual agency working in and outside the movement as a site of resistance.

Rosario, however, does not feel betrayed by a movement that was unable to save her in her time of need. She does not bitterly question its inability to care and provide for its own members. On the contrary, she continues to espouse its cause, organize more followers, and, on a personal level, to draw emotional support from her comrades. (I have comrades in the movement who visit my children and help explain my situation to them.). Believing in the need to continuously engage in transforming the nation's political and economic interior, Rosario commits herself to the struggle of organizing migrant workers' rights in Hong Kong, and links it very closely to political projects back home. She invokes class consciousness and faith in collective action, and demonstrates sophisticated skills in organizing as well as a generous sensitivity to the psycho-social conditions of migrant domestic workers. (You really have to be patient and use different methods of organizing. Most of the time they are overworked, underpaid, have little food to eat. when they come to Hong Kong, their lifestyles change suddenly because now they have a fixed income... The most challenging thing is to convince them to take action on their own problems. That is where the organization comes in, to show what we can do when we are united... Those coming from the peasants and workers are usually easier to organize because they understand what is happening at home.)

Rosario's direct engagement in an organized movement for collective resistance has now taken on the shape of involvement in a migrants' union. Even if at one time it had failed to present itself as a site for alternative economic agency, the 'movement' still continues to play an important role in the constitution of Rosario's identity as 'subaltern intellectual' and 'activist woman worker.' The union/movement is the focus of her attention, her time, and her creative and mental energies. It serves as a platform for enabling collective agency (The organization shows the migrants what we can do when we are united, Rosario says) and collective 'speech' (We need so many speakers !). It is also an important site of learning (I really enjoy it because I learn so much about the conditions of the migrants.). It becomes Rosario's source of fulfillment and the locus of her dreams and hopes for the future (I just dream of having more members in our organizations. That is not impossible to achieve!) She says that she is so preoccupied with her involvement in the union – her mind so full with it – that she does not feel any need for other personal or intimate relationships as a 'woman.' 'Woman' in Rosario's sense is no longer a construct that is defined solely by its distinction from 'man' and as the position from which to relate to 'man' in a personal way, but rather an identity that collaborates with, enables and supports other significant identities like 'activist' or 'migrant worker.' It is in this sense, that Rosario feels fulfilled as a woman.

### 2.3. *'Woman' as daughter, wife, activist and mother*

Rosario's personal experiences and exposure to the situation of women in her family leads to a strong identification with other women struggling against oppressive conditions. As an activist in the Philippines she deliberately chooses the 'women's sector' among the peasant and urban poor communities as the fields for her organizing work. In this engagement she finds expression for a feminist consciousness framed within the 'national democratic' political ideology and which borrows legitimization from the global discourse of women's rights (Rosario points out that the UN Decade for women and the Beijing women's conference was influential in bringing the women's agenda into the mainstream discourse and in the emergence of NGOs working on women's issues even in rural places in the Philippines).

Tensions between the 'political' and the 'personal' play out in her life as she struggles to combine the demands of movement and family both struggling against economic deprivation and a highly militarized and repressive political situation in the Philippines. She cites ways by which the movement tried to ease the burden for women, such as by setting up child care centers for the children of activists. This would prove helpful though adequate for couples like Rosario and her husband who were constantly on the move, either traveling to remote villages or fleeing from the military.

Organizing other women becomes the 'center' of her attention and this would lead to tensions with her husband/comrade. When she was involved with the women's organizations in the Philippines, she began to spend less time inside the home and her husband would take on the larger share of domestic responsibilities. This would later sow the seeds of their conflict and estrangement. While the husband demonstrated his ability to break free from the traditional 'machismo' by taking on the role of primary caregiver to the children, he would eventually demand that Rosario perform the traditional role of mother/wife when she first returned to the Philippines after completing her first contract in Hong Kong. (He did not expect that after returning from Hong Kong I would go back to my organizing work, Rosario recalls. He wanted me to look for another job, one which would enable me to come home at five o'clock to cook for the children.). Why did the husband now invoke the traditional gender roles? Why the slide back to 'machismo'? Could it be possible that he felt threatened by Rosario's new economic position in the family?

Rosario's husband was not happy about her decision to go to Hong Kong in the first place. If it was just for the economic needs of their own nuclear family, the husband felt that they could make do with what they were earning. If Rosario was going to Hong Kong only for the purpose of paying off the debts that she incurred on account of her father, then he did

not think it was that reasonable at all. When she was first contemplating the possibility of seeking employment abroad, Rosario was put in a situation of competing allegiances – between obedience to her husband on one side, and on the other side, responsibility over her father combined with her duty to the comrades to whom she was indebted. Only after a year of weighing her priorities did she choose the latter. She knew then that it was a choice that would imply a drastic turn in her life.

That her children became closer to their father became a source of pain and self-doubt for Rosario (I was a mother who just gave birth to the children but didn't really spend time with them.) Rosario's choices as a 'woman activist' would exact its toll on a family life and a marital relationship that continued to be caught within the culture of patriarchy and 'machismo.' She would be blamed by her husband for the distancing that happens between her and her children as well as for the distancing that he takes from her. Rosario's marital relationship took after a turn for the worse when she first returned to the Philippines after two years in Hong Kong. She could not give in to her husband's expectation that she give up her activism so that she could be a 'regular wife and mother.' She felt that what he was asking her to do was to give up her very 'personhood,' that which was an essential part of her self. Feeling trapped and constrained by this relationship, the only and immediate means of escape she saw was to return to Hong Kong. This time, she was conscious that her decision to return to Hong Kong was for her own sake.

It was also when she became a wage earner as a domestic helper in Hong Kong, physically separated from her children, and even more when she became separated from her husband, that Rosario would gain self-confidence as a mother. It is a self-confidence of a mother who is able to provide for her children's economic needs, secure their future, and nurture them despite the long-distance relationship (The children know that I was not neglectful of my responsibilities to them as a mother. I would even discuss their lessons with them on the phone.)

Secure in this new role of a 'long-distance mother/provider', Rosario finds fulfillment as a 'woman' in her activist work and in organizing other migrant worker-women. From this sense of fulfillment she develops an optimistic and pragmatic approach to her life, enabling her to confidently dream the kind of dreams that 'are not impossible to achieve.'

## Chapter Eight

# CONCLUSION

The life histories recorded here enable us to see how the history and the phenomenon of migration are played out in individual lives. The narratives have been read in order to gain insights into how the Filipina domestic worker, in and through the experience of migration, constructs meaning, articulates a sense of ‘self’ and others’, reconstructs memory of the past and imagines a future where other/alternative subjectivities may be possible. The readings also attempted to tease out traces of the social and historical conditions that produce and effect a/the subject and a/the subject’s ‘voice’ in narration. However, the narratives of the life histories have been viewed not as authoritative sources of ‘truth’ nor simple representations of ‘facts’, but as forms of self-representation that are themselves a product and producer of discourse, and which thus need to be ‘re-constellated’ by the reader in order to be useful.<sup>108</sup> In the research process, it was important to be aware of the difference, or even tension perhaps, between the act of ‘listening’ to the stories – in which the listener tries to ‘know’ what the narrator of the life history wants to say – and in the act of ‘reading’, in which the reader must now try to go beyond what has been ‘narrated’ and set it against a larger social text. In narrativizing and retelling the very moving life histories of migrant domestic workers, it was very easy for the researcher/listener to identify with the narrators and thus very tempting to be content with merely echoing what has been narrated and letting the stories, powerful testimonies that they already are, just ‘speak’ for themselves. But in order to make the narratives more useful for the construction of knowledge about the operation of discourse/power and transformational politics, the researcher is called to play the role ‘reader/interpreter’ who listens and reads the narratives with the purpose of interrogating the wider social text in which they are produced and which they simultaneously interrupt, disrupt or reinforce.

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<sup>108</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, A Literary Representation of the Subaltern : A Woman’s Text From the Third World, in *In Other Worlds, Essays in Cultural Politics*, Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 241-243.

The life histories that are presented and read in this thesis give insights into the conditions of Hong Kong's 'social others', of which the Filipina domestic workers are an invisible part. Though diverse, the narratives give voice to a shared and collective experience – a familiar story of poverty, family crises, diaspora, encounter with cultural difference and subjection to difficult working conditions. Together they are the hidden threads that form the underside of the grand narratives of 'nation', development, modernization, and globalization. It is against this backdrop that family crises would push five women -- Mader Irma, Gina, Esther, Miriam, and Rosario -- to leave their home and families behind and enter a particularly difficult type of employment in Hong Kong. While their journey was primarily an act of love/duty to the family, the experience of migration would eventually reinvent the meaning of 'wife', 'mother,' 'daughter,' 'worker' 'subaltern intellectual' and 'activist.'

All of the readings thus sought to explore the 'family' (the migrant domestic worker's family as well as her household of employment) as a matrix of power relations and a site of discursive practices, locating it against a wider socio-cultural backdrop. Efforts were also undertaken to identify the strategies employed for resisting and negotiating power within the family, and the identities mobilized for exercising agency. However, different themes and questions are teased out and emphasized in the different chapters. Chapter Five, for example, looked at the story of two mothers (Mader Irma and Gina) in their journey between two life/worlds, teases out the voices of change and reaction, looks at the discursive practices manifested in relationships with employers' family (*amos* and *alagas*) and traces the notions of self/motherhood and dreams for the future (*pangarap*). Meanwhile, Chapter Six explored how traditional gender roles in the patriarchal family structure are transgressed in the story of two daughters, the strategies they employ to negotiate power and stabilize subject positions, how notions of self/subject are constituted against overlapping temporal frames (past/present/future), and looks at an example of how the domestic worker is mobilized to reproduce the capitalist/patriarchal discourse of budgeting/resource management. Finally, Chapter Seven read and retold the narrative of a domestic worker which almost spans the contemporary history of a nation and a people struggling within a nation. This chapter attempted to trace the emergence of a 'subaltern intellectual and activist' in the personal history of the domestic worker in her involvement with a 'national liberation' movement and a migrant workers' union. The chapter ended with an exploration of how her experience in migration enables her to give new meanings to 'woman' as daughter, activist, worker, mother and subaltern intellectual.

The following section recalls and summarizes some of the recurring themes present in the narratives, point out the relevance and usefulness of this study to a wider academic field and social arena, and identify briefly some areas for possible future research.

### **1. What ‘migration’ means to the Filipina domestic worker**

In the stories of all five women, the decision to seek contractual employment overseas is very much tied to a sense of duty to and responsibility over the family. Often, it is precipitated by a crisis in the family, especially when it is a question of survival. For Mader Irma and Gina, it is a logical decision resulting from the challenge of facing single parenthood as widows. For Rosario, it is the result of the crisis of debt she came to face in fulfilling her duty as a daughter. While the event that first triggered Esther’s decision to migrate was a personal crisis – failing a subject in college -- she also understands this as something related to her family’s condition and lack of means to provide for her education. With Miriam’s case, her presentation of the story did not indicate that her decision to migrate was triggered by a crisis, but on her part, the decision is very much influenced by her sense of responsibility for the future of her younger siblings, which is summed up in her first utterance on the very day that she learned that her visa was ready – Dear little sister, go and enroll at once at the Urdaneta school !

While the primary motivation for migration has been shaped by the particular gendered positions they occupy in their family, and their understanding of the duties and responsibilities constitutive of those positions, migration at the same time offered opportunities for transgressing some aspects of their traditional roles as ‘women’, wives, and daughters located in rural/semi-rural Philippines. The income they earned accorded them a certain status in the family itself, even perhaps a certain speaking position in the family. For many of them, the income they earned combined with the physical separation from family and the anonymity they enjoyed in a foreign country suggested the possibility for an enlargement of personal space and a greater feeling of self-confidence and autonomy. Using body as metaphor, for example, Mader Irma points to the difference between her life/self in the Philippines and in Hong Kong: Here in Hong Kong you could/would paint your lips, go to the market as if you were dressed to kill, but in the Philippines you would go around in a shapeless housedress wearing wooden slippers. In Hong Kong, Mader Irma has the feeling of a life other than that of a mother, and specifically, she points to the fact that, being surrounded by young women during days off, she would herself feel very young.

While migration was primarily motivated by sense of duty to family, the most painful aspect of migration is physical separation from family. They talked of different strategies for overcoming the pain (Miriam talks about keeping herself busy all the time), but the common

and most basic strategy is to remind themselves that it is precisely by enduring the pain of separation from family and the hardship of labor that they are able to secure a better future for their family. It is the logic of “if I don’t do this, if I don’t endure this, what would happen to my children? How would my younger siblings get an education?” As Rosario points out, you would rather overcome the pains and sufferings of being separated from your family just so you could provide for their economic needs.

The affective dimension – the production of feelings for the family (of pain from separation combined with the attraction towards the possibility of a better future for the family) thus inevitably becomes a necessary feature/component of their subjection, of what ties them to the position of migrant domestic workers, and of what renders them vulnerable to domination and exploitation as migrants.

## **2. Selfhood and womanhood**

It would seem then that the notion of self is very much tied to the family, of what is perceived to be the interest of the family, and in which the security of the family comes first. At the same time however, a sense of ‘autonomy of the self’ seems also in the process of becoming, and it seems very much tied to a notion of economic independence. However, it would also appear that the notion of full economic independence, and as such perhaps autonomy of the self, is subject to or contingent upon the fulfillment or completion of obligation to the family. Sometimes, this notion is self-imposed (in Esther’s case, for example). Often, the feeling is that the ‘autonomous self’ could only come into being after complete freedom from obligation to family (in Miriam’s case: When my sister graduated, I thought finally I will be free to socialize, to flirt and find a suitable mate.)

The sense of being a ‘woman’ is also very much primarily tied to, though not limited to the performance of roles within the family (as wife, mother, daughter) or the anticipation of performing such a role (in the case of Esther and Miriam, they both anticipate and look forward to the possibility of being wives and mothers). In this context ‘woman’ is primarily understood and constructed as a position from which to relate with male members of the immediate family and/or wider community. Sometimes, gender – the notion of what woman is and should be – is presented or presents itself as an obstacle to the fulfillment of certain dreams and desires considered to be inappropriate for the female. Often it is the male voice of authority that establishes the order and enunciates what a woman should and should not be. Gina’s father, for example, said that she shouldn’t go to school because she’s a girl. Sometimes, it is a male voice that is not dictating, but pacifying. (Miriam’s big brother, “dear little one, what if we save some money first?).

Their voice as 'woman' thus first takes on the shape of a voice responding to, resisting, sometimes echoing and supporting, and at times preserving and protecting the male voice of authority. When there is a sense of threat to the male voice of authority, it would eventually be s a woman's voice that would search for a resolution to the crisis, often by stabilizing the position of authority. Yet, upon closer look, the stabilization may be a strategy of negotiation, rather than re-inscription or transformation of power relations. It is as if there was a way to insert the woman's voice, for the woman's voice to interrupt, rather than disrupt the male voice of authority, to position it to get things done, without totally destabilizing the existing order which privileges the male voice. (Miriam's strategy to get her big brother to accept the vehicle, Gina's mother who raised pigs to send Gina to school. ).

In many cases, it was also a male voice that expressed opposition to their decision to go abroad, even if migration would come to benefit the male family members as well. Gina's husband, for example, asked why did this going abroad get invented in the first place. But Gina went, any way. She felt it had to be done for the sake of the children. In this case, she is able to transgress her expected role as 'obedient wife' and give new meaning to being a mother. Traditionally, mother is not expected to be the chief provider, but in Gina's case, as in others, she gives new meaning to being a mother. Her sister-in-law, who helped her to go abroad and first gave her the idea, seems to be in alliance with her in this case. Her sister-in-law is actually the sister of her husband – but her sister-in-law's empathy and solidarity for Gina, a woman like her, appeared stronger than loyalty to her own brother. In most cases, it was the sisters and sisters-in-law who helped them go abroad. In a kind of network/alliance of solidarity, women thus help other women transgress, to a certain degree, the traditional roles and expectations by giving new meanings to such roles, if not blazing the paths of escape.

In the case of Gina, as in others, the roles and expectations of 'woman' in the family can also come into conflict. She was caught between her expected role as wife – as wife she is expected to be obedient to her husband – and the new meaning which she gives to being a mother to her children. Esther was caught between obligation to her first family, and obligation to fiancée who is considered to be a kind of 'family-in-waiting.' Rosario was also caught in a kind of conflict between expected roles and duties of wife/mother and daughter. Her husband did not want her to go to Hong Kong just for the purpose of paying off the medical bills of Rosario's father and would rather that she stay at home to take care of the children, cook for the children and so on. But Rosario went off anyway.

Family crises provided a turning point for these five women to search for other ways of constructing meaning as 'women' – as wives, mothers, daughters – and led them to seek contractual employment overseas. In subjecting themselves to this particularly difficult type

of employment -- of crossing geographical and cultural borders, and in a way crossing class lines (abandoning a previous status to subject oneself to another status in a foreign country in which domestic work is considered to occupy a low position in social hierarchy), they find themselves even more embedded in and tied to the family – despite physical separation -- as pressures and expectations from family increase sometimes exponentially. It is summed up in Miriam’s enunciation of self-blame and in which she castigates herself, rather than others, for an excess of dreams -- “*Hindi na maubos-ubos ang pangarap ko!*” (You see it’s because my dreams are endless and inexhaustible).

### 3. *Amos and alagas*

The feelings and attitudes toward life in Hong Kong and the experience of work as migrant domestic helper specifically depend a lot on the relationship with their *amos* and *alagas*. This would mean the extent to which the household of employment becomes a site of affective production, suggesting a continuation of affect in the family, or to which extent the *amo* allows a degree of autonomy. Gina uses the metaphor of body – the confinement of body, the control of space and time, to demonstrate and express the sense of ‘imprisonment’ she felt under her first employer. For Miriam, the *amo* uses the discourse of family, something to which Miriam is very familiar and to which she generally has a positive attitude, to solidify their bonds – it is not only a way of co-opting or disciplining Miriam, but also a way of providing her the space to frankly communicate her feelings, within the framework of ‘family’, to her *amo*. It is also within this framework that the logic of “the obedient and capable daughter can get away with what she wants” that Miriam operates. She is very efficient and competent, knowing from experience in the family that her efficiency and competence are keys to asserting her voice within the family, and to managing her emotions and resources.

For Mader, the kind of space that her *amo* created for her in the household employment enabled her to reenact a mothering role, a role that was familiar and dear to her and an integral part of her sense of ‘self’. More than this, the *amo* gave her the means to recreate a family life by employing other members of the family. Mader herself sums it up: the secret is to have the right *amo*. She herself was lucky in that she found an *amo* who is kind and rich.

But perhaps it is not so much having the “right” *amo* as having one whose personality and interests are compatible with the domestic worker. In this sense, both Miriam and Rosario found compatibility with their *amo*. Rosario’s *amo* valued her intellectual labor the most -- Rosario’s contribution to the family and the household was defined more by the kind

of tutoring and research assistance she provided, rather than the domestic work she produced (It was up to me whether I would have the time to clean the house. Sometimes I would just tell them that I did not have time to cook, so we would just eat out.). The *amo* also treated her as a member of the family and at the same time gave her the freedom to pursue her activism. All these gave Rosario a sense of a sense of continuity with a past self/life, a feeling of having a life other than that of a maid in Hong Kong. Miriam and Esther, however, were not so fortunate. Their negative experiences with their previous *amos* led them to search for live-out arrangements.

#### **4. Crossing class positions and the possibility of upward social mobility**

While employment overseas would provide a source of income that was deemed unimaginable at home (in terms of relative value of moneys earned), it also meant, in a way, a kind of crossing of class lines and social positions. It also came to mean the abandoning of a former self/life, a former position of 'class' in which class is not necessarily defined in absolute economic terms, but in terms of social status and cultural power. In the Philippines, for example, Rosario enjoyed a certain social status as a holder of a bachelor's degree in a prestigious university. The degree could have been a form of cultural capital. Esther had been a student, someone expected to be in the process of becoming someone else (in her case, a nurse). Her acute awareness that, in going to Hong Kong as a maid, she has become someone actually more inferior to what she had once imagined she would be – is summed up in her simple utterance, "*Bakit ako nagkaganito* (why ever did I end up like this) says it all. Miriam herself was a factory worker in the Philippines. From her point of view, factory work as a kind of class position in itself may be perceived as something higher in the social hierarchy than a maid. In fact, her idea of upward mobility is summed up when she says that, if she could change things, she would like to be a factory worker in Hong Kong. The main difference, of course, lies in the simple fact that, as a factory worker in the Philippines, she would earn much less than as a maid in Hong Kong. For Rosario, it's the same. As a researcher in the university and as someone who was contracted to do part-time research and writing work in the Philippines, she would earn much less than what she would earn in Hong Kong as a domestic helper. It is a complex classed position that is constituted and produced not within the boundaries of the national economy, but the global arena of an asymmetrical and inequitable international division of labor.

While finding themselves in a stronger economic position than before, they find, however, that the possibility of 'upward social mobility' – of possibilities of other forms of employment or social status -- is in fact constrained, whether in the country of employment, or at home. This is a result of the foreclosure of possibilities which were once imagined in a past life, and the impossibility of returning in the future to a past self. This is most

poignantly expressed in Esther's words, I can't go back to studying anymore because I feel that my mind has become empty, blank, unused.

On the other hand, greater income would mean a greater sense of economic security, if not social mobility, for the future. Starting a small business when they go home for good is the common 'master plan' – in a way it would promise upward mobility because it would mean the possibility of increasing (rather than fixed) income that is based on profit, and the possibility of a greater sense of economic independence and control/ownership of one's resources. But it would seem that it's almost predetermined – going home for good, what else to do, but to start a small business? One can no longer be a nurse, one could no longer be a researcher. It would no longer be possible to pick up the pieces of a previous self/life abandoned because of migration and what has been taken away by the passage of time. It is a gain that first begins with a loss.

