

Ang Nawalang Ilaw ng Tahanan:

Examining the Lived Experiences of Filipino Women in the Live-In Caregiver Program

(Trans: The Missing Light of the Home)

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ABSTRACT: The Philippines belongs to Southeast Asia and is rich in natural resources. However, it remains a developing country, with globalization and neoliberal policies weakening its economy and damaging its environmental resources to prioritize foreign interests (Velasco 2002). With a lack of national industries, the Philippine government implemented a labour export policy favourable to developed countries such as Canada, whose demand for domestic work, childcare, and eldercare expanded. In the 1980s, Canada's Foreign Domestic Movement (FDM) Program allowed migrant workers to gain permanent residency status (Velasco 2002; Cohen 2000). FDM was replaced by the Live-in Care Giver (LCP) Program by 1992, and during this period the Philippines became among the top sources of labourers to Canada (Bonifacio 2008). The seemingly mutually beneficial set up between two countries inevitably treated human beings as commodities, the labourers also racialized, thereby devoid of rights typically afforded to other migrant workers of European descent. The migration process was also gendered since most caregivers were women, depicting a feminization of care work. This paper sheds light on the experiences of Filipino caregivers who worked under the Live-In Caregiver Program. It utilizes an intersectional framework to examine the interlocking issues of race, class, ethnicity, and gender and how these became tools of oppression for these Filipino women.

KEYWORDS: Philippines, Neoliberalism, Live-In Caregiver Program, Canada, Migrant workers, Careworkers

The Philippines' Labor Export Policy

With the rise of globalization and neoliberal policies in the 1970s, the Ferdinand Marcos regime implemented the official labour export-oriented strategy—the State Migratory Apparatus (SMA) – accelerating the outmigration of Filipinos through government ministries and agencies (Velasco 2002; Malek 2021). Whereas the devaluation of the Philippine peso, high inflation rate, poverty, and lack of job opportunities were the push factors for the Filipinos to emigrate, the SMA made human resource export the temporary solution to rampant unemployment and a revenue source through remittances (Velasco 2002).

Although the Philippines is rich in natural resources, the absence of national industries has urged the government to dehumanize its people into movable commodities. The Gloria Arroyo government also actively encouraged Filipinos to work abroad, painting them as cheap labourers preferred by countries such as Canada, whose policies focused on importing domestic workers through the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP) in 1992 (Velasco 2002). However, research suggests that the LCP led to victimization because of poor working conditions and abuse. Thus, this paper investigates the experiences of Filipino women caregivers, beginning with a brief background of Canadian immigration policies and the LCP. Most importantly, it uses an intersectional framework to analyze the oppression experienced by these women because of the interlocking disadvantages caused by gender, race, class, and ethnicity.

Canada as an Ideal Migrant Destination

Like the United States, Canada has historically outsourced its labour force from different countries to sustain its economy. Immigration policies initially prioritized Western Europeans, particularly the British and the French, because others like Italians and Jewish people were not considered White at the time. They were still preferred, however, compared with Asian people and Black people placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Kelley and Trebilcock 2010). In the prairies, advertisements about moving to Canada spread throughout Europe, with promises of free lands. As preferred races, Ukrainians and the Irish easily moved to Western Canada to establish homesteads (Kelley and Trebilcock 2010). Similarly, politicians such as Clifford Sifton and Frank Oliver deemed Asian people and Black people unassimilable and undesirable (Kelley and Trebilcock 2010)

Immigration eligibility adapted according to the needs of the economy through the years. Chinese workers were in demand when the Canadian Pacific Railway was being constructed due to their work ethic and cheap costs, but its completion spelled the end of their immigration with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1885, illustrating the state's intention to halt Asian resettlement (Kelley and Trebilcock 2010). By the early twentieth century, the economic growth of Europe disincentivized White migration to Canada, forcing the Canadian state to implement legislative changes and open its borders to more people of colour. Furthermore, the number of female migrants caught up with men following the Second World War due to increasing demand for nurses and domestics (Boyd and Pikkov 2005).

Canadian immigration reforms in the 1960s “removed the overt restrictions based upon race and geographical origin” (Malek 2021, 3), boosting the number of Filipino immigrants in Canada. Many of these migrant workers were women, filling positions in health care, education, and garment factories. By the 1980s, Canada implemented a new immigration scheme: the Foreign Domestic Movement Program (FDM), which doubled the approval of temporary work visas (Bonifacio 2008; Velasco 2002). The cession of Spain of the Philippines to the United States turned the US into the country's new colonial master until 1946. As a result, Due to colonial ties with the United States, Filipino and English are official languages in the Philippines, giving its citizens an advantage over other nationalities. At present, Filipino communities are most significant in four major Canadian cities: Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and Winnipeg (Malek 2021).