## **5. Of tricycles and vehicles, flight and return**

The new role of mother/daughter as long distance economic providers would also mean that the expression of love and affection, duty and devotion, would require investing new meaning to cultural commodities. They would serve as symbols not only of economic status but of the migrant domestic worker's connection to and investment in the family – for Miriam, a vehicle for eldest brother, for Gina a bicycle for her youngest child, for Mader Irma, a house for her family and a tricycle for her sons, and for Esther, a piece of land. These commodities are privileged the almost exclusive means of affirming the bonds with the family and reassuring themselves and their family of their existence and constant presence. The gift of vehicle to Miriam's brother is a statement saying, I am also thinking of your future and your children's future. It could have been perceived by the brother as a statement saying, I have more economic power than you, or, You are unable to provide for your children's future. And thus, by invoking her duty as an aunt, rather as a sister, Miriam reassures the brother that the vehicle should not be considered a threat. In a similar vein, perhaps, Esther's offering of land to her brother, to be tilled for free, could be seen as Esther submitting herself to the hierarchical position of the brother in which the brother is not expected to pay any rent to a sister. On the other hand, it could also be seen as Esther's way of saying to her brother, This is my land, but I am not using it to assert my power over you, or, this is my land, but this is ours to be shared. I may have more money than you but it does not mean I don't respect and recognize you as a figure of authority in the family.

An understanding of this dynamic interrupts/disrupts the analysis of economists who say in frustration that the migrant workers are investing in non-productive ways<sup>109</sup> or that migrant workers do not know how to save their money. A closer reading of individual lives show that the ‘social status’ commonly attached to such cultural products may not necessarily be the most important motivation. In the narratives of these five women, such commodities would strike the reader more as important symbols of the exchange of affective relations with the family, the means by which bonds are affirmed or reconnected. They may also be ways of saying to the members of the family, I may have more money but I am not using the money to accumulate riches for myself (as in money used as capital to earn for oneself), but using them to provide things that are important to you, for your pleasure and your future. Rather than approaching the issue from the point of view of assessing their value or non-value in economic terms, it may be more productive to look for ways to read the cultural meaning behind these modes of economic behavior.

The migrant worker eventually realizes, however, that the construction of new meanings seem to take a life/logic of their own, from which escape sometimes becomes difficult. Migration then has come to mean a kind of disruption in their history where there is hardly any turning back. While wistfully they would like to see it as an interlude, and interruption – repeatedly expressed through nostalgia and the constant longing to go home – they also have an acute sense that it has changed their lives forever. In this sense, it is to the family that they return for a continuation of a disrupted history: for example, taking comfort in seeing their younger siblings and children as the embodiments of a future that was denied to them. In Esther and Gina’s case, they invest in the education of their younger siblings. In Mader’s case, her children seem to repeat the history of migration (four children have gone abroad for work), but this time, not out of a sense of crisis but out of a faith in the ‘outside/abroad’ and growing conviction, based on the experience of the mother herself, that it is through migration that they can have a better future.

A kind of circularity – the endless repetition of exilic flight and return – is perhaps symbolized in her sons’ promise to her that once she returns home for good, they will take her on their tricycle and jeep, so that she could, this time upon returning home finally, go anywhere and everywhere she wishes. . The offer of her sons to ‘take her anywhere she wants to go’ is a symbolic gesture of appreciating the Mother’s sacrifice, and of her sons’ way of ‘paying back’ – for it is now their turn to serve the mother. There seems to be a recognition that – flight, or the journey away from home – ironically, becomes a condition of

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<sup>109</sup> Katherine Gibson, Lisa Law and Deirdre McKay, Beyond Heroes and Victims, Filipina Contract Migrants, Economic Activism and Class Transformations, in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 3:3 Autumn. (London: Routledge, 2001), 365-386.

confinement and symbolizes suffering and the curtailment of desires. As such, it is only upon the return home that Mader would finally have the freedom of flight, of being free and able to go to places she'd never been.

## **6. Rewriting narratives of nation and migration**

The narratives, though diverse and narrated in individual voices, give voice to a shared and collective experience. The narratives are many stories, similar yet dissimilar. They could be read as the making of single story. Or the story of many lives whose interconnectedness are made possible through the common experiences of being female members of a family in dire need and of female diasporic citizen subjects of a nation state. It is a familiar story of economic impoverishment, crisis in the family, sacrifice and fulfillment of duty and obligation, of journeys to a strange land in search of work, of being subjected to difficult working conditions sometimes likened to slavery,<sup>110</sup> of separation from loved ones, of anticipating the fulfillment of dreams and the continuation of a disrupted history through the dreams and history of others. Together they are the hidden threads that form the narrative of 'nation' in its postcolonial failings and failed aspirations to Development, and the narrative of modernization in a country that receives and simultaneously marginalizes and rejects them, for it is a country to which they will never really belong.

The production of the Filipina migrant domestic worker-subject could thus be seen as the result of the exclusion and foreclosure of possibilities of other subject-positions within the geographical boundaries of 'nation.' She is living testimony to the weaknesses and failings of the project of modernization, development and its attendant institutions (educational system, social security, and so on) that together produce and interpellates her in her excluded and rejected state. Migrant Filipina domestic workers are part of the nation's economic refugees and laborers in exile, fleeing from a nation that has failed and disavowed them. And yet, the very same nation interpellates them, calls on them to perform a duty of saving the 'nation, through the discourse of patriarchal family (dutiful daughters, virtuous mothers) and the seductive capitalistic rhetoric of salvation through hard work and a better future through small-scale investment and resource management. Undergirding this discourse however is a reinforced 'colonial' faith in dependence on the superior outside and a 'colonial' fatalism that resigns the destiny of the nation in the hands of the 'outside'. In this sense, outside/abroad becomes constitutive of the nation's interior, suggesting a mutated state of coloniality in which, rather than the colonizer coming to occupy and inhabit the nation/space, it is the nation that now sends out/sends away its subjects into servitude to the

Foreign Master that is figured as an abstract 'outside/abroad.' As poignantly uttered by Esther, "*Paano na lang ang Pilipinas kung walang abroad.*" What would the Philippines be if there was no 'abroad.'

The need to transform the nation's 'inside' is, however, enunciated by Rosario: as long as there will be no economic and political changes in the Philippines, Filipinos will continue to flee. The journey overseas to seek employment is thus an exilic flight. Rosario sees her work in organizing migrant domestic workers as an extension of the movement to oppose/change the nation that has produced the migrant domestic worker-subject. It is from the position of 'economic refugee and laborers in exile' that the Filipino migrant workers are being mobilized for oppositional political projects aimed at confronting state power. However, in locating the struggle to confront powers and change oppressive systems primarily, if not exclusively, within the nation and its extended boundaries, such project will encounter its limits if it does not become an integral part of a transnational activism. Confining the struggle to a limited national project will prove inadequate in transforming the wider globalized arena of capitalist/colonial relations which produce the current phenomenon of gendered labor migration and which shape and subject the 'nation' in its current state.

All signs point to the likelihood that the current trajectory of Filipino diaspora will continue for a long time in the future. With an unemployment rate of 11.4 % in 2002, and given the average daily income in the Philippines of PhP 169.83 (roughly about HKD 25 a day, or about HKD 500 a month), the country's survival at the macro and the micro level can only be guaranteed through the earnings and remittances of the overseas Filipino workers. The Philippine government, has increasingly been forced to recognize the contribution of overseas contract workers (OCWs) to the national economy and to respond to the OCWs' demand to translate this economic contribution into political power. The enactment of the Overseas Absentee Voting Act of 2003, which allows overseas Filipino workers to vote and contest elections, as well as the recent election of a leader of a Hong Kong-based Filipina domestic workers' union leader into the legislative body signify a turning point in the struggle of migrant workers for access to political power. Yet it remains to be seen if these new developments will radically rewrite the script of Filipino labor diaspora and accord them their proper place in the nation's narrative.

## **7. The usefulness of this research**

This research contributes to an understanding of the affective/subjective dimensions of migration by presenting ways of 'narrating' and 'reading' women's experiences as texts

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 382

within and struggling against a wider social text. It also demonstrates the relevance of intellectual resources offered by feminist and cultural studies in interrogating the conditions of Hong Kong's 'social others' and identifying issues around which an agenda for transformational politics might be explored. The method of research and inquiry that was utilized in this study, as well as the various themes and issues it has generated, can be useful to a wide range of disciplinary fields.

### *7.1. Life history*

This study demonstrates the usefulness of 'life history' research in gaining access to knowledge that is otherwise not possible through other methods of inquiry. By providing 'life history' as a frame for constructing events, feelings, thoughts, emotions, the researcher is able to see a context within which interconnections of data can be analyzed in an aggregated manner. This method is particularly useful for studying those belonging to marginalized sectors in community not only for constructing knowledge ABOUT them, but for positioning them as sources of knowledge and subjects of discourse. It can facilitate and inspire an exercise of self-reflexivity and thus serve as a tool for empowering the subject/object of research.

This methodology relies a lot on the listening and reading skills of the researcher, for in the process in which the stories unravel, the researcher becomes challenged to rethink earlier presuppositions and methods of interrogating and analyzing data. A human life – the history of a life, a self – is too complex to be limited to pre-constituted categories. It is in a process that requires the researcher to be open and flexible, and to listen to and allow on the subject/text to take her into a journey of inquiry. Otherwise, the richness of the text, and the opportunities the text opens for multiple ways of reading and informing knowledge would be wasted.

### *7. 2. Understanding the formation of subjectivities in migration*

Other researches have contributed a lot to knowledge about the nature of paid domestic work and the situation of Filipina domestic helpers. This study builds on existing research but emphasizes how the processes of migration as lived personal histories affect individual lives and make agency possible. For example, by examining the Filipina domestic worker as a dutiful member of the family and as an inside/outsider in her employer's household, this study contributes to a better understanding of the family as a patriarchal structure and a site of discursive practices. While feminist theories have gone a long way in analyzing patriarchal structure of family that produces gendered subjects, the study of individual lives gives emphasis to the complexity of processes that interact, collaborate and compete to

produce this phenomenon. Duty to family has become accepted as common sense, yet how this common sense is reproduced and performed, and how individual subjects make sense of this, is something that is revealed in the study of narratives of personal lives.

In Hong Kong, where there continues to be a reliance on paid contractual domestic work and on the ‘import;’ of domestic labor, the study is useful in demonstrating the possibilities for arrangements that are mutually beneficial and satisfying to both employer and employee, beyond the definitions and requirements encoded in law. What makes for a successful relationship between *amo* and ‘maid’? Stories have suggested the compatibility of personalities and interests, the spaces that are created for the employee by the employer for their life in Hong Kong to have a meaning other than paid work, for an affirmation of their presence. While the discourse/language of family is often used to stabilize relations, the domestic worker is also keenly aware that she doesn’t really belong to Hong Kong society. What makes her life more bearable, however, is an affirmation of trust and respect which restores her sense of self and dignity as an individual.

The original motivation behind the research was an interest in gaining more insights into their lives as domestic workers INSIDE Hong Kong, and see to what extent their life in Hong Kong as migrant domestic workers, constitutes a significant aspect of formation of subjectivities. However, in response to the simple question, If you please, tell me the story of your life, all the interviewees spent more time talking about ‘past lives and selves’ and their dreams for the future, rather than their everyday life in Hong Kong. What constitutes a life? The story of a self? Most of the storytellers offered are stories about their lives in the Philippines (the before of their life in Hong Kong), their families, and so on. Only upon careful and sensitive prodding did they begin to speak of their life INSIDE Hong Kong. Perhaps it may be a sign of a reluctance to speak of a pain (of a painful life in Hong Kong). It may be a perception that the routineness of their daily existence in Hong Kong, the drudgery of domestic work, does not make much of a story, much less constitute a life for them. It could also be that the feeling that the life here and now – the present that is here in Hong Kong – is an interlude that both interrupts and constitutes the life that they know and live and the ‘self’ that they imagine and construct. It is here that the continuity and discontinuity of wife, women daughter in migration, become constitutive of a ‘self’ in the process of becoming.

### *7.3. Identity construction of Hong Kong’s ‘social others’*

The construction and consolidation of identity would entail a process of inclusion as well as exclusion. This study makes more visible the conditions and identities of Hong Kong’s ‘social others’ personal, social, economic and cultural histories have often remained

hidden and sometimes erased. The construction of an image of a modern, prosperous 'global city' has become essential for Hong Kong's commerce and tourism industry. Part of this construction is the projection of the image of a 'modern, professional, career-oriented, highly educated woman' of the middle class. What is rendered invisible in the construction of this image and excluded from the consolidation of the dominant identity are the figures of the working class and especially the single, working mothers, the migrant workers and especially the migrant domestic workers, people with disabilities and the elderly who are no longer considered valuable to production, and the racial and ethnic minorities. By focusing on the lives and conditions of Filipina domestic workers, and making them more visible and accessible to public discourse, this study hopes to generate a better understanding of identity construction in Hong Kong, as seen and experienced from the underside, or its invisible 'others.'

## **8. Some areas for further research:**

It is hoped that the results of this study would generate more interest in other related areas of research. Following are some of the critical issues that require further exploration:

### *8.1. On the family.*

The individual histories clearly point to the family as an important area of study for feminist and cultural studies research. One question that needs to be further explored is how globalization has affected the family and its structures and relationships, and how in this context it becomes a site of affective production that makes possible the interpellation of women as gendered domestic worker-subjects. Further, it will be important to trace how this is reinforced by and enabled in the global sphere of capitalist relations. The emotions of motherhood and 'dutiful daughter', collaboratively produced in the family and in a larger discursive field, are mobilized and utilized in the subjection of domestic workers. What would be most challenging would be to explore how to expand such discursive production in a way in which such emotions could prove useful in the formation of alternative subjectivities – of alternative ways of producing feelings as woman, wife, mother, and daughter.

### *8.2. The transnational division of female labor.*

The current phenomenon of feminized migration illustrates a transnational division of female labor that causes a divide between and among women from different geo-economic, cultural and economic positions. In the case of Hong Kong, it is a division between women

called to perform different tasks and roles in Hong Kong's pursuit of modernization – between skilled working women belonging to the middle classes and the dominant ethnic majority and who constitute the greater number of female employers of migrant workers – and, on the other side, the 'poor woman' from the developing countries being traded as domestic helpers. The question of addressing the inequitable relations of power and the search for alternative subjectivities that can be produced in the process should form part of an agenda for a feminist and cultural politics of transformation.. While there is now a growing interest in researching the lives and conditions of migrant workers, there continues to be a need to initiate studies looking at how Hong Kong women are positioned as 'amos'/employers: how this phenomenon in turn shapes a construction of 'self' in relation to others and how the consolidation of their ethnic and class identities (and by extension that of their families and children) are shaped by the experience of employing domestic workers from other national, racial and ethnic origins. Such studies would perhaps enrich an understanding of culture and gendered power relations in Hong Kong society.

### 8.3. *Sites of collective resistance*

There continues to be a need for examining various sites of collective resistance that produce discursive practices that not only contribute to reconfiguring power relations in the public arena but also enable the transformation of the self. The collective resistance of migrant worker-subjects is a productive site for enlarging the space of struggle beyond the confines of traditional national boundaries, but also for expanding the horizons of consciousness (of self and others, of nation and world, of past and future) precisely because it is located in that ambiguous in-between space inhabited by the inside/outsider. In that space in which collective identity is constructed around a shared experience of diaspora, which is at once economic, political and personal, the transformation of self, and the ways by which an individual makes sense of herself in relation to the world, becomes not only possible but absolutely necessary for survival and for pursuing a meaningful existence in an exilic and subaltern state of uprootedness.

**Concluding remarks.** Finally, in summarizing, it must be pointed out that the life histories presented and read in this thesis offer and produce valuable insights into the individual-subjective and affective dimensions of the diasporic experience. They are thus useful in challenging or filling the gaps of migration theories which so far have either been produced and articulated from the vantage point of 'receiving countries,' or have focused on the macro processes and state policies attendant to the phenomenon of migration. The stories of the five Filipina domestic helpers, though each of them unique, dramatize the effects and the

conditions at the personal and micro level of the social and global phenomenon which Heyzer and Wee have referred to as the transnational division of female labor.

The life histories of women migrant workers call for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and social dimensions of contemporary migration, one that particularly recognizes the role of the family as an integral part of the conditions and effects of such dimensions. The narratives presented in this thesis have shown various ways by which the family, as a social, economic and cultural unit, becomes a localized site where competing and colluding discourses produce and reproduce the embodied subjects required by processes of colonization and capitalist globalization. In such historical processes, the family as a matrix of class, race, and gender relations is simultaneously produced, mobilized and transformed. As the family and its members confront the conditions and challenges presented by capitalist globalization, the tensions produced in the process call for as well as enable new forms of gendered subjectivity and relationships among its members. The significance of the family in the formation of the gendered subjectivity of Filipina domestic helpers indicate the need to 'bring the family back' in the study of migrant workers to aid the re-conceptualization of migration and family theories.

Against the backdrop of increasing and intensifying globalization of labor and capital flows, the female migrant domestic worker-subject is produced, effected and called on to negotiate multiple identities through and around the discursive and social terrain of family, nation and host country. The requirements and challenges of such negotiation are not without emotional and social cost to the Filipina domestic worker. Constable has aptly described and analyzed the ways by which Filipina domestic helpers have subjected themselves to self-discipline in order to become more efficient, acceptable, and productive worker-subjects in Hong Kong. In this process, Constable asserts, the Filipina domestic worker exercises power that then becomes a source of pleasure and satisfaction. A critical reading of the narratives of Filipina domestic workers as presented in this thesis would, however, question the limits of such exercise of power and the ways by which pleasure, affect and emotions are discursively constituted and collaboratively produced. Would such pleasure and exercise of power be associated with an autonomous and empowered subject who exercises free will, or would such pleasure itself be a condition and effect of the structures and processes that produce and confine the subject? Could such pleasure be viewed as inseparable from the matrix of family relations which defines, and to a certain extent confines the domestic helpers in her (dis)empowered position? On the other hand, Constable has correctly argued and lamented that such attempts to subject themselves to self-discipline only succeed in promoting an image of a 'disciplined and docile worker', one who willingly submits to her own subjectification. However, as the narratives of the Filipina

domestic helper presented in this thesis have shown, such identification is only one among the many identities she inhabits – often, the presentation of a public persona (such as that of an ‘efficient worker’ capable of enduring pain and hard work) could well be a strategy to protect a more private ‘self’ and protect/sustain a personal life that is often largely defined and enabled by her own family.

The pioneering study undertaken by Constable focused on the employment experiences of Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong and analyzed their strategies for resistance at the discursive level as an exercise of power and a source of pleasure. In contrast, this thesis provides insight into the more hidden arena of ‘personal lives’ as lived and constructed around and across the borders of space and time (my life before/in/after Hong Kong) and the boundaries of multiple familial relationships (my family in the Philippines/my amos and alagas in Hong Kong). Thus, they provide insights into the terrain – of self, family and nation -- on which notions of pleasure are constructed and on which the limitations/possibilities of the exercise of power are grounded. Rather than disagreeing with Constable’s assertions, this thesis suggests the need to take the questions further. If indeed migrant domestic workers derive pleasure in subjecting themselves to forms of discipline and control as a strategy for survival and resistance, what then is the nature of such pleasure? In the case of the five Filipina domestic workers interviewed for this thesis, it would seem that, given their relational and gendered position in the family structure, the family itself is the site that is most productive of emotions and affective relations. This would suggest perhaps that the pleasure they may derive from being able to successfully survive, endure, negotiate and cope with their subjection to difficult working conditions is a positive emotion that is not primarily felt on their own behalf as ‘individual and autonomous selves’, but rather on behalf of the families with whose future and security they closely identify with. This dynamic – of the individual’s relationship to the family, and vice versa – is not necessarily stable, closed or free from tension. Often, it is the tensions and differences produced by change that provide the spaces from which new forms of subjectivity could be constructed or imagined over time.

Thus, this thesis suggests that the subjectivities of Filipina migrant domestic workers are neither fixed, unitary nor stable – they are constantly changing and are produced within and as a complex matrix of discourses that simultaneously forecloses as well as makes available a multiplicity of subject positions.<sup>111</sup> Within the narrow boundaries of ‘nation’, dominant public discourses have positioned the Filipina migrant domestic worker along the limited constructs of ‘new economic hero/savior of the nation’ (as one who willfully sacrifices

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<sup>111</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, second edition. (UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 32-41

herself for the sake of national development goals) on the one hand, and ‘victim of development/globalization’ (as one who is completely devoid of any agency) on the other. The binary construct of ‘hero/victim’ denies the multiplicity of subject positions that are available in her complex experience as well as renders invisible her agency in negotiating her identity and/or seeking collective agency in transforming her conditions of existence. Similarly, the racializing and ethnocentric gaze that casts the Filipina domestic helper as a faceless/homeless ‘inside-outsider’ and that rejects as well as simultaneously appropriates her labor as nameless ‘ban mui/modern slave’ effaces, or is unable to recognize, the many identities she inhabits as wife, mother, daughter, or even as a citizen-subject of a nation that is subordinated to and disadvantaged by the current international division of labor. In contrast, an appreciation of such identities helps make possible the formation of alternative subjectivities – such as caregiver, family member, subaltern intellectual, active-organizer – that not only serve to effect more harmonious and creative employment relationships but also serve to expand the ground from which the Filipina domestic helper could negotiate a more empowered position.

The positive and negative experiences of women in migration are not produced in localized sites (such as the family) that are insulated from the impacts, effects and conditions of larger social and global processes. A feminist and cultural politics of transformation would need to confront and address multiple layers of social processes locally and globally, engaging the individual and collective agencies of various subjects, in order to make empowerment, if not ‘emancipation’ possible for women in migration. While there are limits to the exercise of individual agency and the deployment of strategies of resistance at the discursive level, such transformational politics could only be possible with a transformation of a consciousness of ‘self’ in history and the imagination of the possibility of alternative subjectivities.

The reversal of the dominant discourses that serve to limit and contain the Filipina migrant domestic worker-subject is an integral element of any politico-intellectual engagement that seeks to counter the master-narratives of globalization and transform the material conditions that effect their oppression through class, gender and racial relations. It would also serve any project that seeks to empower migrant domestic workers, support their individual and collective agencies, and position them as effective subjects of a feminist and cultural politics of transformation. Certainly, the intellectual and political initiative to construct alternative discourses that enable Filipina domestic workers’ engagement in such creative politics cannot advance, nor perhaps even begin, without constructing and expanding the space from which they themselves can speak (and speak to one another) about themselves and in the process transform their own consciousness of themselves and their

location(s) in history. As Weedon points out, 'reverse discourse enables the subjected subject of a discourse to speak in her own right.'<sup>112</sup> The construction of a narrative self through the construction of life history is only an initial but empowering step that engages the Filipina domestic worker toward such direction.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 102

## APPENDIX A

When you come home, we will take you wherever you want to go

### The story of Mader Irma

(Background prodding by friend : Don't cry, Mader. Just think of this as having a conversation...)

*But what is there for me to say?*

I am Mader Irma (Mother Irma). We are two sisters – Maria Lourdes is the other one, and she's older. She married a Chinese man, but they live in the Philippines.

*Naku, ineng!* (Oh, my daughter!) I'm already sixty nine years old. I come from Lucena city, but I was born in Ginyangin, Quezon. You see, my mother and father decided to leave Ginyangin and go off somewhere. Now you see, my father is a tailor, so he wanted to find the best place where he could earn a decent living. He went to Lucban to find a living. And so that was where they ended up, in Ginyangin, and that was where they settled and found a stable means of livelihood. They had three kids when all these happened. When they went to Ginyangin, that was when I was born. Now my mother has passed away, and so has my father.

#### **He said he will not let me fall into someone else's hands!**

My father was a tailor and sewed trousers. Sometimes he also bought and sold *buntal*, which is a kind of grass used to make mats and hats. My mother just stayed at home. It was my father who went to work.

I went to school in Ginyangan, Quezon. When I was in high school, I met my husband, who was also a stranger to that place because he actually came from Naic, Cavite. When he first saw me, he didn't want to let go of me anymore! Soon he gave up his studies to marry me – at that time he was studying Law at MLQU (Manuel L Quezon University) in Manila. He didn't want to let me out of his sight anymore because he said he will not let me to fall in someone else's hands. We got married in 1954.

My husband served as the Secretary to the Mayor for 20 years. He was fond of politics so he worked for the Mayor. He used to arrange things for him, organize events, take care of guests, and go to Malacanang palace to run errands for him, give speeches at events, organize campaigns for the elections. The Mayor was kind to the people, even if he never finished university studies. He was loved by the town people so much that the Mayor stayed on for 20 years. He got along well even with people from other towns. Because the people loved him, they would not let him go.

Since my husband loved to drink, and he had to drink a lot in his work, he didn't last long. My husband soon developed high blood pressure. He fell quite ill. You see, it's because of the kind of public relations work he had to do. You know, running things for the Mayor, taking care of his guests.

I have seven children! You know what it's like in those days – no family planning! When the corners of the house turn dark...and there was no radio, no TV...

So how did one know if a storm was coming? Well then, when the sky looks bad, then you would know!

I was not working then. I just stayed at home. But, my God! You know what it's like to have seven kids...you would have to start cooking your rice by 4:00 in the afternoon ...*Nakupo, Diyos ko!* (Oh dear, my God!)...one of them would be over there...the other one, you know would be out there sleeping in a corner! And still another one, would already be fast asleep before you know it...*Nakupo, Diyos ko!* (*Oh dear, my God!*)

All my children are married now.

### **Ay, Diyos ko! (Oh, my God!), it's so embarrassing....**

I came to Hong Kong in 1978. My husband had already died by then. I've forgotten what year he died...before I came to Hong Kong he was already dead for two years, so maybe it was in 1976 when he died.

People said that I would be able to get a pension of at least PhP 2,000 every month. You see it's because in 1966, my husband even went to Vietnam for some kind of business. He was there even when the Vietnam war broke out. At that time, I hadn't given birth yet to my youngest child. When he returned in 1968, I had one more child. So as I was saying, he worked in Vietnam. Oh, he said there were some people working for him, and they called him Atty! It looks like he had a high position. Oh, but he never even finished his Law studies! I was supposed to get some pension, but then I didn't know how to apply for it.

My sister-in-law had come to Hong Kong first. She felt sorry for me because I had then become a single parent with seven small kids to support. How did I manage then? Oh, my God, it's so embarrassing to admit -- I was doing all kinds of work, like selling *tuyo* (salted fish) at the market.

Until now, my sister-in-law is still here in Hong Kong. She came here a year earlier than I did. Her *amo* and my *amo* are close. My *amo* then was going to have a baby and was looking for someone. So she remembered me because she felt sorry for me. She thought, *Ate* (big sister) should be the one to come here. So she told my *amo*, you should get my *Ate*.

She said that she thought her own *amo* was rich, but it turned out, my *amo* was even richer. My sister-in-law has had several employers, but as for me, I've had only one. I told myself, the Lord is really wise, for the *amo* I found is very good. And even now, she doesn't even want to let me go, even if I really want to go home already! She got three of my children to employ. They also worked here but two of them went home already. So there are only two of us in the family left here.

When my sister-in-law asked me to come here, she was rushing me because my *amo* was pregnant. So my sister-in-law said, Big sister, if possible, please come here immediately because she's going to give birth soon. So please come right now...

In those days, there was no agency...no agency! You know what I would do? I would go to my friend's daughter who was then studying in Manila, and I'd say, *Ineng* (daughter),

please accompany me because I don't know where to go... My *amo* then wanted me to get here to Hong Kong as fast as possible...

*Naku!* (Oh my!) When I arrived, the baby was born already!

You see it's because I didn't know where to go in Manila so before I finally landed here, the baby was born already...she was three months old!

It's really because there was no agency. *Naku!* (Oh my!) When I arrived the baby was born already!

A. *When I came here, the road to the Star Ferry was still a muddy one...*

When I first started, my salary then was HKD 600. But it was very precious and the value of money was big. The exchange rate then was about USD 1 to PhP 20. But in those days, even PhP 1,000 was a lot – with PhP 1,000 worth of groceries, you wouldn't be able to lift them with your own hands! But nowadays, your one thousand pesos is of no value anymore. At that time, the cost of the door-to-door balikbayan box was about HKD 12 for every ten kilos.

The value of money was so high in those days! I took my sister-in-law to Ocean Park – how much did the entrance cost? Just HKD 12 dollars!

Did I feel nervous when I came here? *Naku!* (Oh my!) No one could talk to me, *hija* (daughter)! And I said to myself, if something happens to me here, I would never be able to see my children in the Philippines again...

When I first came to Hong Kong, the road to the Star Ferry was still a muddy one!. There were no Sheraton Hotels. No MTRS. And the buildings, so old, like they're about to collapse!

We wouldn't venture far away, we would just go there to Tsim Sha Tsui to attend mass at the Mariner's Club. In those days we would just be a group of four or maybe five friends. That Statue Square? It didn't even look nice at that time...there were still no ....

You see, the husband of my employer died in 1992. He was then was the General Manager of two. From the very beginning, the woman was not working at all. They had three kids.

What about my own children? *Naku, ineng!* My eldest daughter, who was already married at that time, would just look in on them every once in a while. They grew up without having me around. My youngest child, I left him behind when he was only 7 years old. He was in First Grade. He even had to stop school a few times.

*Naku!* Every night, before going to sleep, I would place a towel on my pillow to soak my tears...and I would cry and cry. I'd say, Oh, why did I ever end up here in Hong Kong? So this is how difficult it is!

During the daytime, one didn't feel the loneliness. There was a lot of work to do. But it was at night, when one is about to go to sleep....

But of course, I endured it all. For the sake of my children. And because of the poverty and the difficult life in the Philippines.

B. She knew that her own children would eat on time and regularly...

Ay! My children, of course they also felt bad. But they also endured it because they know how difficult life is in the Philippines. And of course, they knew that they could go to school because I am here, I can send them money. Even our neighbor who owned a store would tell them, Totoy (Little nboy), if you don't have anything, just come here for whatever you need! They said this to my kids because they knew I was sending money regularly every end of the month. Or, they would say, *Totoy* (little boy), you might need some money, just let me know. That's what they said to the kids I left behind.

My sons, well, they would take care of their own laundry...they were really...they were really responsible for themselves.

As for my life here, it's also hard because I was an all-around . When I arrived at my *amo's* place, her mother and father were with her. Her father, the doctor, would go to the market, cook food. As for me, I took care of the children mainly.

My relationship with my *amo's* children was fine. Even until now, whenever my *alaga* – the one I practically raised since she was three months old , the one who's now 24 years old and married – whenever she comes home and leaves the house, she would give me a hug! She wouldn't even do that to her own mother. Her mother doesn't feel jealous at all.

My relationship with my *amo* is also fine. Yesterday we had a talk and I said that my daughter-in-law is already coming soon, and when she comes I can already go back home to the Philippines. My *amo* told me, "Irma, no way you are so quick. You know we'll miss you...You just stay here. I will give you your salary but I will give you money for shopping." She said she would give me money for shopping so long as I just stay here. I told her, "No, I will go home. I'm very, very, tired." That's what I told her.

One of my *alagas*, the young man said, "Irma why you go home?" I told him, "You know I'm very, very old already. I like to take a rest." He said, "*No waaah!*"

Two of the children have gotten married already. That young man's the only one left in the house. Yesterday while he was toasting his bread, I said, "Are you not getting married? Because I will go home Philippines for good." "Why?" He asked. "You know, I'm very very tired already and I'm very old already here in Hong Kong." He said, "*Waaaah, no aaahh!*"

They treat me like their *lola* (grandma). Even if they go off, even if my *amo* keeps going on trips and tours, she knows that her children will eat on time and will eat regularly. She knows that I'm not irresponsible. It's enough for her that I'm around in the house, even if I'm just lying around once in a while.

She would ask me, "Irma are you feeling well?" My body's already aching from getting soaked often, so sometimes it's good for me to lie around once in a while...

**They cannot stop me anymore. There's nothing they can do to stop me.**

I've only had one employer. So I told myself, *Naku!* It's been 26 years since November 2003 since I first started with my employer. But when my daughter-in-law comes, I would really like to go home. There's nothing they can do to stop me. They cannot stop me anymore.

Ay *naku, hija*, I'm already too tired! And one more thing, I have accumulated a few products to sell back home. I have been sending them by door-to-door. My daughter already

found me a small place where I can set up my shop. She got it some time ago because I have been planning to go home for some time already. But I was requested for another re-contract. So my daughter occupied it first to set up a restaurant, till I get back. But now, when I return, even if I just lay out my stall there, that would be fine...

There are already many shopping malls in our place. There's Gaisano, there's also SM ....

With the Lord's mercy, I have already accumulated some small savings of my own. Now my monthly salary is already HKD 5,000.

My son has already joined me here for the past twenty years. He is also working for my *amo* as a driver. My *amo* said no one else will work with my son except his wife and mother.. That's why I'm not able to get other helpers because I have my son with me. I got him as a driver, guard, and to work on the garden. He is married and they have one child. My *amo* said she will pay for the child to come and visit here as a tourist, anytime they want.

And as for me, I can go home for a vacation in the Philippines anytime I want. I'm the one who arranges my own schedule for going home.

Yes, my *amo* also really loves me very much.

### **You know what it's like in the Philippines, even if you bring home one sack full of money...they all just pour out!**

You know, it's also hard after all to go back for a vacation in the Philippines for a long time! I once stayed there for two months on a holiday. I wanted to go back to Hong Kong immediately because my pocket was empty....This happened the year before last. My *amo* moved to a hotel for two months. So she said, if you want to go to the Philippines for holiday, you can. You see there was nothing to do in the hotel because someone else took care of the cleaning. So I went to the Philippines. But when one doesn't have money it feels bad. Well, well! Even if one were to bring a sackful of money, it wouldn't be enough... there's no money coming in, all the money just pours out.

My youngest child already got married. He didn't finish his seaman's course. But I said, it's also a blessing. He's already going to Taiwan, my youngest son. He already went for an interview. He'll know about the results on Wednesday. Four of my children have gone abroad for work already.

What do I miss in the Philippines? Of course, what I miss are my children! I always ask the Lord to keep me well and healthy, also my children, my grandchildren...

Well, I am happy here. Every Sunday I'm surrounded by young people, I tell myself, even I myself feel young when I'm with them. I tell myself, here in Hong Kong, during Sundays, people will even think you're tourists! That's what I tell myself. You see, here in Hong Kong, you know, you can't paint your lips red – in the Philippines, you're always wearing a shapeless housedress! When you go to the market, you won't think of wearing shoes, you'll just wear some wooden slippers. But here, when you go to the market, you're like, dressed to kill!

Every Sunday is day off for me, ever since. We already agreed on that. Every Sunday, me and my daughter, that's our holiday. It's because you see, every sunday we go to church. And also all the red-letter days in the calender. She – my *amo* -- will just find out that I'm

already gone! So long as I don't get an instruction from her, well, faster than the clock strikes twelve, I'd be out of the house! On all the red letter days – for me, I must go out on those days!

*(lots of laughter)*

So long as there's no instruction, except when I'm told, Irma can you stay because I have a visitor? Okay la, I'd say. But when she doesn't say anything, *aaaaayyy!* Before the crack of dawn, eh, I'm already fidgeting/tinkering around... my daughter would schold me because I wouldn't be able to sleep any more. Well, you see, I'd tell her, I want to go off now so we can chat and gossip with our friends!

### **Here in Hong Kong, you would have dollars to count**

When I'm in the Philippines, what I miss is, every Sunday I wouldn't be able to sleep the night before because I'm raring to go off already...

Oh yes, I'm happier here! I am really enjoying it here. At first it was very lonely, of course. But after some time passed...Life is good here in Hong Kong – you can buy whatever you want. But in the Philippines....! Here, I told myself, every end of the month, you would have dollars to count. But in the Philippines, I tell myself, maybe you'll have nothing but the hairs on your body to count!

I can't recognize the money in the Philippines anymore. I told my son, How much do we have to pay the jeepney? Here, why don't you get my money here because I don't know how much the money is. You would think they were toy money, you know the Philippine coins!

I have no problems with the work. I don't find it very hard because I have my son here with me. My son, he cleans the glass panes, he mops the floor, he vacuums the house... Oh me, I just take care of the clothes and the food. I cook Chinese food. I already learned how to cook it. Whenever She takes something out from the freezer, I would already know how to cook it.

What work do I like best? Ay, just give me cooking! Oh my mother, what I don't like the most? Ironing! Oh my mother, it's so hard to iron! Only when I am asked, Oh, Irma, can you press this? Whatever it is she needs to wear. I don't really do any ironing other than that. She said, the denim jeans of the two boys, Irma, no need to iron, everyday use. Even the pajamas, no ironing.

*Aba!* (Well !) That *alaga* of mine, that young man, when he orders me to do something? Like, Irma, will you please cook me kung chay min? No! I would say. You are very big already! You can do your... what you want...." Imagine, that young man is already maybe 27 years old. Oh yes, he still asks me to cook for him. Sometimes when he comes home from the office, he would say, Irma, can you make me a coffee? I would say, Why? You are very big already, you can do it! But sometimes I feel sorry for him so I would also offer to do it for him. I feel sorry because he would really beg and cajole me. He'd say nothing, he'd keep quiet whenever I would answer him back like that.

With the eldest one, if I don't ask, he doesn't give any orders! The one who recently got married, the youngest one, is also like that. It's the middle one, the one who is an engineer now, that's the one who hasn't gotten married. They're all very good, after all, they're very kind.

That *amo* of mine, oh my mother! Until now she doesn't work . She does nothing but go to China, buy the dresses for dancing, those clothes for ballroom dancing, the shoes, the ornaments, oh my mother! She said to me, Irma, I'll just be like you. I won't get married again. She didn't get married again. But she just has boyfriends.

We look after the house here. The three kids went to Australia to study, with their mother. So the house here, well, we're on our own. We lived here in Shatin first. Often me and my friends would have a cook out there because it had a garden, so we'd eat in the garden!. They were not home for a long time because She was looking after the kids who were studying in Australia.

### **The Lord is wise, he led me away and brought me here in Hong Kong!**

With God's mercy, I didn't have any problems with my children. With God's mercy, none of them turned out to be drug addicts, or you know... Of course, my children also probably felt sorry for me because they know I'm the only one earning a living. There was also someone who was there to give them advice, my eldest child.

With God's mercy I was able to build my own house even without borrowing money. My son didn't want us to borrow money because he said one is never sure about one's life, whether one would get sick or what --- it would be a disaster if these things happened and one had bank loans to pay. So we'd save and save, and after saving some money, we would construct this and construct that, you know. So with God's mercy, in 1992, I was able to construct a house in 1992!

You see, my *amo's* husband died in 1992. The little money I had was augmented – my *amo* immediately gave me a long service payment of HKD 30,000. So we managed to set up the skeletal structure of the house for about Php 200,000. That was in 1992, and then after, I was able to complete it little by little...

*Naku, hija*, I never thought of marrying again! What might happen is, if I had gotten married, then maybe I would end up having 12 children! I was telling myself that I'm really thankful to the Lord because he led me away...you know when I became a widow, there was still someone else who was willing to die for me ...! I told myself, the Lord is wise, he led me away and brought me here to Hong Kong!

*(Mader, with your beauty! The photograph you showed us, that one when you were young, you looked like a film star....!)*

*Here, let me show you the photographs of my grandchildren. I had them made because I'm already planning to go home for good. Fifteen, hija, I have fifteen grandchildren!*

*That one there in the photograph – that's my daughter. That was taken inside the church, during a baptismal ceremony. And that other one, that's my bunso, my youngest child, the one who will go to Taiwan...*

That daughter of mine, she completed ten years in Hong Kong. One day she just said, I'm going home, *naku*, I'm sick and tired of scrubbing toilets! She was working for my *amo's* parents, in Mei Foo. My daughter said, I'm growing older and older, I want to get married now! So when she was 31 years old, she finally went home. So there, now she is married and has three children.

*Naku, hija*, my favorite place here in Shatin, it's really Shatin. Even if I end up living far away, I would still return here to Shatin. You see, I feel sort of scared, child, I'm scared of riding the MTR...

### **Whatever it is I was born into, that's where I'll stay**

When I received my first salary, of course, I sent it all to my children first, because they were still studying in elementary school. In those days we only exchanged letters. It wasn't fashionable to use the phone because in those days, overseas calls were so expensive! And in the Philippines, there were no telephones yet in many places, so we just had to rely on writing letters.

My salary then, I would send to my kids. I would just set aside a small amount for my own allowance. And even if...what I mean is, when I want to send money to my kids and whenever I would run out of money, I would just borrow some from my sister-in-law. With God's mercy, the money would be enough.

I would tell my children, of course, that the money I sent, they should spend wisely so that it would last till the end of the month. You all know, I would say to them, that my salary just comes every end of the month. Well, they would tell me that the money would be fine. And, like I said, my neighbors also told them that it was okay for them to get whatever they needed from the sari-sari store, till I could repay....

I'm active in church. My son also serves at the church in Tai Wai, where I also attend.. My son would be in-charge of raising money for charity, you know. Oh, how many years he's been serving there! I've been religious for a very long time, even when I was in the Philippines. Even if other religious groups are trying to entice me to join them, I will never be able to give up what I have been born to – that's always what I will stick to. I don't like to keep changing. You see, others say that it's good to have a taste of other religions. But I say, whatever it is I was born into, that's where I'll stay.

*Oh, look, there she is, the three month-old baby, when I first came to Hong Kong. She's already married by now, you know...that photograph was taken when she was only a baby....that one over there, that's my amo...*

### **You know what you will get here in Hong Kong? It's varicose veins!**

How can I say that religion is good for me in my life? *Aba (Well)*, of course, even if you don't go to church regularly, as long as you know to call on the Lord, then he will hear what you're saying. You see, my mother wasn't fond of going to church. She said she'll just go to church if God is dead. But with God's mercy, she didn't have a difficult life. Not like the others who are in church morning and afternoon, but once they go home, only gossip comes out of their mouths!

*Aba*, that's what I tell those who've just come here to Hong Kong, *Naku, hija*, have a little patience, have a little endurance! *Kasi, kasabihan ng mga matatanda, kung may tiyaga, may nilaga!* You see, the old folks say, if you have patience, you will be able to enjoy beef stew! Just like me, I was very patient. With God's mercy, well, I also have a little something to be proud of...

Those newcomers, *naku ineng* ...I told those newcomers, *naku, ineng*, you still have a long way to go!

You see, you know what prize you will gain here in Hong Kong, it's veins! Varicose veins! And one more thing, debts! Debts are always there! Of course, whenever you're short of money – that cannot be helped – you know when those days come, of course, you'll have to find a way...

And, of course, if your employer is too demanding, even the way you work performance will be affected – you won't be able to work properly. When your *amo* is too demanding? Oh my God! Those demanding employers? *Naku!*

Me, I'm also like that. I like going home at night in order to rest, because I have nothing negative to say about my *amo*. When we arrive at the house, we would just go straight to the room. They never know if we arrived already or if we're still out of the house. I don't even think of taking a peek at the kitchen to see if the dirty dishes are piled to the ceiling...whatever is there to do will have to be done the morning after. You see there are no children in the house anyway. But if there were, of course you'd have to do them immediately at night, naturally, because in the morning you'd have to send off the children to school. Since I don't have any more *alaga*, even if there were a bucketful of dirty dishes, well, they'd have to wait till morning!

### **Wherever you want to go, we will take you there...**

*Aba'y magpasarap naman ako sa buhay!* Well, of course it's now time for me to enjoy the pleasure of life! My children told me, "When you come home, wherever you wish to go – that will be our command! Anyway I have a tricycle. I have an FX van....wherever you want to go, we will take you there..."

And then I have a cousin who is now a senior citizen. She had been enticing me before – when you come home for good, we'll go ballroom dancing!. I said, that's okay. But how about that? We'll be needing a dance instructor (DI)! I said, oh my, it now looks like I will get the chance to learn to go dancing, 'ballroom to ballroom'....

I should really have the chance now to enjoy life. My children said, you know, you've been working hard and sacrificing yourself, so now it is your time to just make yourself happy. You see it's because you're already in your old age. So of course, you must now just enjoy your life. You should go and buy whatever you want to buy for yourself."

Did I ever once think back and wonder what would have happened if I didn't come here to Hong Kong? Well of course! If I hadn't been able to come here, oh my God! The Lord is really wise. If I hadn't come here to Hong Kong, I would never have been able to handle this.....

It's just that I'm happy with my life, because there is no husband waiting for me. What's important is, whenever I'm in the company of young people, well then it's as if I'm also a happy young person myself! So every Sunday, I really, really want to get out of the house fast. But then, like this morning, I left the house quite late in the morning already because I had to put away the *mahjong* tiles and tables. Every time they play *mahjong* in the house, well, I get additional HK\$50 which I can use for transportation money. Well, every week they play mahjong twice, so that means an extra HK\$100 for me!