The Canadian state attempted to implement several policies to help newcomers settle and adjust to the foreign environment. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) offered four main settlement programs: the Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program (ISAP), the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), the Host Program, and the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) for refugees (Bonifacio 2008). These programs were not maximized to their full potential, especially since new immigrants faced accessibility issues. Nonetheless, Canada offered a chance for migrants to get permanent residency and citizenship. The job opportunities were sufficient for the Filipino people who had failed to secure employment back home. Canada was an alternative to the United States—it was an ideal migrant destination.

The Live-In Caregiver Program

In 1992, the LCP replaced the FDM to meet the increasing demand for childcare and eldercare among the middle-class (Cohen 2000). The program permitted caregivers to apply for landed immigrant status after living with their employer for at least two years; however, this time requirement was deemed exploitative as it placed the worker in a vulnerable position (Velasco 2002; Malek 2021). Although the LCP enabled more foreign workers to come to Canada, these women had to obtain both a ‘visitor’ and a ‘potential immigrant’ designation to prove that they would not stay in Canada permanently. In line with this, the LCP contributed to familial disruption and fragmentation unlike other immigration schemes because it effectively prevented family members to move to Canada at the same time as the caregiver (Cohen 2000).

Bonifacio (2008) and Ty (2012) highlight the gendered aspect of the immigration policies by describing how the undervalued feminized nature of work targeted women, thus explaining the discrepancy between the two sexes in terms of the number of work visa acceptance. Gendered work was also racialized because spouses of those considered skilled, mostly White immigrants, were allowed to join them immediately through work permit grants (Cohen 2000). Hence, an intersectional framework reveals how Filipino women were recipients of caregiving jobs due to their femininity, while their precarious working conditions were legitimized and considered acceptable as people of colour. It became normal for Filipino women as members of a racialized minority to be separated from their families. They were treated as less deserving of companionship, their positions relying heavily on discriminatory procedures. The restrictions painted a jarring picture of exported and dehumanized labour force without family and community ties.

The government introduced changes to the program in 2014. However, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper cancelled the LCP in 2019, citing claims that the program had become a pathway to family reunification instead of a means to strictly import cheap domestic workers (Malek 2021). The decision cemented the vision of the Conservative government. They had no business looking after the welfare of racialized foreign workers.

Filipino Women’s Experiences as Caregivers in Canada

Research on the LCP has been popular throughout the years, but Malek (2021) cautions that existing literature has presented these women as a “victimized population” (17) without any agency. Nevertheless, the findings of previous studies remain credible and valid. The LCP was supposed to be a ticket to a better quality of life, yet the reality on the ground was much harsher.

Precarious Working Conditions

First, Filipino live-in caregivers were required to stay with a designated employer for at least two years, making them susceptible to abuse and exploitation (Malek 2021). The power imbalance persisted since their shelter depended on the employer, who could easily change their mind and terminate their contract. The work-life boundary was blurred because they were sometimes requested to do jobs outside their obligations, such as housekeeping. These women chose to endure, unable to complain and demand the enforcement of employment standards for work that was deemed ‘private’ or ‘familial’, and in fear of getting fired and deported (Velasco 2002; Malek 2021; Cohen 2000). As a result, they did not have the same working hours as a regular employee, and their wages were usually below the minimum wage with no benefits. They also faced physical violence, sexual harassment, and no overtime payments (Bonifacio 2008).

Filipino women whose contracts get terminated sought help from their social networks. Permit processing took at least three months, and these caregivers had to look for another employe (Bonifacio 2008). They usually got assigned to a new residence, depicting a precarious status (Bonifacio 2008). In addition to the sudden uprooting of their current lives, they suffered from impending homelessness and the inability to fulfill their roles as breadwinners.

Recruitment Agencies

Of interest was the role of recruitment agencies, which required expensive placement fees in exchange for their services (Bonifacio 2008). Many of these agencies were situated outside the Philippines, such as in Hong Kong or Taiwan.

These brokers were unreliable and merely added to the burden of the caregivers, especially since they did not offer support when employer abuse occurred (Bonifacio 2008). They encouraged them to suffer in silence or risk deportation. In short, recruitment agencies focused on profiteering at the expense of migrant workers.