## APPENDIX B

### If only my dreams were just a few **The Story of Gina**

I am Gina, 45 years old, from Barangay Sta. Maria, San Pablo, Laguna. That is the place where I was born. We are eight children in the family, and I was the seventh child. My mother was a widow and my father a widower when they married; each of them had a first family. Among my seven siblings, three are half-siblings.

My father was a farmer while my mother was just his helper. We are just very poor. My father was just a tenant – ever since I can remember he had been tilling the land of Pablo Cordero. We plant rice and grow some coconut trees. Every harvest season, we would reap around 90 *cavans*<sup>113</sup> of rice grains and immediately we would give around 20 cavans to the landlord. Whatever grains left behind are used to pay off debts incurred for pesticides, fertilizers and the like. So we are left with barely nothing besides our own food. What is difficult is that when calamity strikes, and no matter how much grain we harvested, we still have to give 20 *cavans* to the landlord!

My father tills about one and a half hectares of land. And that's where I grew up – in the rice fields – helping to plant the seedlings, scaring the birds away from the crops, for example. My father passed away some 20 years ago. From the very beginning until the day he died he was working on that very same land. When my father died, my brother-in-law was the one who took over the work on the land.

#### **“Just why is it that girls have to go to school when they will just end up getting married “**

Was my childhood happy? We were happy only when we were at school. You see, once we return home we have to help in the work that needed to be done. The truth is, my father didn't want me and my sisters to go to school. Oh, how he hated it! What for, when we, the girls, will just end up getting married. But for the boys to go to school – well that was really fine for him! On the other hand, my mother, she wanted us to go to school. She and my father argued a lot about that. Naturally it's because school means a lot of expenses. Whenever we would return home from school, my father would often say, “Just why is it that you girls are still going to school? Why don't you girls just stop it!”

Secretly my mother would whisper to us, “*Sige, mag-aral kayo. Huwag kayong mag-alaala. May baboy ako, marami tayong saging na ibebenta diyan.*” (Go on, go on to school. Don't worry about it. I have been raising a pig, and there, we have a lot of bananas to sell!). So there, I was able to finish up to third year taking a course for telephone operators!

When I was a little girl, I never dreamed I would ever travel abroad. *Wala sa pangarap ko iyon.*! (That was never in my dreams!). You see my mother was very sickly. So the only dream I had was to have some money so that whenever she would get sick we would have some money to spend so we could send her to the hospital.

I got married when I was 18 years old only. My husband was from a neighboring

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<sup>113</sup> One sack

*barangay*<sup>114</sup>. His father was a carpenter. We would just see each other in the village dances, weddings, that was all. Well yes, I guess I also fell in love. But I wasn't thinking of getting married at that time – sometimes I even regret having getting married! But you see it was out of fear of my father. You see he was quite conservative. One day, I had gone to town to apply for work as a hospital attendant and we returned to our village quite late in the night. You know how it's like in our village in those days – 6:00 at night and it's already very dark, no vehicles around. And so I got very scared and expected that my father would hack us to pieces because we returned home so late! Well, so I just went ahead and got married!

My husband went through the traditional ritual of asking my parents for my hand in marriage. At first my father was raving mad. He said he would hack us to pieces! That's true, that's true – he would really do it! You know what it's like in the provinces. That's really how it is, you know, *probinsyanong tatay* (traditional father from the village). But my siblings talked to him. So he finally gave his permission. So there, we got married indeed.

We had only been married for three months when I was able to buy a bahay kubo (small nipa hut) from my aunt. At that time it cost only 150 pesos. We set it up in my mother's backyard. My husband would go with his father on carpentry jobs. And as for me, I would plant vegetables in the garden so I could sell them. That was around 1976. Sometimes we would earn only about ten pesos in one day, if ever there was any earnings at all. Sometimes there was nothing.

Well, married life was also happy because my in-laws were kind. And we were most happy when we had children. We had been married only for two years when we had our first child. But life was also very tough, especially when it came to food. Nevertheless, somehow we had food to eat, even if it was just plain vegetables. Whenever I would have some money, I would immediately buy some clothes for the children – that would already be my present for Christmas. Only the kids would have Christmas presents. But that's the way it is back home, isn't it – Christmas is only for the children.

Well, there were also problems, of course. My husband – he would often get drunk. He didn't turn violent, but sometimes he would come home very, very drunk even if it was still early in the afternoon. Whenever that happened, I would refuse to talk to him. Whenever I would ask him why he did it, he would say, "I can't help it because of the company of my friends...."

*Kaya masayang malungkot din ang buhay may-asawa! Pero hindi naman iyon ang pangarap ko, eh, yung mag-asawa.* So, married life is also just happily sad! But the truth is, to get married? That was not really my dream, you know.

### **“Just why has ‘traveling abroad’ ever been invented at all”**

I worked in a factory in 1980. The factory produced desiccated coconut and was owned by a Chinese. I worked as a peeler. You see my sister used to sell her coconut to that factory and that's why she brought me there. The factory owner did not want to hire married women and so I told them that I was still a single woman. And that is why ever since, in my work, I never used my husband's family name.

I lasted in that factory for more than one year. When I received my first salary, I immediately changed the roofing into a tin one and that's where my one month's salary went!

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<sup>114</sup> Smallest village unit

You see, our roof before was made out of nipa<sup>115</sup> only – so naturally, during typhoons it would leak! Well then, finally, we were able to change it into tin.

Well, life in the factory was also somewhat happy. I worked from 10:00 in the morning to 6:00 at night. The employer was also quite kind. But then, because of the quota system, even during brown-outs we would still stay in the factory even if we were not being paid. So it was also rather unfair. It was also a way of cheating us. I resigned from that job because I decided to come to Hong Kong.

My sister-in-law started working in Hong Kong in 1979. She found an employer for me in 1982. It was by way of ‘direct hire’<sup>116</sup>, but then of course, I still had to pay an agency! During that time I spent only around 800 pesos.

I really, really didn’t want to leave at that time. Imagine, my youngest child was only one year old! I really didn’t want to go. In fact, when I was about to leave, I was breaking out in cold sweat. But then I thought, my children will never have any future if I don’t leave. Because if I stayed, I would perhaps be able to feed them, but I would never be able to send them to school. So there -- I finally made up my mind.

My husband didn’t want me to leave. He really didn’t want me to. He said, “Just why has this ‘traveling abroad’ ever been invented? Just why did it ever become so fashionable these days?”

I left my two older children with my mother. The youngest one was left with her father so he could take care of her. Oh, I was so sad, so sad. But the children, well it seems that they still didn’t comprehend what it meant when I told them that I was leaving.

**"Do not sit on the sofa. Do not watch the TV.**

**When there are guests in the house, do not go out of your room unless we call you."**

A whole jeepload of relatives took me to the airport and saw me off. What I remember carrying with me was one bag of *pasalubong*<sup>117</sup> for my sister-in-law – *alamang*<sup>118</sup>, *suman*<sup>119</sup> --  
you see that was what she requested! I was also scared of riding the airplane because that was my very, very first time!

My sister-in-law, along with my employer, met me at the airport. I was able to speak with my sister-in-law for only a very brief moment – barely enough for me to hand over the bag of *pasalubong* to her when I was turned over immediately to my employer. I felt very bad because I didn’t even get a chance to swap stories with my sister-in-law!

As soon as I arrived in my employer’s home, that very night itself, I was already briefed by my employer about all the things to be done -- all the work in the house like cleaning the house, cooking, and other things – and at the same time all the things that shouldn’t be done. I was given a list of “Do nots.” Do not sit on the sofa. Do not watch TV.

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<sup>115</sup> Dried leaves used for roofing in traditional village houses

<sup>116</sup> Direct hire means the employee was recruited directly by the employer, rather than having been introduced by a recruitment agency

<sup>117</sup> presents given after a journey

<sup>118</sup> salty dried shrimp paste

<sup>119</sup> rice cake

When there are guests in the house, do not go out of your room unless we call you... Oh, there were so many “Do nots!”

When I arrived in Hong Kong, I didn't really know how to do the work. The first thing my employer asked me to do was to search and find the missing matches of socks – a deep box of socks that needed to be paired off, and one huge pile -- so high it towered over me – a huge pile of clothes that needed ironing! That very same night I was already instructed on what had to be done – and that's it, the socks that had to be matched and the clothes that had to be ironed, and then, in addition, what I had to cook for breakfast the following day and all the things that needed to be cleaned in the house.

There were five people who lived in my employer's house. She was a widow and her children were all grown up. My employer lived in Boundary St. I lived in the 'back door' – a tiny room near the kitchen. The room was all right, but then I discovered later that it was actually a prayer room! I had been living there for months when I learned that the two portraits hanging in the wall of my room were portraits of the dead, and that it was in that very room, my room, where they would light the josticks to pray to the dead!

My employer was very kind. And that is why I lasted there for 11 years. What do I mean by kind? Well, you know, she was not measly with food. She would also tell me things like, “You can eat this. You can get this from the refrigerator.” They didn't harm me physically. And also, they didn't hide away their money, their jewelry, they didn't hide them from me, so it means they trusted me. That trust – that is the most important thing for me.

And that is why despite the fact that they ordered me around, I believe they are also kind. You see, this giving orders, this crankiness -- the way I see it is, all of those are part of what one encounters in the work when one is a maid. One needs to learn to adjust to one's amo. When my employer was always cross and cranky with me, her children would tell me to just please think of my amo like my own mother. But sometimes when I think about it, I say to myself, sure they're kind indeed, but then I'm just always at the minimum wage level, and they never even considered raising my salary all those 11 years!

### **I wonder why I was able to endure living in a cage that long!**

My day-off was every Tuesday. Except during my day-off, I just stayed at home every single day. Not like the others who had children to take care of, who had to take the children to the school bus, so at least they would be able to see something of the outside world. But as for me, every single day – day in and day out -- I was just confined at home, and all I could see was the inside of the house! It's only now that I have begun to wonder just why was I able to endure that long – 11 years – like I was living in a cage!

I really don't know how I was able to endure it. When I first arrived here in Hong Kong, I cried and cried all the time. I wanted to go home. I wanted to see my children badly. But there was no one to talk to. I could not explain to my employers why I was so sad, and that my children were always on my mind because I had told them that I was not married! You see they didn't want to get a helper who was married. And that's also why I never used my husband's name. Until the day he died. Oh yes, I cried and cried when I came here. My sister-in-law was cursing me because she said they didn't know that I would only cause them a lot of headache.

How did I deal with my loneliness? I just let the work take my mind off my feelings of loneliness. I just followed my employer to the letter, even if there were so many “do nots” – do not sit on the sofa, do not watch TV...

I also managed to learn how to cook Chinese food. My employer also taught me the way to cut the vegetables – you have to follow it exactly. What I disliked the most among the housework was going to the market, doing the budget for the marketing! But what I liked the most was cooking.

In my employer's house, it was also possible for me to use the telephone, but I couldn't really call up my family because it cost too much! And on the other hand, whenever there were calls coming for me, then you would already know immediately that there's a problem! You see that's the only thing they would call about – for example, whenever my child is sick, then they will call me up so that I could send money to buy medicine.

The loneliest part is when one doesn't have anyone to talk to, to exchange stories with. Not like the Filipinas nowadays who have mobile phones, and that's why even at night they can chat and swap stories!

You know in those days, there were still very few Filipinas around. When you go to Chater Road, there would only be about 5 to ten people hanging out. During my days off, I would just hang out with my sister-in-law in her employer's house. We could hang out there. And we would just chat and swap stories the whole day round. I never went out to stroll around so that I wouldn't have to spend any money.

My monthly salary then was HKD 1,250. Oh, how happy I was when I received my first salary!. The first thing I bought with my salary was clothes for my children, and a pair of shoes for my husband. I would send home almost the whole amount of my salary. You know, the exchange rate was quite big at that time – HKD 1,000 was around 7,000 pesos. Just so I could save some money, I scrimped on my own expenses. I never put my money in the bank – I would just keep it in my own hands. That was the way I saved my money.

What did I buy for my self? One single pearl ring, which, until now, I have kept hidden away, unused. At that time it cost HKD 290. I was already working in Hong Kong for several months before I managed to buy that ring.

### **“Nini, Nini, is that the Mother that you were telling me about?”**

I managed to go home to the Philippines every two years, as according to the contract. I can still remember the first time I went home. I was so eager, so eager to see my children. When my youngest child saw me – she was three years old already by that time and she was only one year old when I left her – she said to her older sister, “Nini, Nini, is that the Mother, our Mother, that you were telling me about?” My youngest child didn't even know me! And her older sister told her, “Oh yes, that is our Mother.” And my own mother, the children's grandmother, told the youngest one, “Go on, go to your mother. Isn't it that you've always wanted a bike? Go on, why don't you ask your mother for a bike.” And so immediately I ran off to buy a bicycle for the youngest one – you know, it was as if the bicycle made up for my absence.

Actually I didn't really want to return to Hong Kong. My husband also didn't want me to. Neither did my mother. But while I was in the Philippines, I was also thinking, how could I ever support my three children? So I ended up returning to Hong Kong

My children, oh how they always just ask for toys all the time. It's as if my absence doesn't matter to them....And on my part, my feeling is always like, well, then I have to give them whatever they ask for because that is what will make up for my absence. And the very

reason why I am here in Hong Kong is so that I can buy for them whatever they want. Sometimes I would also tell them, "If you always ask me for so many things, well then I will never be able to save any money, and then I will never be able to stop working here, and that means I will never be able to go home!"

At first, all I ever dreamed about was to have a decent life. And then, I dreamed of being able to send my children to school. My dreams seem endless, I never run out of them! You see, the next thing was, in 1987, I dreamed of being able to buy my husband a jeep so that he could use it to earn a living. Indeed in 1987, I was able to buy a jeep – so my husband told me, well now you can return home. But I told him, we must have a little bit of money to use as capital for business. And so here I am, I still came back to Hong Kong!

Little by little, I was able to save some money. How did I manage to save? Just simply by not buying anything! You see, it's only in my own expenses that I can cut down on, because the money I sent to the Philippines is absolutely fixed, I never touch it, I never cut it down. I never buy any clothes. Well, I'm not fond of shopping anyway. I don't go anywhere so that I don't have to spend anything.

But after all there is no end to my dreams. You see, my own children, indeed I was able to send them to school, and indeed they were able to finish their studies, but then they can't find any job! And in addition to that, right now I have a grandchild to send to school! There really is no end....

### **Now my body also longs to work**

In May 1987 my husband died. He was shot at while driving the jeep. The details are not clear. I arrived at the airport to go home without knowing how I managed to go there. It was the Dragon Boat Festival then and my employer gave her permission for me to go home. You know, the reason why I say that they are kind is because they even took me themselves to the airport! They put my luggage in the car, while as for me, I was riding the car. You see I was already thinking of not returning to Hong Kong, but my employer, she wanted me to come back. It was very early in the morning when they took me to the airport, and they themselves even queued up at the immigration to apply for my re-entry permit!

I lasted with that employer for 11 years. Imagine, I was only 26 years old when I first started work in Hong Kong! Right now I have been working for 19 years already – that's almost half of my entire life! Imagine, the Hong Kong ID I had when I first came here, that is still the very same ID which I'm still using now – I never lost it, I never soiled it!

When my husband died, my mother-in-law didn't want me to go back to Hong Kong. But then, I thought, all the more reason I should go back to Hong Kong because I will need to earn a living to keep my children alive. For how would I ever be able to support my three children now that I'm alone? And so I came back.

Have I grown to love Hong Kong? Well, maybe, one could say that I've grown to love it. Whenever I'm in the Philippines, I also miss the life here in Hong Kong. It's so different in the Philippines – I've already gotten used to the life here. Whenever I'm in the Philippines, I miss the soft bed. The first time I went home, I told my mother that I couldn't sleep. You see, where we slept over there, it was just a hard wooden bed. When I'm in the Philippines, I also look for... you know, being able to take a shower comfortably. Isn't it, in the Philippines, we still practice the old way, using the dipper and the pail! and the food – I also miss not having to scrimp on food! You see in the Philippines, the food is just barely enough and one is always trying very hard to scrimp on food...And, the most important of all, the

water! My stomach always has a problem with the water over there – it has gotten used to the water here in Hong Kong!

And what more, whenever I go back to the Philippines after 13 years in Hong Kong, it's as if, as if my body longs to work... You see, over there, one just gets annoyed because one sees other people, so many people just hanging around doing nothing! I told myself, I wonder why they think it's all right for them to just hang around doing nothing? You see, I've already gotten used to working all the time.

### **The maids here, they are treated like things, like objects, not like human beings**

I also had the opportunity to experience the 'stay-out' arrangement. The good thing about 'stay-out' is that, at least at night you already have your freedom and you already have someone to talk to. When you're in a 'live-in' arrangement, it's as if you're held captive in a cage. You have no one to talk to, especially at night.

You know, when I was still working inside a house, I would just eat my meals inside my own room – I would never eat alongside with them on the table. They would get the food for me, first in tiny portions, you know, like feeding a cat! But when the dish is steamed fish, naturally, one can't cut that up, so what they'd do instead is to cook some other fish for me, the small, cheap fish.

The maids here, the way they're treated – it's as if they're just things and objects, not human beings. When the employer gives a command, it's like she's not really talking to a human being. For example, when you're doing something and they want to order you to do something else, then you have to immediately follow their orders, even if you were doing something else. Also, your time is limited, controlled, as if you were some kind of property they owned.

The truth of the matter is, it seems that the only thing that domestic helpers really just look forward to are the monthly salary and the yearly lai see – you know, domestic helpers would just keep on enduring the hard work, and pay day is the only thing one could wait for. Oh, after all, the value of one's suffering is measured only in terms of money, and money is the only payment in exchange of one's misery and hardship!.

In 1987, when I returned here after my husband died, I started to look for friends so that my loneliness could be banished away. There was a Filipina who was living quite near our flat whose employer once whipped her with a belt. Someone brought her to the Asian Migrant Centre (AMC). And that's where I met Remy Borlongan who told me, "Perhaps it would be better if we could set up a union for domestic workers." So that's what happened. We organized and attended training seminars and eventually we set up the Asian Domestic Workers' Union (ADWU).

From 1987 to 1995, I was a part of ADWU. I was very happy there because I met many friends. We were also able to do a lot of things in ADWU. But you know, in terms of helping me face my personal problems, the union was not able to help. In fact, it was as if my own problems multiplied because I was engaged in counseling other domestic workers, so it was like I was also absorbing their problems! Like I was also carrying their problems on my own shoulders!

I served as a volunteer staff of ADWU for many years. I was also its Treasurer for a long time. In those days, my employer was a reporter -- she would just let me do my volunteer work in ADWU because I guess she also wanted to be of help in some way. So

actually in those days I spent more time in the ADWU office as a volunteer! But as time went by, I started to have an aversion to the way things were being run because I don't like to be partisan or sectarian. What I mean is that, I believe that ADWU should help everyone, not just its own members. And also, I believe that we should give other people the chance to be officers of the union. And that's why I left ADWU eventually.

Ever since I joined ADWU, I developed many friendships. Those friends of mine, they are like my sisters already. For example, whenever I have problems in my work, you know, I don't really turn to my relatives in the Philippines to talk to them about my problems. Naturally, I would only be able to talk about my problems with my fellow Filipinas here in Hong Kong. And also, I never got married again. I've already gotten used to being alone.

### **If only my dreams were just a few, then perhaps I would have been able to go back home**

My dreams are never exhausted. At first my only dream was to have a decent house. And then, to send my children to school. Well, they did finish their studies, but they can't find any work. And now, it's my grandchild whom I have to send to school. And if ever I had any little savings, my question is, how far would I go with my savings? What kind of job would one take up over there in our country so that whatever little savings one has would not simply vanish away in an instant? And on the other hand, if I stop working, where will I get my money? I shiver with fear over the thought of not having any monthly salary!

It's true, I'm already quite exhausted. For almost twenty years I have been breaking my back here in Hong Kong. I don't even know my own children, their personalities and their character, what they want to eat, for example. Once, when I was home, I cooked a dish for them but they didn't eat it. "But Mother, we don't really eat that dish! And Grandmother knows that we don't like that dish," they told me. Yes, I am called a mother, but a mother who doesn't know her own children.

Still, however, I am quite fortunate – I can buy whatever my children wants. They never had to go through the hardships and suffering that we had to endure when we ourselves were children. You know, I won't even buy one single bangle for my own self, but once my children asks for something, then suddenly I have the money to spare!

What's the secret behind my endurance? You know, other people say that I could really be a nun because I know how to suffer! This virtue of sacrifice, I learned that from my mother. I saw what she sacrificed for the our sake.

My dreams are endless. If only my dreams were just a few, perhaps I would have been able to go back home. What I miss most in the Philippines is, you know, just sitting by the window, watching people pass by. Over here, we never ever experience a happy moment such as that.

### **My body now aches to be free**

What do I think of the proposal to cut the minimum wage of domestic workers? Of course I don't agree to that! One should really perhaps join the protest actions. And if ever the government wants to impose a quota, well then, maybe we should all be sent home. If everyone is sent home, then we will all go home together, and no one will have to feel miserable!

But if they will allow us to become permanent residents – well , that would be good. You know I also want to be a permanent resident because I want to find another kind of job. If at all possible, the job that I would want very much to take up is a job at a factory, to be a factory worker.

I can no longer take the kind of life where one lives like a prisoner! My body now aches to be free. You see, over here, it's like, when you wake up in the morning and your body still doesn't want to get up, well, you can't follow your body -- that's not possible at all. It's as if your body is now someone else's property.

What did you just ask – what are my dreams for myself? Hmmmm.....What, indeed are my dreams for myself?

My deepest longing is ....I just want to be together with my children at last. I just want to know what it's like to be with my own grandchild.

## APPENDIX C

‘I wish I was the youngest daughter...’

### The Story of Esther

I am Esther, from Dingaras, Ilocos Norte, 30 years old. I was twenty years old when I first came to Hong Kong. We are eight children, and I am the fourth child.

I have three sisters and four brothers. Ireneo, my eldest brother now has four children; he’s a farmer. Precy, is my older sister – she has one child and is now in Hong Kong. Then came Joel, who graduated from the police academy. He can’t find a job as a policeman because it difficult if you don’t have a ‘backer’. He left for Canada last November. I helped him with some money to go there. After me came Julie, who finished vocational training and is now 27 years old. Now he has a small business renting out video games. Sometimes he helps when I ask him to give some money for my sisters’ school allowance, then I’d pay him back. After him came Zenaida, who is now 19 years old. She is studying to be a mid-wife and will graduate this March. The youngest is Claricel – whose name was coined after joining the names of my mother and father. She is 18 years old and is now studying to be a nurse. I provide her tuition fees, money to buy books, school allowance, board and lodging expenses.

My father was a farmer. My mother just stayed at home, to take care of us. Last year my father suffered a stroke and since then he could no longer go to the rice fields.

We have a small land. But the rest of the land my father tills is owned by someone else, the rich man in our village. Two times a year, my father plants rice. The third time, after harvesting the rice, he plants vegetable crops – eggplant, tomato, okra, mong beans. My mother sells the vegetables in the market, bringing a basket full of tomatoes and other vegetables. We don’t have a market stall, but we sell vegetables anyway. When I was a child I often went with my mother to help sell the vegetables. I was always so happy when I sold something, because then I would have some money to buy my personal things.

I also used to help in the rice field. My Aunt would ask, “Do you want to go with us to the fields?” And so I would go. My father would wake us up very early, like 5:00 am, just so we could go with him to the rice field. There we would clear the field, pull the grass. After harvest, the landlord would come to our house to get his ‘share.’ Two parts go to the peasant – to us – and one part to the landlord. And why would the landlord have his share even if he did not till the land? Because he owns the land, Ate! I don’t know the name of the landlord, but what I know is that he has owned the land for a very long time, since I was a child. When my father got sick, my brothers farmed the land.

*Nagakakasya naman sa pagkain namin yung inaani namin.* Yes, our harvest is rather adequate for our needs. Every harvest time, my father sets aside what we need for our own food until the next harvest. But now, I am the one who spends for the *abono* (fertilizers and other inputs). Even for the other needs they have to buy, I am the one who sends the money for such things. Even for the education expenses of my siblings.

How did we buy the *abono* before I came to Hong Kong? That’s why my mother used to raise a pig, and my father, a cow. Whenever we needed to buy , my father would sell his cow. Sometimes, the cash would not be enough. My mother had a *suki* (favorite vendor) at that time, and the *suki* would give it to her on credit. When harvest time came, sometimes my mother would be able to pay off the debt.

### **It's difficult to study if you don't have your own books**

I studied at the St. Joseph's Elementary School. Oh yes, my childhood was happy. It was fun to study, *Ate*, because i didn't have to worry about anything except my studies. My favorite subject was Math. Yes, I was a bit good in Math. I really liked Math so much. I went to college at the Northwestern College in Laoag City. It is now a university. It was around one hour's travel from our village. I lived in a boarding house and I was studying nursing. I reached 2<sup>nd</sup> year college. Yes, it's a pity I did not finish it. At that time we were paying about P5,000 per semester, around 1991 to 1990. My father was already growing old then, and I didn't have money. That's why I couldn't buy the books I needed for my studies.

Why didn't I complete my studies? Eh, because we didn't have money then, *Ate*, and I couldn't support myself in my studies. That's why I've asked my sister to take up Nursing, because I didn't finish it myself. What happened was, I couldn't pass in a major subject, so I didn't go on for my 'capping.' I could not study well. It was difficult because I didn't have my own books, I just had to go to the library. I could not study properly. It's hard to study if you don't have your own books. It was the Chemistry class that I was not able to pass That was all. I felt so bad, so disappointed, because I really wanted to study. It was so painful to me. I could not enroll in the second semester. Sure, I probably could have pushed through with it, but I would have to wait for another year to enroll in the other courses. I would have to repeat for one year. So I just stopped.

So my older sister said, well, why don't you just go to Hong Kong then. My sister had come here first in 1991. By 1993 I followed her. My older sister was married to a security guard so their earnings were not enough. That's why she decided to come to Hong Kong. Even if she's working here, she's not really able to help my other siblings much because she was saving up to build her own house. We approached an agency called Reliable, and paid P30,000 pesos as application fee. My father mortgaged our land so we could pay the application fee. I was able to pay it back and recover the land after several months working in Hong Kong.

Oh yes, I was excited to come to Hong Kong because I had a job. Finally I would be able to help my family. If I hadn't been able to come to Hong Kong, my younger sisters and brothers wouldn't also be able to continue their education...

### **Oh my God, so this is how it is!**

When I traveled to come here, i was so happy. But when I arrived and went to my *amo*, I told myself, *Oh my God, so this is how it is, it's so difficult after all!*

Why was it difficult? Because my *amo* had a huge house, four stories. They had two kids, 12 and 8 years old. three cars, three dogs, and a garden! And I was alone. I had to do everything.

When I arrived here, the agency met me at the airport. Then my *amo* picked me up. When we arrived at their house, they told me to have a little rest. Then after I had a bit of rest, they then explained to me what I had to do: wake up the children in the morning (6:30 am), prepare breakfast, clean the three cars, then wake up my *amo* (11:00 am), make them some tea, then clean the house, clean the garden, do the laundry, then after that, iron the clothes, then cook again, and so on. I used to wake up at 6:00 in the morning. The children's breakfast was not hard to prepare, usually bread and milk, and sometimes I would cook some noodles. All these tasks they had written in a list and had given the agency.

When the children came home from school, I had to prepare their food. We would eat together at around 7:30 in the evening. Then when my *amo* would come, at around 11:00 or 11:30 at night, I would cook and prepare dinner for them also. My *amo*'s husband did not like to eat cold rice or food that was not freshly prepared, so I had to cook separately for them.

My *amo* would wake me up any time at night whenever she needed something from me, like to make her tea, or when she was looking for something. Even for just some small thing she would still wake me up any time at night. It happened quite often – she would wake me up to ask me to do some small thing. Like at that time, our dogs were quite noisy at night. The security guard would scold us. So my *amo* would wake me up, ask me to get up and to make the dogs shut up. So I would have to chase the dogs, catch them and lock them up in my bathroom (I had my own bathroom then) so they would be quiet. Once, I accidentally blinded the dog because I was trying to catch it and it wouldn't keep quiet! No, my *amo* didn't scold me for that because she knew it was just an accident.

### **okay naman vs. Ah, O.K.!**

How was my relationship with my *amo*? *Okay naman. Kaya lang kung minsan may sumpong ang amo ko.* It was just okay. But sometimes my *amo* has fits of temper. Even if you didn't do anything bad, she gets mad at you. Like when she is looking for something and she can't find it, ay, what comes out of her mouth, *Ate! Iba talaga ang Intsik!* The Chinese are really something else! I don't really understand what she's saying when she's in a bad temper, because it's in Chinese. When she's mad, then she breaks into Chinese. I don't know what she's saying. So what I do, I'll just smile.

What about with her husband? Ah, he's OKAY! It's because I don't see him often. he's never around, and he doesn't say anything much. When he's at home he just watches TV in the room. *Wala akong masasabi sa Lalake, Ate, kasi mabait siya.* I have nothing to complain about him, because he's nice.

What about the kids? *Ah, O.K. sila!* Ah, they're O.K. They're very good to me. Why do I say they're kind? Because when they have food, they share it with me. Like when they come home from school, I prepare some snacks for them. And then they'll ask me, "What about you, have you had your snack?"

*Hmmm, oo, natatapos ko rin ang trabaho ko.* Well, yes, I was able to finish my duties for the day. Ever single day, I would do the laundry. We had a washing machine, so it was easy. From 2:00 to 3:00 in the afternoon, I would do the ironing. Then sometimes I would go to the market. I didn't have to go to the market all the time because it was quite far from the house. When it came to cooking, I just followed a Chinese cookbook which my *amo* provided. It wasn't difficult because the cooking was simple. They always liked steamed food. Once I cooked steamed chicken and I steamed it so long that it grew too soft and tender! What was really funny was when I first cooked *choi sum* – I cut off the leaves and threw away the stems because I didn't know that the stems were edible. My *amo* looked for the stems! She said, next time you should include them because the stems are the most delicious part.

### **Well, yes, I did find time to rest**

When did I find the time to rest during the day? Well, yes, I was able to find time to rest. Like when I was ironing, I would sit down once in a while, because they were not around in the house anyway. Or while I was cooking soup – isn't it that the soup takes a long time to

cook – then while waiting for the soup to simmer, then I would take the opportunity to sit down... *E di pahinga na rin yon, di ba*. Well then, that's already like resting, isn't it?

What do you mean by rest, like on my own, to do things on my own, like watch TV or read? Is that what you mean by rest time, like rest in the afternoon, Ate? Ay, *wala!* Oh, no, none at all.

Just during my day-off, I would go to Central. Take a stroll. Eat out. That's where I met some of my other friends, at Chater Garden. There was an activity organized by ADWU (Asian Domestic Workers' Union) every Sunday afternoon and sometimes I would go there. My neighbor brought me there. Eventually, in 1994, I joined the ADWU.

I stayed with my first *amo* for two years. When my contract was about to end, they asked me if I wanted to renew the contract, and I said, maybe not. You see, it's difficult to take care of such a huge house!

### **I kill you, I kill you!**

Then after that, through the agency, I met my second *amo* – that old woman with a big mouth! She lived at TST. Why do I say she has a big mouth? Because, Ate, she always yelled at me saying, I kill you, I kill you. Oh yes, she was always saying it to me – I kill you, I kill you. Like, when I made a mistake in my duties.

What do I do when she yells, I kill you, I kill you, at me? Nothing, *Ate*. I just put on a smile. Why? Well, it's because if you say something, the more she'll get angry at you, so I just keep quiet and put on a smile!

My duties then were mainly cooking and cleaning. There was also a child in the house, my *amo's* granddaughter. They also had a pet cat. I had to play with the cat. My *amo* would know if I didn't play with the cat in the afternoon because the cat would be in a sad mood and the cat wouldn't greet my *amo* when she returned. So I had to play with the cat every afternoon. We had to play with a ball together. Well, yes, I also enjoyed playing with the cat.

I worked for my *amo* and her husband. Then when her daughter separated from her husband, the two-year old child lived in my *amo's* house. But her *yaya* – another domestic helper – also came to live in my *amo's* house. So there were two of us. I was in-charge of cooking and cleaning. And the other helper just took care of the child. We got along well. You see, Ate, I don't really know how to pick a fight with anyone. My motto is, just ride along, rather than pick a fight.

We would take our day off alternately. But the problem was, even if we didn't take our day off, we wouldn't get paid.

In my first *amo*, I had my own room, my own bathroom. But in my second *amo*, ay, I didn't have my own room. The other helper slept in the kitchen in a folding bed. As for me, because I was smaller, I had to stay in the same room as my *amo's* daughter and granddaughter. I slept on the floor, under their bed. What I really hated was, the daughter would bring her boyfriend at night and then they would engage in sex, even while I was there. Can you imagine! What would I feel when this would happen? I would get very annoyed! Very annoyed. Then the child, she would of course wake up because of the noise and my *amo* would come to the room. Why I would get annoyed, well, because they would do this private thing even in my presence! Because I felt like I was just...I felt like I was just

nothing to them, like I was not present ....I would pretend I was asleep, but of course I could not sleep properly.

I only stayed there in the house for one year because the other helper also wanted to leave. At some point, there were three of us in the house, because my amo wanted someone around when one of us was having a day off. Then she would also ask us to work for her other friends. Then eventually, I started to “stay-out.”

My monthly salary with my second amo was HKD 3,600. It was much better than the first amo, who gave me only HKD 3,200. Though my first amo was very rich, and the house was very big, my first amo gave me a smaller salary.

What work do I hate most as a domestic worker? Nothing really. Except that, in my former amo, I had to give her a massage every night. I had to dig through her back with a spoon until her skin turned pink. Then I had to rub some smelly Chinese herbal medicine – I think it had papaya and other herbs. Giving a massage is so tough! That’s the work I didn’t like the most.

But what I enjoy the most is cooking.

### **I miss my family, but...**

On my day-off, I go to church in the morning, then have lunch with my friends. Then, before, we used to go to Central to swap stories. And in the afternoon we’d go to Chater garden for some events.

*Aaaayyy*...in the earlier years I didn’t have any savings of my own. You see, *Ate*, they need the money over there in the Philippines. *Ate*, it’s not really possible for me to say no to them when they need something from me! It’s because I feel so sorry for them. And I was also sending my younger siblings to school. My whole salary – I used to send the entire thing to them. I would send it through the bank to my mother. Yes, they knew exactly how much my salary was. I would leave something for my own allowance here in Hong Kong, like around HKD 500 for the whole month. It would be enough because I only needed it during Sundays, for my transportation, my lunch, and so on. All my expenses were covered by my *amo* – food, shampoo. I don’t really need anything much for myself.

Did I ever get lonely? Not really. Of course I missed my father, my family, my brothers and sisters. *Kaya lang*.....But then....But then, there’s nothing I could do.

My sister and I would phone them, but it was not easy because we had to schedule it one week before. There was no telephone connection where my family lived, so they had to go to town, which was far. What we would do then was we would tell them one week before that we would call, then they would make a schedule to take a trip to town. So we couldn’t really call them often enough. Nowadays it’s much better because they now have a cell phone.

You know, where my family lives is really far. First it’s in the countryside, then not only that, it’s in a remote barrio. you have to take the jeep and then ride the *bangka* to cross the river. During rainy season, like in June or July, when the water level is too high, we would have to ride the *balsa*, which is like a simple raft.

Since I’ve been working in Hong Kong, I would send all my salary to my family. Yes, all of it. For many years I didn’t have savings of my own then. I would only keep a small amount to myself, like HKD 500 a month for my expenses here in Hong Kong. Yes, that was

enough for me, because my amo covered my food and other things like shampoo and so on, and I didn't spend much during my day off. As I said, during my day off, I would just go to church in the morning, eat out a bit, chat with my friends in the afternoon, or when I started my "stay-out," I wouldn't leave the boarding house.

I'm happy to be in Hong Kong

After my second amo, I just continued having "stay-out" arrangements. I really prefer the stay-out arrangements. It's fun, it's good. After you leave your amo's house, suddenly your tiredness is gone. When you arrive in the boarding house, you feel refreshed because your friends are there. We would tell stories, watch TV together.

I'm happy to be in Hong Kong, *Ate*. Happy because I can help my sisters and brothers. Because if I didn't come here, they wouldn't have been able to get some education. I'm happy here but not because life is enjoyable in Hong Kong. After all, what do I enjoy doing here? I don't go shopping, I don't do fun things. I don't really do anything much except for my work. Now that I'm a 'stay-out,' I just spend my day-off at the boarding house. But come to think of it, my life here is also fun – going to church every Sunday. During my day off, I sleep a lot in the afternoon. My boarding house mates wonder why I just sleep and sleep. So yes, my life here is also happy even if I don't really do anything other than my job.

Also, I don't really get sick often. Like last year, I had a very bad cough. the doctor said I just needed more water and Vitamin C. But I'm generally okay because every time I go home to the Philippines I would go for a check-up. I also got scared of SARS. When I was coughing last year I thought I already had SARS! But I didn't want to go to the Philippines then because if I did have SARS, then my family would also catch it. I was thinking, if I will die of SARS, then let me die here in Hong Kong, so that I wouldn't put my family at risk. If they would also get the disease, then that would really be disastrous!

I get to go on vacation in the Philippines every two years. Whenever I go home, I bring back presents for my family, like clothes for my sisters and brothers, for my parents. When my mother learns that I will be going home, *Ate*, she would prepare her pig, fatten it up for my homecoming! Oh yes, they also miss me, I suppose. Just now they're already asking me when I will be going home. But since I just went last year, it'll be some time before I can go home again.

Last year I was able to purchase a small piece of land – it's for farming, but it can also be used for residential purposes. According to my mother it's a little less than one hectare. It cost PhP 50,000, and it's even by the roadside! It's also close to our house. You see, the value of our land is really cheap where I live. The land I bought is under my name, but my brothers are now tilling it. They are planting rice and corn. Whatever is harvested out of the land goes to my brother, but, you see, my brother is really kind, so once in a while he also shares with me some of the profit from the harvest. I did tell him that, if they ever harvest anything, then it's theirs, but the difference now is I don't give my brother any money for the *abono* for the land.

My brothers also tried to apply at the Disneyland construction site here in Hong Kong. But it turned out that it was a fraud—there weren't really any openings for Filipino workers. Imagine, my three brothers had to pay PhP 10,000 each for the agency (totally PhP 30,000)! But actually, it turned out that they weren't hiring Filipinos. We were just cheated! I think some charges were filed against the agency, so the agency was order to close down. But the owner of the agency fled somewhere and couldn't be found.

So what do I miss the most in the Philippines? It's fun there! I have lots of fun whenever I go home. You see, it's because when all the sisters and brothers are together, my mother and father seem so happy! They're happy whenever we're all together.

I also follow the developments in the Philippines because I also read the newspapers sometimes. But it's so full of politics – I don't like that. It's a mess. I plan to cast my vote this coming presidential elections. I don't want Arroyo to win anymore. I want to cast my vote because the news I read about the Philippines is always bad.

What I like bringing back to Hong Kong from the Philippines is foodstuffs. When I'm in the Philippines I like to take a stroll, go places, visit the beach. Sometimes we would cook up a live chicken and bring it with us to the beach. Sometimes we would grill some fish.

When I do get married, I wouldn't want to leave the Philippines anymore

I have a boyfriend and he's been my boyfriend for the past ten years, even before I came here to Hong Kong. Well, he's still there, waiting. *Laging naghihintay, laging namamanhikan*. Always waiting for me. Always going through the traditional ritual of formally asking my parents for my hand in marriage. He comes from our village and he also works in a farm, raising pigs. When I made up my mind to go to Hong Kong, he told me, 'When you come back, we'll get married.' I told him then that I would be away only for two years. So now he tells me that he's always waiting, always waiting. He said maybe I'm waiting for nothing! And I tell him, what about my sisters and brothers? How will they get their education? That would be a problem once we get married.

So now we just write letters to each other. Well yes, I do miss him also, but there's nothing I can do....Every time I go home to the Philippines, he and his parents would call on my family to discuss our marriage. But I don't want to get married yet. So there he is, still waiting...I think his mother will not live very long. His father also passed away. My friends and family told me that, very soon, both his parents will be gone even before we get married. They wouldn't even have the pleasure of seeing our wedding.

But what can I do? Whenever that day comes when I do get married, I don't want to have to leave the Philippines anymore. I wouldn't want to get married and then still come to Hong Kong for work. When I get married I just want to stay in the Philippines. And if I get married now, what about my sisters and brothers? How will they be able to finish their studies?

No, I don't want to think about getting married, because it's painful to think about. It's hard. *Mahirap ang buhay sa Pilipinas pag wala nang abroad*. Life in the Philippines would be hard without 'work abroad.'

My siblings are doing fine in their studies. As I said, one of them is graduating in March and she will be a mid-wife. She plans to go to Canada. That's what she told me.

I have many cousins and nieces who also came to Hong Kong for work but most of them have gone home for good. My sister also wants to work here first then go to Canada.

As for me, even if I had the opportunity to go back to my studies, I wouldn't want to do so. That would be a problem. My mind right now is blank, empty, unused. Imagine, if I went back to my studies, I might end up writing 'housecleaning' under my subjects! So that's why I keep telling our bunso (youngest sibling), I'll just concentrate on sending you to your college education, supporting you.

I do miss taking up my studies, I really miss it, especially when I'm here in Hong Kong. Sometimes, I ask myself, how could I have ended up like this? *Bakit ba ako nagkaganito?*

### **If only there was a better job!**

I don't really know anymore what first attracted me to my boyfriend -- it's been such a long time that I've already forgotten it! But what I know is would like a husband who is good and kind. Someone who behaves well. And when I get married, I'd like to have just two children. It's hard to have too many kids.

My dream is, after my siblings finish their studies, I'll save some money and then have a small business, You know, like buying and selling rice grains. That would be a good business in our place. Maybe it will take some two years before this dream can become a reality.

If only there was a better job for us here in Hong Kong – that's the only thing I'd like to change right now. Like, if it would be possible for us to do work other than domestic helper. If that were possible, I would like to set up a small business if I had some money. For example, like the sari-sari stores at the World wide House.

I guess I got my 'business sense' from my mother. During harvest season, she would sell the grain. And then, she would use the proceeds to buy some products to sell at the market. So it was a small kind of buy and sell business. Ever since I was a small child, I really had a strong interest in sales and I enjoyed selling. I would feel very thrilled everytime I managed to sell all my goods at the market – I would run home and announce to everyone that I sold all my goods.

If I had some money, is there anything I would like to buy? Nothing. Nothing really. There's nothing I want to buy here. All I want is to watch Filipino movies. There's nothing else I want to do here. As I said before, during Sundays, all I want to do is to go to church with my friends. I go to St. Joseph's church, and also to Rosary Church sometimes. I enjoy going to church because they really say something meaningful there. After you go to church, your body feels so refreshed, your spirit feels happy. It really feels good, going to church. After you've finished your prayers, then you feel happy and so fresh.

### **Grant me the strength to toil and labor**

Like you said, what I think of, what I hope for, is always for my siblings. That's what my mother taught us. She said we should always help each other, that we shouldn't bicker. My father was the silent type – it was my mother who spoke more.

Yes, *Ate*, my sisters and brothers are so grateful to me. Every time I go home, they always say how thankful they are. They tell me, don't worry, we are studying very well. They also show me their grades. Sometimes I tell them, why don't you just get married so that I don't have to support your studies. Oh no, they say, we want to finish our studies. So I tell them, how fortunate you are – when we were students we couldn't study properly because we didn't have money to buy our own books. So they would always thank me.

Sometimes I want to weep, cry on their shoulders. But I stop myself because I don't want them to see me with my tears. I don't want them to see me crying, no, I don't want that. But I cry when I think about my situation. You are so fortunate, I tell my siblings, you have someone to support your studies. Sometimes, I think to myself, I wish I was the youngest child...

My father seems sad these days, especially since his stroke. He just sits in front of our house. And sometimes, he cries. Maybe it's because of his old age. When my father was hospitalized last year, the expenses went up to about PhP 80,000. My older sister also helped a bit, but my share in the expenses was a lot bigger. My father said, "If it were not for Esther, maybe I would have died. But when I die, I pity Esther because she has to shoulder everything." My father didn't say that directly to me – he said this to my siblings.