Mental Health Issues

The prolonged separation negatively affected these Filipino women's mental health and strained their relationships with their nuclear families. "Mothering from a distance... [had caused] helplessness, regret, and guilt for mothers, and loneliness, vulnerability, and insecurity for children" (Bonifacio 2008, 33). These mothers were penalized, incapable of watching their children grow and be part of the most important milestones in their lives, reinforcing feelings of isolation. Instead, these women were encouraged to believe they were 'one of the family' at work, compelling them to participate in psychological and emotional labour (Cohen 2000). However, the employer's house, as both their shelter and workplace, provided enormous pressure, for they were under constant surveillance (Davidson 2012).

Effects on the Family

Another unintended consequence was the transfer of care work of their own children to a sibling, a single parent, or relatives. As these caregivers' children grew older, maternal affection came from somebody else, resulting in estrangement. Sadly, the LCP ensured that caregivers would face as many hurdles as they could by requiring them to prove their financial security to sponsor their dependents (Davidson 2012). Poor working conditions crippled these women on top of having to send remittances to their families. The chances of them meeting the threshold were low.

Furthermore, family reunification did not always end happily as the effects of fragmentation trickled in. Some couples eventually separated because of the tension caused by the separation or wage differences (Cohen 2000). Women continued to earn more because the newly arrived men did not possess the same language skill level, challenging the traditional roles of husbands as providers. Other factors also included affairs, jealousy, and indifference.

Coping Strategies

To cope with isolation, caregivers sought refuge in meeting with friends, families, communities, and religious organizations. Filipinos are predominantly Christians, specifically Catholics; hence, the Sunday worship services became a space for them to connect (Bonifacio

2008, 38). They found a sense of belonging and access to information through these informal networks. They also associated with their agencies to help them adjust to the foreign land, illustrating their ignorance of migrant assistance services from the Canadian government (Bonifacio 2008, 33). Moreover, the requirement to live with their employer reduced accessibility, since they mostly had to work while these services were open for business (Bonifacio 2008, 34). For those who were aware of government assistance, they assumed their problems (i.e., termination, abuse, shelter) to be unsolvable by those in power, so they reached out to their circle of friends, community, or family (Bonifacio 2008, 40).

Deprofessionalization and Post-LCP

Several human rights groups organized protests to end the program due to discriminatory regulations that intensified deprofessionalization. The Canadian government preferred Filipino women because most were university and college graduates, yet many live-in caregivers were licensed nurses who were prohibited to work in healthcare. Velasco (2002) claims that "[the Canadian government] want[ed] to keep skilled and talented immigrant women in a trap, where their labor remain[ed] cheap and flexible" (134) by not recognizing their foreign credentials while setting high standards for immigration. Canada operated at a loss because it failed to maximize these workers' skills despite shortages in healthcare workers. In addition, these caregivers could only take non-credit courses while in the LCP, impeding their chances to upgrade and meet Canadian standards after they exit the program (Davidson 2012). Overall, the structure perpetuated poverty and lower quality of life because racialized immigrant workers were barred from entering the white-collar labour market.

Lastly, the LCP resulted in racist stereotypes against Filipino women being only capable of domestic tasks in contrast to the early years of immigration where many came to work in health care, clerical, or garment industry jobs (Ty 2012). This prejudice resulted in difficulties to advance to a different career and find a professional job because years of their relevant experience had become insignificant (Davidson 2012). For previous caregivers, upward mobility was challenging, and nearly impossible as Canadian employers looked for experience in Canada. The LCP was a vehicle for preserving racial and social inequality by establishing a system of 'othering'; it successfully reinforced the invisible line between 'us' and 'them.'

Conclusion

The story of the Filipino diaspora must consider the context of global inequality. The outmigration was a result of interlocking issues of unemployment in the developing homeland and the economic needs of the developed foreign country. Both governments sowed benefits from one another, but in between were human beings treated as commodities. Without strong industries, the Philippines chose to split families apart, while Canada accepted the trade, exerting minimal effort to support family reunification.

Despite the stories of labour exploitation and abuse, some caregivers had positive experiences with their employers (Malek 2021). Canada remained a better option than the Philippines because of its relative economic prosperity and higher standard of living (Davidson 2012). However, these do not erase the discriminatory and precarious working conditions many suffered. The Canadian state failed to support these live-in caregivers after using them as a band-aid solution to the absence of universal childcare and eldercare. The consequences of familial separation were placed on these long-distance mothers to bear as the government deemed “the former life of a domestic worker...irrelevant” (Cohen 2000, 82).



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