What are my prayers about? I pray for the salvation of my family. My father, my mother, especially because they're already in their old age. My grandmother, too. My sisters and brothers. That's the first thing I pray for. What about for myself? I pray that God will not neglect me. I pray that God will give me strength so I can toil and labor...

## APPENDIX D

### You go on, big brother, I can manage myself The Story of Miriam

I am Miriam. I was born in Lepanto Mines, Mancayan, Benguet. My father worked in the gold mine there. And then he was one of those who were laid off. If he wanted to go back to work there, they probably would take him back. But he didn't want to work there anymore because by then we already went to the lowlands. I was six years old when we went to Pangasinan.

My grandfather and father grew up among the Igorots. Some people say that we have the Igorot accent, but we're actually Ilocanos. But I suppose my folks couldn't shake off the Igorot accent anymore, I don't know. But we don't have Igorot blood.

I grew up in Manaoag, Pangasinan, at Barrio Baginay. My father was a farmer. He planted rice, mong beans, and other crops. You see our place is a barrio (village). Our land was my grandfather's, but it was really my father who tilled it.

You see, my grandfather was a bachelor. I also have a grandmother who's a spinster, and an aunt who's also a spinster! It was really my spinster aunt who cared for us. So actually it was as if we had two mothers.

We are six brothers and sisters. One died, the one after whom I was born. He died when he was 24 year old because he had rheumatic heart disease. The children were alternating between boy and girl – boy first, then girl, then boy, and so on. People say my father did a great job!

So now I am the third child, actually the middle child. We all worked on the fields together. My mother, meanwhile, used to sew clothes.

#### **You go on, big brother, I can manage myself**

That was also the place where I studied elementary and high school. I was so happy when I was studying. Even our teacher was like our friend. We often went off together. Come, let's go to the mango grove! Or let's go to the star apple trees. Everywhere, we'd go everywhere. We'd climb all those trees. Our homes had everything, like all the different kinds of fruit trees.

Math was my favorite subject in class. I don't really know why. All I knew is that everytime it was Math class, I was always so awake! What I hated most was English – it made me feel sleepy! During Math class, my eyes would be wide open like this – but during English class, they would be drooping, like this. Ah yes, I was also quite good in Math, with numbers. People ask me why I didn't take up computer studies.

You see, I really like those things that people say are difficult to do – I would slowly study it and study it until I could finally grasp it. I don't know why. Yes, maybe I will eventually go to some computer class at YMCA, cause my big sister is a kind of teaching volunteer there. You see, there are two of us here in Hong Kong.

I took up vocational courses in dressmaking because during that time we really had no money, absolutely. The budget was not enough! I was planning to go to college then. But my big brother, we finished high school at the same time, and the money was not enough. So I told my big brother 'you go first, and I'll just take up vocational training for now.' I asked him to go ahead first because he's a man, you see. I said I would just take up vocational training for now and said that I would just give way to him. I said, you go on, big brother, I can manage myself.

He ended up not finishing college because he died, you see. He only completed two years. But I didn't go to college anymore.

Six months after I finished my dressmaking course, I told my mother that I would just go to my Aunt, her first cousin. Mother, I said, I'll have a break first. So I went off to my Aunt in Gapan, Nueva Ecija where I cared for my three cousins. I really raised them, ate! Three Marias! The youngest one was just 6 months old at that time. They also gave me a salary, but the truth is, I never held my salary with my own hands! Till now I don't even know how much I was earning then. Yes, that's true. What would just happen was, everytime we went to Pangasinan, to my mother's, my Aunt would give my mother whatever I earned. At any rate, whenever I wanted to buy something, all I would do was just tell my Aunt, 'Aunt, I want this,' and then she would give it to me. .

### **But they said it's not possible because I'm a woman**

I am an obedient daughter. So whatever I wanted, they would let me do it. Like, it was my own idea for me to go to my Aunt. 'Then why don't you come here then,' my Aunt said. She really treated me like her eldest child. Like she really adopted me but without the papers. Her husband was a seaman, you see. Everytime he came home and people would ask who was their eldest child, he would point at me! I also treated them like my own parents – so you see I have two sets of parents! I was about 18 years old then and I stayed there for seven years.

We did have a discussion then about the possibility of my going to college. The problem was, there were people who were jealous and envious – my Aunt's cousins on her mother's side, and the side of her husband resented me. They said I could get whatever I want from my auntie. You know, like, when I would say, Aunt, I want this, then she would buy it for me. I also managed their money – I paid the rent and things like that. So my Aunt's relatives were green with envy.

My aunt and uncle wanted to send me to college to take up Education course, but I didn't want them to because I didn't want their other relatives to feel bad. I don't know why. What I want is, if ever I will go to college, I don't want to hear any gossip.

Oh, at that time, how I hated Education course! It was just their idea for me to take up Education so that I could teach their children. Also, it would be easy for them to find a job for me in Gapan because they know the Mayor there – he was my uncle's friend. They said they could also easily get me a job at Divina Pastora, the church which had its own school at that time.

I said, Uncle, I don't want to. I just don't want to study Education. Why? He asked. I don't want to teach children. So what do you really want? My uncle asked. I said, criminology! You know, that has really been my big dream. That is the dream of my life. Really, that's my dream. I really like that, ate – to study criminology and them to be a secret

agent! That is the dream of my life! If only we had money then ...I could have pursued that dream. I cannot wish that dream away, even until now. That is my dream. My life. That is the truth, *Ate*.

But my aunt and uncle said it is not possible for me because I am a woman. It's a dangerous job. So they didn't allow me to study it. Just because I'm a woman. I said, But auntie, I can do it! Child, she said, it is really not possible for you because you're a woman.

**Lord, if it's not really meant for me,  
then please grant it to those who come after me**

It was my big brother who really knew that it was the dream of my life. But then he said, alas, little sister, I cannot afford it. You see he was just working at the Coca-cola plant in Baguio then. He was just a driver. Then some people also resented him, so he also resigned from his job. And that is why he couldn't afford to support my studies.

You see, it would also cost much to study criminology – the cost of the uniforms, the classes, and so on. My big brother said, little sister, what if we save some money first? I said, okay then. So the idea was to save some money first – until I landed her in Hong Kong just to keep on saving! (laughter)

But I didn't really feel too disappointed. I said, Lord, maybe it was not really meant for me. I don't feel any resentment towards my parents. You know, people say that one becomes rebellious if one doesn't get one wants. I don't have that feeling. No, not at all,

You see, it's because I thought to myself, if I will be rebellious, I will be the one who will get hurt after all. So I didn't have that experience of being rebellious, *ate*. *Pina-sa-Diyos ko na lang*. I just left it in the hands of God. Lord, if it's not really meant for me, then just please grant it to those who come after me – and I will do whatever I can to make it a reality.

I came to Hong Kong in 19915, when I was 25 years old. After I lived with my Aunt, I was shuttling between Gapan and Pangasinan, then Manila, too, then back to Gapan. Just like that. When I felt bored, I would look for something else to do. I thought of so many things, like I also went into selling foodstuffs as a street vendor! I sold *adidas* – you know, that's what we call the chicken feet – BBQ, chicken head, and so on. I also sold *halo-halo and bibingka!* I ended up selling so many different things. I had many customers. You see, in front of my Aunt's house was the highway, And then, there was a rice mill on the other side, and a car repair shop still on the other side. I was the only one selling halo-halo then, so you can imagine what brisk sales I had! The only problem was, all my tumblers ended up broken! (laughter)

It was my Aunt who gave me the initial capital for the *halo-halo* business. Modesty aside, on my part, I am the type who, instead of cribbing and griping, I would rather find a way to be of help in a situation. All my Aunt's cousins thought I was enjoying a free ride in my Aunt's house. They were very jealous. They would go to my Aunt's house then to look for a way to earn a living, but the problem was, at that time there were no job openings. And then, they never went outside the house anyway – so how would they be able to find a job? So our budget was always short! Imagine, our budget then was P 3,000 a month just for food alone!

So one day I said to my Aunt, Auntie, please give me PhP 100. Why, what will you do with it? She asked. I will sell halo-halo, I said! You see, I told her, we don't have any more

money to buy THEIR food, YOUR cousins' food! We have no money left – so I will just sell *halo-halo* first from 10:00 in the morning until 2:00 in the afternoon. I said. Oh, all right, my Aunt said.

### **People say that I am very hard working but I don't reap the gains**

So there – I did end up selling *halo-halo*. And in the afternoon, I would sell *bibingka* instead. The special kind of *bibingka*, the one that you have to steam, the one that has the salted egg on top. I cooked and prepared everything!

People say that I am very hard working but I don't reap the gains...

You will really laugh, you know, because when I was selling *halo-halo*, I didn't even notice that I had worn my skirt inside out! My father's friend would schold me – Hey, Miriam, go back to your house, your skirt is inside out! No, I said, that's not inside out. But the truth was, it was really inside out! I was in such a hurry then, you know ... So I looked down and saw that it was really inside out! I laughed and laughed and laughed.

What I would do then was, I would first pick up the kids from kindergarten class. You see my Aunt was minding her own store. She would say, Okay, Miriam, go and fetch the kids, I've already prepared some snacks for you. Then after that I would prepare my *halo halo*. When it was time, I would tell my Aunt, Okay, auntie, you're now in-charge of the kids, it's now time for me to sell my *halo halo*...

That was our life for three years. Until my Uncle found out! What have you been doing, you and your niece? He asked my Aunt. He demanded why my Aunt made me go and sell *halo-halo*! But I explained to my Uncle, you see, I'm getting bored that's why I wanted to do it. What my Uncle wanted was for us to focus our attention on the children. Whatever I earned from the *halo-halo*, all of it was used to buy our food. You know, like, when the kids would make a request – Auntie, they'd tell me, I want to eat a burger, so then we would go to the burger machine. Sunday was always our day off, for all of us. We would go to church. It would be the day when we all took a rest.

### **Little sister, go ahead now and enroll at the Urdaneta school!**

It was my big sister who came to Hong Kong first. My *amo* now was the *amo* of my big sister for her part-time work. She told my big sister, Lina, I need a domestic helper because I will be giving birth very soon. So my Ate said, if you like, you can take in my sister, ma'am. Does she know how to take care of children? Oh, when it comes to taking care of kids, ma'am, she is even much better than me! And then, she said, Okay, then I will get her. So they started to process my papers, ate. But around January, she backed out! You see, she said it's because she might not be able to afford it. She said she may not be able to pay the salary, and also her house is quite small. But my sister's real full-time employer, who was my *amo's* sister-in-law, said, just go ahead with it and I will get her if you can't. So of course, my *amo* also thought that she could go ahead with it. That was the agreement between the two sisters-in-law.

Around March, my sister told me, Oh, Miriam, come her now, your *amo* already said so. So I set off and started attending to my documents. I did it alone, all of the paperwork. I would go to Pangasinan, then I would go to Manila. There was an agency then but I would

do it myself. Then one day, they called me and said, your visa is here already, go and choose a date for your departure to Hong Kong. I said, please schedule me on May 13. You see that was a Saturday – my sister’s day off is on a Saturday.

My youngest sister then was just about to start first year high school. I remember quite well, it was still very early in the morning, and it was a Sunday – as soon as I got my visa, I told our youngest sister, Ading, enroll ka na sa Urdaneta! Little sister, go ahead now and enroll at Urdaneta! You see, we didn’t want her to study in the barrio because we know what it’s like to study in the *barrio* (village). We wanted her to study at the national level, in the city. How is that, ate, our little sister said, I haven’t taken the entrance exam for high school yet? I said, never mind, just go and approach your uncle. You see, we had an uncle who was a teacher there. So that’s what she did – she went to our uncle in the city and so she was able to make it to the enrollment!

So then on May 13, 1995, I flew off to come to Hong Kong...

And every since, from the beginning of that first year of high school, until she studied college, I was really the one who sponsored her studies. Her name is Jane. She was a menopause baby because my mother was 42 years old then. You know, we thought we wouldn’t have any more siblings, and the last baby before Jane was even a stillborn baby! So it was quite fortunate indeed that my Mother was even able to give birth to her! But you know, we really raised her ourselves....

### **Is this really what Chinese food is like?!**

It was May 13 when I arrived at my amo’s place itself, and I will never ever forget what they have me to eat on that same day! You know, that dish which the Chinese people give to those who just gave birth – the one with the pork legs, the one with the egg, the one with the sauce that looks very, very black! You see, my *alaga* was only one-month old then, ate. They say that that dish was what my amo ate to improve her blood circulation after giving birth. And that was also the dish they gave to me. I said to my big sister, will I really eat this, this black thing?! And my ate said, little sister, you must show them that you like it! So I did. I showed them—I couldn’t even put it in my mouth, ate, but I showed them, I showed them that I really ate it.

Nowadays, when I have to eat it, I can really eat it. But in those days -- really, I couldn’t eat it! My big sister said, little sister, you must show them that you like it. Oh dear, I told myself, why do they have to give me this food to eat on my very first day, this black dish?! You know, even the *choi sum* then, I couldn’t eat it! I told myself, is this really what Chinese food is like?! I don’t know why, but I just couldn’t eat the *choi sum*. You see, Ate, we’re really used to eat Filipino food, aren’t we?

I said, Lord, is this really what Chinese food is like, just boiled vegetables, fried with just a small piece of ginger?! When my *amo* is not around, Ate, I don’t eat it! But when they’re around, I really show them that I eat it so that they can see that I am feel at ease with their family...

I’ve had only one *amo* ever since. The truth is, Ate, I’m really quite fortunate with my *amo*. I don’t have any problems with her. She told me, when you wake up, the only important thing is the kids. The house cleaning? That’s really up to me if I still want to do some house cleaning. All my amo said is, the important thing is my kids and their food. You see she also works in the daytime. Her important instruction is, don’t ever neglect the kids.

When I first arrived at my *amo*'s house, the eldest child was five years old. The youngest one was only one-month old. And you know, the way they treat me – like a member of the family. When there is something you want to say, just say it. My *amo* said. If there is anything here you don't like, just say it also. As for me, my *amo* said, if there is anything I don't like, I will also say it to you. That's what she said. Okay, fine, I told her.

And you know, I just discovered recently that she and my big sister had a prior agreement that if she doesn't take to me, she will release me after one week. *Nakursunadahan din pala ako ng kurdapya ko!* Well, it seems she took to me after all, that dear boss lady of mine!

The man of the house, I have no problem with him. He keeps quiet. He also has a full-time job – they own and run a laundry. A big one in Kowloon Bay. The boss lady, she works in Fo Tan, in a boutique selling some accessories, figurine, stuff like that.

I didn't really feel lonely here. How I feel here in our village in Hong Kong, I feel like it's in the Philippines because it's pretty quiet here. Like a subdivision. My sister lives in Pristine Villa. Her lady *amo* and my *amo*'s husband are sister and brother. My big sister had been working in Hong Kong for one year already before I came.

My big sister, she already worked in Singapore before. One day, while taking a holiday in the Philippines, she came across an agency in Manila. You see, sometimes while waiting for your papers you have to stay in Manila, too. And you know, her *amo* in Singapore then was a terminator – always terminating! Well, when this *amo* in Hong Kong saw her in a video clip, there you are, she took to my big sister instantly!

It was her *amo* who said to us, I don't know what it is with you two sisters, but I feel close to you. She said that with her first few maids, the hair on her skin would stand! They gave her the creeps, and she sort of felt she couldn't really trust them! But with us, she said, she feels her mind is at rest.

What I like most about my *amo* is that she is not *palautos*, that she's not the type who is always giving orders. And you know, what's important is that you are free to do whatever you think is right. That's all.

### **They have taken a liking for me, I for them, too**

I stay in the same room with the youngest child. There are three rooms in the house. The tasks I have to do are, take care of the children, clean the house, you know. What I enjoy the most is cooking. I don't know why, but they said they really gained weight because of my cooking – they said my cooking tastes so good! Cooking, it's really cooking, ate that I really enjoy the most. Especially baking. Oh yes, how my *alaga* eat! When I see something on TV, you know, like baked potato, I'd get the idea and then I'd just do it myself! Oh, how the kids love it!

What I hate the most is their *mahjong* playing! It's just so noisy! They play mahjong every Saturday night. There's a little bit of money exchange, too. Just among their friends, you know, our neighbors around the house. All I would have to do is to boil the water for their tea and prepare the teapot, that's all. Then I would just stay inside the room, doing my cross stitch – that's my hobby, you see.

It's nearly nine years of stay with them already. How I really treat my amo, ate, is like a big sister. They have taken a liking for me, and I have taken a liking for them, too.

It was only after three years before I was able to go home. The year after I arrived, Ate went home – that was in 1996. I waited for the right moment. When her contract ended, I went home for a vacation for 18 days.

What do I miss most in the Philippines? *Halo-halo* (an iced dessert of mixed fruit and milk)! You see, the *halo-halo* here is quite different. I also miss *bibingka* (a round steamed rice cake) and all those other cakes we eat during *simbang gabi* (midnight mass during Christmas season), like *puto bumbong* (purple-colored cylindrical rice cakes garnished with coconut gratings). In those days, during the Christmas season of midnight mass, I would go to places as far as Gapan and Baliwag, in the wee hours of the morning! The *bibingka* there is fantastic! And so is the ginger tea. My Aunt had a jeep, so we would visit all those places, wherever *puto bumbong* was being sold. It is so delicious if freshly made!

### **What I did not enjoy before, I will give them a taste of it**

Here in Hong Kong, during my day off, and when I am not attending a seminar at YMCA, I would just go out at around 10:00 in the morning. At YMCA I took a course on handicrafts. I just learned of it from the newspaper. My big sister tried the computer class there. And as for me, I took up soap carving. Oh, I finished all the handicrafts courses! I don't really know what I will do with it. You know, I also enjoy sewing. I love to tinker around with my hands, you know, like create flowers, work with beads.

I really miss studying. But what is the point, I'm old already! Perhaps I will just direct these wishes towards my niece and nephew, maybe through them...you see I only have one niece and one nephew. They're my big brother's children.

My younger siblings are very grateful to me because they were able to continue their studies. You see, it's towards them that I directed my efforts. What I did not enjoy before, I will give them a taste of it. But I did not really spoil them, ate, and that's the truth. You know, it's like...if I can afford it, then fine! Well, they also know it's as simple as that. So the two younger siblings are just so happy, because my big sister and myself are sharing the responsibility in supporting them.

My parents are still alive. My father still works on the farm, and so does my big brother. Our land is also quite a size, just enough to plant rice and some vegetables. We live off the farm -- that's also where we get our food. I was also part of the farm labor in those days. In fact, when my older brother was hospitalized – you know, the one who died – I was the one who would go off to work on the farm.

People say to my mother, you're very lucky to have a daughter like her, she's always the one who is helping you out. It's like, when I finally got here in Hong Kong, something was lifted off her shoulder. You know, when I'm in the Philippines, that axe over there, that block of wood – of, I would make a go at it! All those jobs for men, I would do! I would ride on the carabao...I have so many experienced in the fields...like working on the seedlings for example. I was always my Mother's companion in her work, too, The truth is, Ate, I have also experienced toiling in the fields, how difficult it is.

Why did I decide to come here to Hong Kong? So I could help my siblings, Ate, especially the youngest one. I want them to be able to study, ate. I don't want them to be

like us who didn't finish our studies. I don't want them to follow the footsteps of their older sisters and brothers who don't have any college degree. We said to them, our parents cannot afford to support your studies, so I'll try my best so that your dreams can become a reality. So there, their dreams were indeed fulfilled somehow! One of them is now in Saudi Arabia – he's an architect, *Ate*. Our agreement is, whoever has a job already, then that person should be the one to help the others out. But I still have to help them out if their budget has a shortfall.

### **Wow, I'm free at last!**

Indeed my parents are quite lucky, but on the other hand, they lack grandchildren! You see we weren't able to get married anymore. I'm already 33 years old. I haven't had a chance to think about getting married because my dream is to support my youngest sibling in her studies first.

I did have a suitor, but I said no to him because I still have an obligation to my family. I'm really determined to support my youngest sister until she completes her studies. When she finally completed her degree in banking and finance, I said, wow, I'm free at last! Well, after that, she made another request --- she said she wants to have a Master's degree. So she's doing her Master's now, and it's been a year already. She's studying at the University of Baguio. My brother in Saudi and myself, we're sharing the costs of her education. He gives her allowance, I pay for the tuition fees. My youngest sister is really so lucky, she has everything! So we said to her, so don't ever try to hurt us...but anyway she is an obedient child.

And what do I dream for myself? The truth is, when I finally finish my contract, should there already be a special someone, you know, then I won't need to look for one anymore. I will get married and have children of my own! But if there's no one yet by that time, I will apply for a job in Korea...I also want to try being a worker again, you know, like working in a factory, making beds, and so on. I don't know why, but I want to experience it again. I really crave challenge, but, as soon as I learn all I can, then I lose my interest in it!

I once worked at Puritan Factory in Manila, but I tired of it quite easily! You know, when I have learned something already – like when I know how something is made – then I'm not interested in it anymore. I'm fond of challenges! Oh yes, you said it! Yes, my brain is really looking for some challenge, that's a fact! I'm really fond of discovering how things are made and so on, and maybe I really should have studied engineering or electronics or something like that. Well, it's true that it's still possible for me to study again, but on the other hand...I think I just want to save my money, maybe so I can set up a business in the Philippines...

### **Are you sure you can really last there that long, my child?**

You see, my parents always told us, well, you already know what is right and what is wrong. If you know you're in the right, then go on. If you know you're in the wrong, then stop. Actually, we're also very lucky to have parents like them. They don't ask for anything, not one cent! Actually, my mother was worried about my going to Hong Kong and she aid to me, are you sure you can really last there that long, my child? You see, people say that I'm a mother's girl! But I did last that long, *Ate*...

Oh, I also miss my family, *Ate*, especially in those days when there was no cell phone yet and we just had to write and write letters. But then what I always think about, you know, is our family's survival. What would happen if I go back, how can I help my siblings? What about the youngest one? That is what is always on my mind. You see, whenever I begin to long for them, to miss them so much...then I try to find a way...you know, I'd make myself busy – I'd clean the house, tinker around with my hands, do some small things, whatever I can...and that's so I won't feel the pain of missing them...

The one I always miss the most is my youngest sister – she's already 21 years old. And also my niece and nephew. My youngest sister has a boyfriend already. That's true – she might end up getting married even before I do! Just be careful, is all I said to her. No, *ate*, she said, don't worry, I won't get married yet because I haven't paid you back – you know, *ate*, she means like she's not in a position yet to help our family so that we could already go home for good. So I said to her, we're not really expecting you to pay us back – we're thankful enough that you're able to study and that you didn't have a boyfriend when you were still in college.

**She said I should use it for myself,  
So that I wouldn't have to come back to Hong Kong**

What would have happened if I continued my studies, *Ate*?

My big sister who is here in Hong Kong, she was the one who would have finished her studies – she was taking up Education and she only needed to complete a few units more. But she didn't want to continue anymore – you see, it was us she was thinking of. What about my siblings? That's what she said to herself. And that's why she decided to go to Singapore.

Yes, it's true that I could still take up my studies...but the truth is, I'm still saving some money so I can buy a computer for myself.

My *amo* said to me, until next year, only, Miriam – your contract will only be up to 2005 most likely. You know, it's because the economy in Hong Kong has collapsed and it's also possible that she will lose her job because she's not really that good in speaking English, you see. That's how she explained it to me. Okay, I said, that's fine. But your long service payment, I cannot give you 100 %, she said, because you know how bad the economy is in Hong Kong and you also know how our life is right now, she said. So basically she can only give me 50 %, she said. We discussed that already. She said, if the economy bounces back, then I will give you 100 %.

When we signed our fourth contract, she said, don't you know that you will get some money? I said, I'm not interested in the long service payment, just the monthly salary. You know, when I give you that money, that is for your future, was what she said. We won't do it in black and white, she also said, because a document can always be torn up – but you respect me and I respect you. She said I should use that money for myself, use it for my business so that I wouldn't have to come back to Hong Kong. It seems she is also preparing whatever it is she plans to give to me.

She's really good, if good is what it takes, and in terms of relating and living with her, it's okay.

I won't look for any other employer anymore. You're the first and last employer, I told her. You're the only employer I want -- I don't want to look for a 'do this and do that'! Why, is there such a thing? she asked. Oh yes, I said, there's a lot of them! They would even run their finger across the table top to check the dust, like this! Why, do people do that, she asked. Yes! I said to her, like one of your friends, the one who came here, she did that to me! What?! She was so shocked. You yourself, I told her, you don't even do that to me because you said that the kitchen is my territory. She do this to you? My *amo* asked again. Yes, I said, she do this to me. What?! So ever since that conversation she never invited that friend over to the house anymore.

We have a very good relationship because we tell each other what we don't like about each other. Just tell me, she said, open up, you should be open to me. Whatever she doesn't like, whatever instruction she gives me, like I shouldn't let anyone into the house, I really follow! I really don't let anyone in! But...when she is not around to see it...you know...but I do that very rarely, only with those whom I really trust.

I have no complaints about her – just the *mahjong* playing, that's all. But she knows that, she can sense that I don't like it when they're playing mahjong, You see, whenever they're already getting ready to play *mahjong*, my eyebrows would go up like this! You would know that the *mahjong* is starting once you hear the noise...oh, how noisy it is! It seems all those breakable things in our house, you know, it's as if they were also being shattered! Oh, it's so difficult, *Ate*, really! I would always have a walkman on my ears...

### **Don't think about those things first – just leave it in God's hands**

I would get up from bed at around 6:30 in the morning. I would start preparing my *alaga's* breakfast – fried noodles, or sometimes a sandwich. You see, they would already tell me what they want for breakfast the night before. *Ate*, I want to eat sausage, they would tell me. Whatever the kids requested for breakfast, that's what my *amo* and her husband would eat. I would never hear them ask for something else. Even coffee, they would make their own, *ate* – I would never hear a word from them. Even a glass of water to drink, they would get it themselves.

In the morning I would also prepare the school bags of the children. And then at 7:45, the eldest one who is in high school will leave. Then after that would come my little naughty one – at 8:00 mother and the little one will wake up. By 8:45, the little one will leave, and so I'll be by myself in the house. By then I would stuffing the dirty clothes in the washing machine. Then 10:00 I will be going down to town again to pick up the little one from his tutor. Then I'll go up again, and then cook up some lunch. By 12:30, I'll be free already. That's the time when I'll be doing my housecleaning, everything else. Anyway, the cleaning is quite easy to do—I'd be finished by 3:00 sometimes. Then before I would take a rest, I would prepare the dinner, everything you know. Then maybe one hour for cross-stitching. At 4:00, I'd bring down the frozen foodstuff from the freezer so I can start to cook – I'd begin with those stuff that takes a long time to cook. You see, it's hard to do things if you don't do it in an organized way.

Usually I'd be asleep by 11:00. I sleep quite late because I'd spend some time doing my cross stitch, but I'd be in the room by 8:00. By that time I would have finished everything – dishes would have been washed, kitchen would have been cleaned, everything. You see we would eat dinner by 7:00 pm. When everything else is done, that's the time I'd do my cross stitch because anyway I'd have to wait for the little one to come in. With my cross-stitch I would make some tapestries to hang on the wall, big ones!

What will I do with all of these? Well – that’s precisely what I ask myself! Just why did I study commercial baking, for example? Maybe it’s because of watching TV, seeing all those cooking shows. You see, I’ve already finished the handicrafts seminars, so...

Yes, I really need to have a challenge all the time. I don’t know, *ate*, I just enjoy it when I’m being challenged! What if I take up baking? I’d think to myself. I told my Aunt about it – well, it turned out she was also planning to set up a bakery! She said, don’t worry, I will set up a bakery...My neighbors said I’m so lucky to have an Aunt like her!

The truth is, I’m quite happy. Whenever I feel the loneliness starting to creep in, I’d keep finding a way so that I can forget the loneliness.

I don’t like problems, *Ate*. But problems will always come into our life. When I know that there’s a problem, I don’t think about it for a while. I just set it aside temporarily. I would say to my big sister, what can I do about this? And she’d tell me, don’t think about that first – just leave it in God’s hands. That’s all, *Ate*.

### **Mommy, I want this thing...**

When it comes to money, well, I’m really quite careful. We really do a budget and follow it. I don’t borrow money, every – that’s what I’ve never ever experienced in my life! I don’t go shopping, except when there’s something I really like. Usually a pair of pants, you know.

The presents that I buy to bring home to my family, well, I just get whatever they request. We would ask them what they want and tell them, so long as it is within our budget. Like the youngest one, she would say, *ate*, I’d like to have this thing...So I’d ask, what is it, just tell me. And she would say, I’m too shy to ask...Actually what she asked for at that time was a cell phone. Okay, I said. And big sister and myself split the cost between us. That’s always how we do it whenever we buy something for the folks at home. Big sister would say, little sister, you pay this part, and I pay that part. Okay, I’d say.

You see, usually when the folks back home want something, they’d say we should just buy it in the Philippines. Sometimes when my big sister would go home, she would just bring some chocolates. But when she’s already there, the kids, my brothers kids children, would say, ‘Mommy, I want this thing...’ You see that’s what they call my big sister. All right, she would say, get dressed now. Let’s go and buy it. But you see, *Ate*, the truth is, we would really prepare for it, do a budget for what we would spend for every person at home! So then we would be able to buy what they ask, so long as it’s within the budget.

### **Why don’t you find one for me!**

You know, I don’t really like joining the associations here because I don’t want to hear so many things. It’s just really me and my big sister plus a few friends we’ve made over the years here in Shatin. Like what we’re doing right now. We would just go to church, and then attend some seminars about business. That’s all, *Ate*. After the seminars, then that’s it.

Well, I’m really looking for a boyfriend, you know. I don’t have one yet. Why don’t you find one for me! What I want is...just that he will be able to secure the future of the children we will have, that’s all. That would be enough. That’s all I dream of in my life – for the future of my child – he wouldn’t have to provide for me. You see, the truth is, I’ve already prepared for my own future – I already completed the payments so I can actually go

home for good anytime now. So I'm prepared to provide for my own future, even if I won't have a husband, or even if I won't have children of my own. What I mean is I already bought myself a pension plan, *Ate*. I already completed payments for one plan – I already got the certificate of full payment! Oh, I was so happy when I got the certificate! That's all that's great about my life...

### **If you don't want to accept it, then put it in your children's name**

I am really thankful to the Lord because he really accompanied me in doing my budget and managing my finances – that's where God really helped me. Despite the fact that I was supporting my siblings through college, I was even able to buy my own pension plan! It took me five years to complete the payments – I was only 28 years old then when I started it. I only suspended the monthly payments for a while because we were paying for the vehicle we bought, my big sister and I.

We bought that vehicle from our Aunt in Gapan. Somebody wanted to buy it from her for PhP 300,000, but she sold it to us for only PhP 200, 000. We paid it in small installments, gradually. She only asked for PhP 70,000 during the first payment so that she could buy a van. My big sister and I shared the costs. And then after that we paid it in very small installments.

We presented the vehicle as a gift to our big brother. He refused to accept it and wept – really, he wept! Big brother, we said, if you don't want to accept it, that's okay – just put it in your children's name then. That was the point when we all broke into tears! Really, that's the story of our life! We gave it to him. If you don't want to put it in your name, we said, then put it in the children's name. You see, *ate*, we just wouldn't know when we get married, right? Because we're women, you know. Would we be able to help our big brother once we get married? That was what we were thinking. Would our niece and nephew be able to study then?

Okay, we said, if you really refuse to take, then it's really for the kids, big brother. We won't get anything from you. It's just for the two kids. So that was how it was. He broke into tears, *ate*. Really. Now he really takes very good care of the vehicle. He uses it for his work, and sometimes he takes it out for paid rides. The vehicle is like an FX, you know, that kind that we call XLT in the Philippines. Oh, how he cried, *Ate!* Really, he cried!

### **We told them, you should budget your money!**

People say that my siblings are so lucky. And that's because we just let them be. You know, we don't demand anything in return, or like, tell them, okay you should give me my share of the profit. No way, *ate*. What we say to them is, you should be the one to do your own budget. You should prepare for your children's future.

My big brother also considered going to Taiwan. I used to tease him – what will you do there, fish out the Taiwanese snails? But he said, little sister, I don't have any luck in going abroad. And that's why until now, he and my father are working the land together. Their harvest really increased a lot!

What we harvest is really enough for our basic needs, even more than enough in fact. But actually, in the old days it was not like that. We even had to buy rice from other sources. Imagine, we had our own farm and we even had to buy rice for ourselves! But thank God, that's not the case anymore. Our rich neighbors – you know how it's like in the *barrio* – they're the ones who come to us now. I don't know why! That's what puzzled us last time we went home. My mother said, didn't you know that our rich neighbors are now buying

from us? They were the people who really had money then – you know what it's like in the barrio – you know they were those who would never run out of food, who would always have a stock of rice. If they run out of rice in the house, they just needed to send someone to get some more. But now, they run to us. That's true. But we really wonder why.

What we harvest should be enough to support the children through college. We really planned it in a way that we would have savings – the rice we need every month, we'd set aside. We told them, you should budget your money – for example, you should calculate how many sacks of rice you will need for the whole year...

**Those precisely are the savings I have!**

This is where I learned how to do a budget, but attending these seminars about business in Hong Kong. I am really able to apply what I learned. You know, I even attended a seminar on how to raise poultry! Sometimes I'd say to my *Ate*, it looks like I'm just wasting my money on all these seminars. But actually I really learn a lot.

Sometimes I'd tell myself it's not too late for me to study again. I will really do this, Lord...

Yes, *Ate*, the truth is, my brain really looks for some more stimulation. Sometimes I think, if I saved all these money I spent on seminars, I wonder how things would be like – but then on the other hand, if I didn't attend these seminars, then I wouldn't have learned a thing!

That's what I really want to do when I finally go home – take up some classes on computer. You see it's too expensive to do it here. *Ate*, when I do go home, I will visit you and let you taste my *pinakbet*!

What I want to change in my life is ...people say I'm rather aloof. So that's what I want to change in myself. But I also tell them, my aloofness is within reason you know.

But what I really, really want to change in my life is, I really want to have a family of my own. That's all. Two children would be enough. And that is the truth...that's what I want when I finally go home. But people say, it will come when it comes.

The truth is, *ate*, sometimes I wonder to myself, what would have happened if I had just saved my money. But then I say to myself, if somebody ever asks me what savings I have after all these years in Hong Kong, I would just simply respond, well it's my siblings college education! It's my big brother's vehicle! Those precisely are what make up my savings.

## APPENDIX E

My dream is not impossible to achieve!

### The Story of Rosario

I am Rosario, 42 years old. My father is a mechanic and my mother is just a plain housewife. We are five children, and I am the second child. Among all the children, I'm the only one who finished her studies, and it's because my father did not have a stable job. I was able to enter the University of the Philippines (UP)<sup>120</sup> as a student in 1978 because I qualified under its democratization scheme – as you know, it's for the scholars, they said. I completed my studies and earned a degree in Bachelor of Science in Biology Science. And naturally, since we are seven children all in all, I also needed to find a job. So right after I finished college, I took on a job at UP as a research assistant for almost two years. The RA was on contractual basis only. After that I resigned and joined GABRIELA<sup>121</sup>, and became the Secretary General of GABRIELA (provincial chapter in Panay) from 1986 until 1990.

When I was a student, I joined the League of Filipino Students (LFS)<sup>122</sup> from 1981 until I graduated. I was active in the student movement then so when I finally graduated in 1983, my graduation had been long overdue. You see, when I was in LFS, there was a time when I went into full-time organizing of students, so I had to extend my graduation.

#### **Our education is really just for the privileged students**

You see it was the time of martial law then. But when martial law was lifted in 1981, many organizations emerged in UP. And naturally, it was the peak of student struggles. So maybe that's also why I could comprehend the situation in the country – and that's because I also come from a family that's struggling for basic survival, and my consciousness was raised through the popular education that we were given at the LFS – which addressed questions like, what is the real situation in the Philippines, and what should be the role of students. Or why it is that there are only very few students who are able to finish their studies, and why it is that most of the students who are able to graduate are only those who come from the rich families. That's also where I learned that our education is really just for the privileged students. It is such that those who come from rich families, they're the only ones who are able to study in good schools and whose parents are able to support and sustain their studies. It is such that those who come from the poor...well, naturally, it will be difficult for them to compete with those coming from more privileged families. So that is how life is.

So actually, while I myself was studying, I was also involved in organizing other students. So in those days, when the political life in the Philippines was so unstable during Marcos' time, there were really many students who were attracted to join organizations and mass rallies. So before I was able to finally graduate, I had already been involved in LFS as a full-time student organizer.

I grew up in the province of Panay. But when I was a student, I was able to travel to many places. I finished secondary school in my hometown – at the national high school in

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<sup>120</sup> Reputed to be the most prestigious state university in the country

<sup>121</sup> GABRIELA is a national network of women's organizations

<sup>122</sup> League of Filipino Students is a militant mass organization fighting for education and political reforms in the country

Cabatuan, Iloilo. Yes, I graduated with honors. From among all the children in my family, I was the only one who finished college, and it's because my father really couldn't afford to support our education. Actually I was able to study college only because I qualified for entry at UP. If I hadn't qualified, for sure, I wouldn't have been able to study at all. You see, my father is only a mechanic – and how much would he earn, do you think? It wasn't even enough for our food, no? The only good thing is that all of us did go to school. No one had to stop just in order to let the other finish. No, it wasn't like that in our family. If you really want to study college, well then, you'll just have to find a way to support your own studies. That's because what my father could only afford was to send us to high school, because public school was free, was it not. And also, we only had to walk to the school from our house.

My father didn't really get mad at my joining the LFS. At first he didn't really have an idea what LFS was, but then they would also get some news. You see, they also knew what was happening in the city, and also, in those days, I began to go home quite infrequently. So they were also wondering why, in the beginning, I would go home regularly every weekend when I was a student, then all of a sudden, I would go home very rarely. When I finally explained it to them, my father didn't have any comment. Maybe it's because he also could understand why I decided to join LFS. I also explained it to my siblings. Actually, the ones who had reservations about my joining a student organization were my uncles who were in the military. I had two uncles who were in the PC<sup>123</sup> then, and one of them was even in the special forces. So naturally they knew exactly what they were doing to the student activists during the time of Marcos.

I first had planned to take up BS Statistics, because Math is really my line. But then when I was in high school, someone offered a medical scholarship to us. So when I took up the offer, I applied for BS Biological Science<sup>124</sup> in UP. I was able to finish that scholarship after all. The scholarship was given by an American doctor who was my foster parent. But I didn't proceed to medicine proper anymore because as I said I needed to find a job after graduating in order to help support my siblings' education.

So after I graduated, I immediately took on the job of research assistant. And one other reason why I liked that job is because it enabled me to stay at UP. In those days, you see, it was very difficult to enter UP. So it served a double purpose for me – I was still in UP and at the same time, I had an income as well! At least I was able to help my siblings – one of them was able to go on to second year college, and the other one was able to reach first year college. But they weren't able to complete their studies. Because after that, I went on full-time organizing work among women. And that's why I joined GABRIELA then. Well, there was no income in GABRIELA, instead just a small allowance.

### **I was really challenged by the situation of women that I saw**

I got married in 1986. I met him at an NGO there because he was one of those who were conducting training seminars. He was also an activist then. We ended up with three children. But it was really my husband mostly who raised the children because during that time we were just in the initial stage of setting up the Panay chapter of GABRIELA. So the center of my preoccupation and attention during that time was really GAB. Naturally, there were many training seminars I had to go to and which took place in Manila, or many meetings. So that's where I really focused my time and attention – you know, it was like, you're a mother

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<sup>123</sup> Philippine Constabulary

<sup>124</sup> BS Biological Science is usually taken up as a preparatory degree for entering college of medicine.

who just gave birth to your children, you know like, you don't really neglect them but you don't really see them frequently....

What we were organizing then in Gab were the women in the urban poor communities, and also those in the peasant sector, plus those in the professionals and the students as well. It was also during that time when one could see the momentum of the organizing work among women in different sectors, especially after 1985, after the UN recognition of women's rights and welfare. And that's why many women joined the organizations, became members of organizations. And naturally, in order to provide services to these organizations, and to help the women organize themselves, we had to give them some training. So that was what we were doing, giving them trainings about how to organize themselves, engaging them in some educational activities to inform them about what their rights are, about the situation of women. You know, society really has to know about the situation of women in different sectors in the Philippines – such that one can see that here are the women, we need to recognize their rights, their contribution to the development of society....

Actually, I was really challenged by what I saw in the situation of peasant women – they have such a big contribution to production, but it is not recognized. The housewives have a big contribution to our labor force, but the work of a housewife is not recognized as productive labor in our society. So I thought it would be better perhaps if this was given attention to. So there, that's how it was.

That was like the driving force behind me, because I could see the same situation in that of my aunt, my mother, and it was as if there was no recognition for what they were doing. For example, what about housework – how does our society view it? If there were no housewives, well, our society will not really move, will not?

Even among the students, as women students, I could see that we're also marginalized. Women are really a marginalized sector in our society. So maybe that's why it was a driving force for me. Actually, I was the one who really made the choice to go into the work of organizing women.

### **We also had problems in the marriage Because my husband's work also suffered**

The truth is, I didn't develop a close relationship with my children. My husband no longer works with an NGO, and maybe it's also because he became preoccupied with taking care of the children, with our children. My eldest child is now 17 years old, the second is 13, and the youngest is ten. When I was with GABRIELA, I had only one child at that time. You see, it also had an effect on my, you know, the fact that I wasn't close to my children anymore...when I was at home, my child would look for his father. He was close to his father naturally because they were together all the time, Yes, my eldest child is a boy. That also pained me! But the way I also see it is, it also has something to do with how the child is raised, and how one explains it to the child. Like, how one explains that, if I'm not there with him, this is what I'm doing. It's really hard, you see.

My son's first three years were okay because even though we seldom saw each other, he wasn't living with my father's family. But when his sense of curiosity was developing already, we were living with my husband's family. You see, my son had a difficult time trying to adjust to moving from one house to another because before that we were just renting a house in the city. If you're an activist, there would be times when the situation would be 'too hot' so you would have to keep moving from one house to another. So there were times when we would just leave him sometimes at the day care. There at the day care,

they would see to our son. So it was like that. But the atmosphere at that time was better than when we stabilized our home in my husband's family.

We also had problems in the marriage because my husband's work suffered. You see when I was not around, naturally he had to stay behind to take care of our child. And when we had no one else to look after the child, naturally he was forced to do it. Of course it's not possible to leave the child behind all the time. In my family's case, the people there are too...you know...it's like, our son is also influenced by the thinking and culture of the people around him. It also makes a difference if the child is with us.

We have a day care at GABRIELA and that's where we would leave our children whenever we had to go to the field areas, to the villages.

**I told her, maybe she could find an employer for me just so I could pay off my debts**

After I finished my work with GABRIELA, I joined an NGO for the peasants, but we concentrated on organizing peasant women – that organization is called *Amihan*. I was the education officer and project coordinator of Amihan during that time.

In 1994, my father underwent a surgical operation. He had to go through surgery because of a stone in his gall bladder duct, and that's why it was difficult because he had surgery two times and the expenses were huge. I shouldered most of the expenses they were all loans! My debts then amounted to more than PhP 65,000 and that's why I couldn't pay them off. That was an enormous amount of money in the Philippines in those days! Because I couldn't pay it off, I talked to my sister who was working in Hong Kong then. I said to her, just so I could pay off my debts, perhaps she could find an employer for me. You see she went to Hong Kong in 1992.

I had borrowed money from the office, from my other comrades. I really had to pay them back because the money was for the allowances of other people. I was also paying it off, but perhaps it would take many, many years before I could complete the payments! You see, how much was my allowance then? It was not even enough for my own basic needs! So I had to make a decision, and I also said told my comrades. Actually it took me almost one year to make the decision, one year of contemplating on whether I would come here to Hong Kong or not. But you see, it was absolutely necessary for me to pay off the debts. It was being taken out of my allowance by installments, but it was not really working out. At that time my husband was also a full-time organizer so I really had no other way to pay off the debts.

It was really such a big change in my life. That's why when I came here, sometimes I also thought about that...but you see, that was really an enormous amount of money in the Philippines, those debts I had to pay back...so what else could I do?

Yes, it's true – I really thought long and hard about it – what are really my priorities in life? How would I really be able to pay off those debts if I just stayed in the Philippines?

Actually, I was able to work at the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics from 1990 to 1992, as their Marketing Information officer. The salary was rather high. But during that time, you see, I gave birth to my second child, and that's why our expenses also shot up. It's also because our eldest child was already going to school. But while I was working there, from 1991 to 1992, I still continued my organizing work among urban poor communities. So I moved from GABRIELA to the urban poor organizing, then from urban poor to peasants' organizing. It was like that.

But the truth is, if only I didn't have debts to pay, then I wouldn't be forced to come to Hong Kong. You see, even when I was working in the NGOs I also had some extra income from part-time research jobs. I had a part-time job at that time, working as an interviewer for a social science research institute of a college. One other thing we did was to evaluate government projects. So the pay was quite big and it was really a big help to us.

### **My husband was not supportive of my coming to Hong Kong**

So I finally made a decision. Actually, my original plan was just to stay here for two years, and that's why I returned home in 1997. But the problem was, I was not able to 'unite' my husband with the idea of my coming here just for the purpose of paying off the debts which I incurred on account of my father. Naturally of course, since we have differences in our notions of giving help to our family, perhaps he could not comprehend me, or he understood me but denying it to himself! You see, of course, the matter of helping your own parents is a matter of personal responsibility. So he really absolutely did not agree to my coming to Hong Kong. If it was just us, with our subsistence level of income, well, that was just okay for us. In fact we were even able to give some help to our parents. But then, I was also determined to pay off my debts in my own way. And also, you see, my father's medical expenses did not end there – in fact he needed another operation. So it was really still necessary for me to help him with his next operation.

You see, I am closer to my father than to my mother. I don't know why. But ever since I was a child, I grew up with my grandmother, the mother of my father, You see, my mother came from a family that was relatively well-off. In contrast, my father was really very, very poor, really poor. And that's why my father was not very close to my mother's family. And maybe it was because I was close to his mother, and also because among the children, my father felt closest to me. So it was like that.

When I first came here in 1995, it was just really work. From 1995 to 1997 – that was one contract. During that time I would also do some part-time work for others. I did not have any organization here. And my employer was also all right.

Actually my employer offered to renew my contract before I went back home, but then I did not come back to Hong Kong. You see during that time, my husband didn't really want me to come back to Hong Kong. Perhaps it was also because he also needed help in taking care of the kids. On his part, he feels that if I am just coming here to Hong Kong to look for money, only to find work just because my father underwent surgery, well, by that time my father had already recovered. If we're just in the Philippines and if we just live a simple life, well, we wouldn't be in want. You see I could also look for a job there – I received so many job offers then!

But you see, when I returned to the Philippines, I went back to peasant organizing. And that's where we had our conflict because he had already disengaged from movement organizing at that time. He already left the NGOs where was working. You see we already had three children at that time and he wanted to give full attention to his children. He went into farming. Actually, his family is relatively well off. Rather like rich peasants. The land they owned was rather big. Well, yes, they were really more landlords!

He and his brother alternated and took turns in farming their land. Well, during that time, they gave him his full turn and let him do the farming. You see, he didn't take his turn to farm for quite a long time when he was a full-time organizer. So it was only lately when

he gave attention to the farm. Actually, they had farm workers, so their earnings were really quite big, especially given that the salaries of the workers were quite low, and given that their farm was fully equipped with the necessary machinery. They planted rice and, as an in-between crop, watermelon.

So when I returned home in 1997, my husband's expectation was that I wouldn't be going back to Hong Kong anymore. But he never expected that I would go back to peasant organizing! We didn't really have a leveling off of expectations and that's why when I went home, we quarreled a lot. Actually, he didn't have any questions about the political issues. He was even supporting movements by giving money, offering the use of his house for meetings, giving donations in kind, like that. But he was no longer really involved politically. You can see that the characteristics of his 'class' are really making a comeback, isn't it? So there.

### **I was 'lost' in those days**

And since I did not join any organization here in Hong Kong, I was really 'lost' in those days. But my comrades in the Philippines really continued to update me so that I wouldn't be totally cut off from the mainstream of the movement. You see it was only much later when I established links with the APMMF and the MFMW. And it's also because in those days, it was really quite 'chaotic' here in Hong Kong. I didn't know whom to approach.

You see, my employer wasn't really... well, you know, the way she treated me wasn't really like treating a domestic helper. She always told me, you should treat us as sister or brother. And that's why even at home, we called each other by first names – there was nothing of this "sir" or "madam"! Actually, she was my sister's employer before, but my sister eventually went to my *amo's* sister. My *amo* could be considered as a middle income family. She was able to complete her education and now works in the insurance field. That's also why I always see her relating to other people, all kinds of people. Actually she's also able to relate with domestic helpers.

My work at home is 'all-around.' In the early years, they only had one child. So my work then was mainly tutoring their child. Our house is quite small and they don't really demand that I do housecleaning. They don't also demand that I prepare the food. And that's why I still don't know how to cook until now! The woman is an insurance agent, and my male *amo* is a civil servant. There was really a time when they were studying. So what we would do was, I would help them with their lessons. With their thesis. You see, my male *amo*, he is not very good in English. So he would explain to me what he wanted to do. And then I would do it. And then I would explain it back to him. What we would do, my female *amo* and myself, we would teach him. You see he would have presentations to make, you know? And that's why our relationship is also quite good. Actually, with all their homework, their papers, I helped them make all of them! (laughter)

### **There was no big reason for me to return to Hong Kong, But I felt suffocated by my relationship with my husband**

My employers are really quite liberal with me. When I had meetings to attend, they would allow me to go out again. Actually, they really wrote me to convince me to return. At that time, in 1997 when I went home, my relationship with my husband was really rough. There were so many things we were quarreling about and that's why we were no longer....He was questioning me about my schedules...like that.

There was really no big reason for me to return to Hong Kong but I felt suffocated by my relationship with my husband. So it was emerging as one reason for me to return to Hong Kong...so I could have some breathing space. I didn't want to stay there for the meantime! You see we were quarrelling all the time...

Yes, I do have some space here in Hong Kong which I don't have over there. When I came back here, I made sure that I really found a link with a group so that I could continue my activist work. You see I cannot really abandon that. What I experienced in the past, you know, those two years when it seems that I was not doing anything here in Hong Kong, of course it was just like...you know, it's as if your life, the life you had since you were in college, until you came to Hong Kong was about organizing people, and then suddenly for two years you didn't do anything, you didn't organize anything?! What a waste of time!

So that was all there was to it. I told him that I couldn't give up what I was doing. Of course I couldn't compromise my principles just so I could conform to the life he wanted to pursue. He wanted me to look for another job... to go home after 5:00 pm, to help the kids with their studies... to cook dinner... Well, during that time, I would go home only after one week, sometimes after two weeks. That's why I told him I would think and reconsider our relationship, but that this wouldn't be an obstacle to my activist work.

When I finally came back to Hong Kong, it was already 1998. I had been in the Philippines for one year and eight months. I went back to the same amo. They had hired someone else, but when I finally said yes to their last letter to me, they terminated the other maid.

When I returned to Hong Kong from the Philippines, I immediately got in touch with the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers (MFMA). I arrived in October. And soon, in November, we started organizing the Filipino Friends, whose members are mainly Ilonggo-speaking. The January after that we already had the assembly. And then the whole process was set into motion and I didn't stop since then!

### **Perhaps as his way of rebelling, he engaged in womanizing**

Yes, I'm happy here, but then on the other hand, my husband and I separated. It was in January 2001 when we separated, and I had been back in Hong Kong for more than a year by then. It was I who asked for the separation. You see, perhaps as his way of rebelling, he engaged in womanizing. The money I would send, he would spend on others – and naturally it had a bearing on our misunderstanding. As for me, that is not the way to face the problem because anyway, you see, I would go home every year. But we also didn't really talk to each other. The only thing we would talk about was the question of the children – their financial needs.

Actually, he did have a history of womanizing, but we were able to arrest it in the past. But you see, in the past, I didn't give it too much attention. So this time, I was thinking that he was just wanting attention – so I thought to myself, so you need attention, huh?

When I first broached the idea of separation, he tried to use the children as an argument against it – he'd say, why should we separate, what about the children? He couldn't accept it when I first presented it to him because it seems it was already a habit on his part not to take me seriously. And also he's not really...he's not really sorry for what he had done. He tended to direct the blame on me, that it I was I who had inadequacies. He said he was trying to understand my situation but that it was I who was not including him as

part of my plans in life. Those were his sentiments. At first he didn't take me seriously – he thought it was just all talk on my part. So it was like that.

But I really stood firm on my decision. And for me, it's a question of commitment and trust in a relationship. Infidelity, you see, is not just a prerogative of the male. Even a woman can engaged in it, can she not? So there.

And because my children were close to their father, their father would really show them what he was doing. You know. He would even introduce his own children – he wouldn't introduce her as his girlfriend, but later on, the children found out that she was actually his girlfriend. In addition to that, he also began to stay away from home. When he were still together, he would never do that, he would never leave his children at home. Whenever he would go out, he would always make sure that he would be home by five o'clock so he could cook for his children. But later on, what happened was...what happened was there would be several nights when he wouldn't come home.

### **The children know that I did not fail them**

Of course, the children know that I did not fail them. I always talked to them. If ever it was possible for me to go home, I would really try to go home if I could. You see it wasn't just the financial needs that I tried to respond to, but also the need to really talk to them. Even just on the phone, we would engage in lectures about their lessons in school, you know, just so they could see that despite the fact that I was far away, I was still attentive to their needs, that I was still fulfilling my responsibilities to them. They could really see that, you know.

So later on the also got angry with their father. They still live with their father, because we have no choice, you see. But I also developed the eldest one so he could Be responsible over his two younger siblings. He is also the one whom I send the money to. He's also the one who would go to meet with the school authorities whenever his siblings have problems.

But their father continues to perform his responsibilities. Actually he's trying to make up right now because he noticed that his children are no longer as close to him as before. So he's trying to make up. But you see I also told the children that, actually it's just me and their father who separated. He is still your father, I told them. He is still the responsible person who is looking after you, especially whenever you have problems, I said. All the things you need, you should tell him. Even when they have to go out of the house, or spend the night in someone else's house, I would still refer it to their father. You see it's difficult if you don't know the situation over there, so it's really much better if...

Actually, their father and I are better friends right now. I can see that it's much better to develop that kind of relationship with him, rather than quarelling with him all the time when you know that as a matter of fact he's the very person who is looking after your children! So there.

Migration really exacts a huge social cost. You see that's what happens to many families. It's just like that.

**They don't really ask me to come home  
Because they know what the situation is like over there**

My decision is still to stay here in Hong Kong. My eldest child is already in college, studying computer engineering at St. Augustine, a private school. If I'm just in the Philippines, I wouldn't be able to send him to college. He still want to study, so one needs to let him study. That is still quite possible perhaps, for so long as I am here. But I also explain to him about the instability of work over here. They don't really ask me to come home because they know what the situation is like over there.

My son was a member of Anak Bayan, an organization for the children of comrades over there. At least he was able to attend some study sessions. But when he was in college he couldn't sustain his involvement anymore. I told him, if you don't want to be a member of any organization, that's okay. I used to tell him that I wish he would be a member of the League of Filipino Students (LFS). He didn't want to. That's okay. At least there are people who can talk to him. Actually, if it were just up to me, I wouldn't be able to continuously talk to him, explain the situation to him and so on. I have friends over there who really took the time to talk to them, to visit them in the house. So it's like that. And I still go on trying to explain to the children what my situation is like over here so that they know...so that they know the difficulties in my work. You see it's not all the time that work here is easy. There are times when your relationship with your employer is also difficult you see ...

**Whenever the child's grades are bad, they ask me questions**

What I really find difficult now is my employer's demands about their children's education. You see their elder child is already in high school. Naturally they expect that since English is the main medium of instruction, I will take care of it and they will only tutor him in Chinese. I have to do the tutoring when it comes to other subjects. Well, the child is very hard-headed! So whenever the child's grades turn out to be bad, they ask me questions. It's like that. It's true. And that's why it's difficult for me.

Also, the younger one is still very small. My amo, she even gave birth to a second child – her elder one was already quite big and she even had another one! Well, ever since the second one was born, the little one stayed with me. We share the same room. So whenever the little one was sick, I had to do everything. The little one is almost three years old now. So you see...you know...it's really hard to do everything at the same time.

But the only good thing is, they don't really demand any housework from me. I would still do the housework whenever I have time. But when I would say that I wasn't able to cook, my amo would say, well, then let's eat out! So it's really the elder one's studies and taking care of the little one that's important for them. Actually they also give a little extra for the tutoring. You see I also told them that it's okay for me if there's a lot of work in the house – just don't make me tutor their child who is so hard-headed! I also told them that.

Actually, before I arrived, they hire one tutor. They paid a big sum to the tutor – well, you know, the extra pay they give me isn't even one-fourth of what they paid the regular tutor! Indeed they pay a little extra for me for the tutoring, and whenever their child is studying, then I just don't do any housework in order to help him out – it's just like that. But they relieve me from housework whenever I have to do the tutoring. It's as simple as that – our arrangement is that simple.

Yes, my relationship with the children is okay because I practically raised them. The only thing is, it's really difficult to motivate them to study, it's really difficult to tutor the kids!

### **We need a lot of speakers!**

The organization I belong to right now is the Filipino Migrant Workers Union. I'm currently the Vice President. The main objective is to protect the rights and welfare of the migrants. And of course, the empowerment of migrants, political and economic. The way we see it is that empowerment is done mainly through organizing the migrants – because it's only through this, when they are united, that the strength of the migrants can be felt. Like on the wage cut issue, for example, and other issues as well. Especially now, we are tackling the omnibus policy of OWWA, which we don't think should be implemented because it is not responsive to the migrants' needs for services, but instead is a form of exploiting the migrants.

Of course we also undertake campaigns on issues here in Hong Kong and issues in the Philippines. We launch training programs and leadership training activities in which we explain why the Filipino people are migrating. We discuss that in the migrants' orientation program. And of course, skills training for speakers. We need a lot of speakers!

In addition, of course, we also engage in solidarity actions with other migrants here in Hong Kong. We help them out, too. You see, it's not just as Filipinos who are oppressed here. It's not just us who are being marginalized in Hong Kong, but other foreign domestic helpers as well.

What I enjoy the most, what I find most challenging is precisely the task of organizing the migrants themselves. It's because one learns so many things. The problems they face. The conditions they find themselves in. And how one could persuade them to join organizations. You see that's not easy at all! That's the most difficult part. But you see, once you've explained to them what your organizations aims to do and what the benefits are to the members, what the role of members is in developing the organization and in responding to the needs of the members, then it's actually easy to convince them to join. And of course, the initiating of educational activities. That's what I really enjoy!

Well, with my employer, the work that I enjoy the most is helping them out with their studies, and with the studies of the children. Just don't ask me to cook! Yes, I'm not really fond of cooking. So my amo always says, ah, let's just eat outside! Actually I also got used to that – to eating out – so until now I still don't know how to cook!

### **So long as it's not study time, it's okay for them if I use the telephone!**

Don't I ever get bored?

You see, what we do is, during Sundays we're already hanging out at Bus 13. You see that's the place where the Ilonggo-speaking people always hang out. And of course, since I am an officer of the organization I help make sure that our activities on for the whole month are worked out well. And we have activities every Sunday. So the follow up work – how you arrange the logistics to make sure the activities push through – you do all of that during weekdays. So that's the important thing for me, because my amo is very liberal about my use of the telephone.

So long as it's not study time, it's okay for me to use the telephone. And as long as it doesn't conflict with the homework I have to help them out with. The note that they always tell me is that, whenever you are engaged in some work, just don't use the telephone because it will divide your attention. But that's really true, isn't it? You won't be able to concentrate, your work will be affected...but otherwise, it's okay for them....

So those activities we have every Sunday, we'd prepare for them beforehand. We would set them up from Monday to Saturday. Whenever we have training sessions, you know...we would set up the venue, call up the participants, ensure the attendance, preparing the visual aids ... all of those things have to be done during weekdays. So I don't really get bored. It's not even enough! The time we have is not even enough....

And also, my amo doesn't engage in verbal abuse. Really, that's never done in our house. If there is anything that they don't like about you, well, they really talk to you and tell you that they didn't like this or that. And if they don't have time to talk to you, well they write you a letter and you really have to respond to their letter!

**You would prefer to overcome your own suffering  
Just so you could fulfill the financial needs of your family**

Yes, it's really a viable option if you can find a good employee...you see there's really no option to find a good job in the Philippines and to have a stable income like one has here if you go home. It's also because there is no certainty about employment over there. That's why we don't really entertain the thought of going home for good. Even I myself, I don't really entertain the thought.

While my children are studying, their financial needs are rather big. Actually I am remitting almost PhP 12,000 per month. And they still find that inadequate. It's just for the very basic needs. It's like that. If your amo here is good, then you won't really think of going home to look for work over there. You would prefer to overcome your own suffering – your suffering from being separated from your family, from being far away from your own children, you know your own emotions and feelings – you would rather overcome all these just so you could fulfill the financial needs of your family. It's like that.

So I'm not really thinking of going home for good. Actually it's still within the context of my financial needs and the fact that there are still so many migrants who need to be organized here! And also, our organization is just beginning to gain momentum. So it's like that, you see.

**You see, one's sense of fulfillment is relative**

I don't really think of having regrets about not pursuing studies in medicine. You see, the cost was really huge. When I decided not to go into medicine proper, that was when I went into full-time activism. I don't really regret that at all! Actually, in those days, when you are a student, your idealism is really very intense!

Do I not yearn for intimate relationships? Actually, even when I was with my husband, I wasn't really that kind of a very sexually active person. Maybe I'm really abnormal! I'm not really abnormal, don't you think?

Because you see, I don't really think of those things. You see, when you are thinking of a lot of things, when you are constantly thinking of what you're going to do next Sunday, and your mind is preoccupied with it, and your mind is full, well then you don't really think of those things like relationships. Naturally, among women friends there is a lot of bantering about it, and of course, one also gets to joke about it, how can one not join the bantering, don't you think?

But do I feel fulfilled as a woman?

You see, one's sense of fulfillment is relative. On my part, the moment when I realized that this way is not the right role of a woman, well that's really a big leap on my part. You see, there's a big realization on my part that women have a big role to play in our society – her role in our own development – and this should be given attention.

So on the whole I'm okay. I already feel fulfilled – that I even gave birth personally, and that I am also fulfilling my responsibility to the children. I also look at the question of equality between men and women in terms of our roles in society – one should not be more superior than the other. So there.

And I also try to convey that to other women by carrying those principles in whatever I do...you see, what's the point of having good principles when you don't apply them to your own practice...if you don't then they don't have any meaning.

**The biggest challenge is how to convince them  
To take action on their own problems**

One thing you have to deal with is the reality that Sunday is really the only rest days for the domestic helpers. So many of them just sit around, hang around. So that is the biggest challenge you face – how do you convince them to take action on their own problems. You see, most of them are already overworked, have very little sleep, have little food to eat...and of course the problems in their own family which they have to deal with constantly!

You can't really avoid the social cost of migration....problems with husbands, with children...you are always confronted with that when you work with migrants. But if your organization is responsive to their problems, then it's easy to convince them to join the organization.

But then you have to have a lot of patience. Since they live and work here, then their income is bigger than what they were used to. They're lifestyle also changed, even if in the Philippines they come from peasant families. They're lifestyles really change! So you have to employ different approaches in migrant organizing, different methods....

Is it not that in the Philippines, the peasant families that they come from, the lifestyles are different because there we don't have fixed incomes. But when you're here, we have a fixed income. Sometimes, what they think is, when they have a fixed income, it's enough for them to send money home, to be able to call up their families, you know...that's enough for them. But to engage in other activities, to be involved in demanding an answer to their problems on wages, rights protection, well, those are not their priorities. And that's where the organization come in...to explain precisely what are the rights and welfare of migrants that need to be protected – our rights and welfare – and what else we ourselves can accomplish when we are united in struggling for those rights and welfare.

But it's still easier to organize our compatriots who come from the workers and the peasant classes. In the first place, the peasant class, you see, have already been rather politicized in the areas where they come from. While the workers, on the other hand, are really more advanced in their thinking when it comes to political issues. They're really the most active ones. It's really easier for them to comprehend the situation in the Philippines.

So you see, you have to employ different treatment and methods in organizing among the migrants who come from different class backgrounds...

**My greatest dream is to help in organizing my fellow-migrants...  
That's not really reaching for the stars, isn't it?**

There are also a lot of problems. For example, there are some organizations who lost some members. That's what really happens when the organization doesn't have any activity and when the basis of unity is not clear. You see many of the organizations are town-based. There are only a few political organizations here in Hong Kong. And many of the organizations are also only at the level of savings-oriented, in the sense that they think that so long as they can save money, they will have some money to use as capital when they go home. But what happens is the funds disappear – funds that were invested and managed by others! That's the problem – many people go into income generating projects in which the orientation is not clear. It results in mismanagement. For example, I know of an organization who was under the AMC (Asia Migrant Center) – and they focused on savings, but there was no feasibility study.

On our part, we put our socioeconomic projects on hold for the meantime, because we believe their orientation is really wrong. In 2000 there was a group that left AMC and came to ask help from MFMW in order to set right their orientation. So now they are just beginning to recover...

What are my dreams? Well, of course, as a mother, my dream is just for my children to finish their studies – but the truth is, even if they don't finish their studies, that's fine. You see I don't believe in education anymore because even if you finish your college education you won't be able to find a job, anyway. For me, so long as you are educated...that's all. Because for so long as the political and economic situation in the Philippines doesn't change, the Filipino people will really continue to migrate and will continue to be on the move....

So you see, when it comes to dreams, for me, it's not really like the others, you know, like dreaming of having a nice house. Because you see I already have a house. And actually, I can also live anywhere!

But what I really dream of is to be of help in organizing my fellow migrant workers and in raising their political awareness. That's really where my attention is focused right now – to multiply the members of my organization. That's not really aiming too high, isn't it? It wouldn't be like reaching for the stars! It is not impossible to achieve – it can be done!

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