

# THE PLIGHT OF FILIPINO WOMEN IN JAPAN: LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE PHILIPPINE EDUCATION

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(Received September 28, 2001)

## Abstract

The recent decade has shown the overwhelming number of Filipino migrants around the globe. Japan in particular is noted for hosting a great number of Filipino workers especially women. The lure of high economic expectations prevails upon them to seek greener pasture at the expense of rooted socio-cultural demands. This being the case, the study seeks to examine the issues, trends and challenges facing the Filipino women "entertainers" widely known as "Japayuukis". This study sifts the underlying experiences of Filipino women in various situations and examines the related educational challenges within the gamut of impinging social, economic and cultural realities. The primary aim is to examine the corresponding issues related to education in terms of policies, reforms and empowerment efforts for women.

The study argues that, to transform the current labor flows of entertainers to Japan, first, the Philippine society through its educational system must re-examine the neglected key cultural values in the current times that have led to intensification of labor migration. Second, a globally aware, relevant and quality education must be produced in the country so as not to enable the future generation of women to become vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. These arguments are conscious of the realities that perpetuate labor migration to Japan such as high under-employment, unemployment and endemic poverty in the Philippines.

Key words: Filipino, Women, International Migration, International Marriage, Education, Poverty.

## Introduction

There has been an increase in number of Filipino migrants to Japan in the last twenty years. The majority of them are women (Filipina)<sup>1</sup> working in the night clubs. They are referred as "entertainers"<sup>2</sup> however, a large number of them are forced by circumstances to go out with customers as prostitutes. Hence, the term "entertainers" was juxtaposed with "Japayuki" (Japan bound)<sup>3</sup>, which is associated with sex industry or prostitution. Eventually, the Filipinos, Japanese and others have commonly aligned "Japayukis," "entertainers" and "prostitute" all together indistinctively. Filipina entertainers are thus inevitably generalized and carry the defiling label, "Japayukis". Consequently, the Filipinas are marginalized within the context of the Philippines and Japanese societies.

Many Filipinas prefer to work to Japan due to the lure

of high economic gains and due to the sense of social and geographical proximity. Their stories have been the focus of several studies however, not many have taken the approach of integrating education in the analyses of the plight of the diasporic Filipino women for poverty alleviation.

It is within this broad context, therefore, that this paper intends to (1) examine the dynamics that have led to the increase of Filipina entertainers to Japan; (2) highlight the number of problems confronted by the Filipina "entertainers" in their struggle for poverty alleviation; (3) explore the related educational challenges within the gamut of impinging social, economic and cultural realities.

## Research context

My examination of prior works has led me to raise

several questions. First, given the different levels of educational attainment (i.e. high school level, undergraduate, collegiate level, college graduate) of the Filipinas, what are the compounded reasons for working as entertainers? Second, what are the problems that they have encountered in their living and working conditions? Third, given the experiences of the Filipina entertainers, what can be learned from them and what are the challenges posited for the Philippine educational system?

## The Study and Sample

With these questions in mind, I conducted fieldwork in the sub-urban area of Hiroshima Prefecture (Saijo) and in the city of Hiroshima, Japan. 30 questionnaires were floated around and 3 in-depth interviews to Filipina entertainers were conducted. Filipinas who were interviewed are married to Japanese and have stayed in Japan for a long period of time. Some of those who answered the questionnaires are young, married to Japanese and less educated while some are educated, not so young and still married to Japanese, some are still working and some are plain housewives. In addition, there were some impromptu interviews conducted during chance encounters.

## The Flow of Filipina Entertainers to Japan

"International migration flows are almost invariable from poor to richer countries, and particularly common where source and receiving areas are geographically proximate" (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992, p. 7). The relationship between Japan and the Philippines illustrates this pattern.

Majority of the Filipinas who work as entertainers in Japan, were generally motivated by a strong sense of concern for the welfare of their families and for social and economic mobility. They all hope that their lives will be improved socially and economically upon coming to Japan. Most of them are not able to respond to those concerns due to the rampant (un) under-employment and due to the low wages they have in the home country<sup>4</sup>.

High expectations as to the benefits of working to Japan are earnestly considered as realizable due to the good stories and experiences of those who were able to alleviate their families from poverty. Filipinas who

decided to work as entertainers to Japan are "dazzled by stories of fat earnings in Japan by returning Filipino entertainers, many families are, in fact, led to expect a quick deliverance from their economic woes by the anticipated earnings of their daughters, sisters, wives or mothers. Such pressure from the family back home can be so compelling" (David, 1992; Tigno, 1993).

The entertainers' primary reason for working in Japan is to alleviate poverty and they juxtaposed it with marriage. Some of them put the latter as the primary goal in order to achieve the desire social and economic mobility.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this, there are those who come to Japan due to hopelessness, boredom, lost of interest in living in the Philippines hence, they take the risk of working as entertainers. They have been thinking that they can never reach the economic and social mobility that they are longing for if they will stay in the Philippines.

Their decision to work as entertainers is typically understood as a reaction to the living/working conditions in the Philippines as well as to the expected living and working conditions in Japan. Therefore, from this perspective, "migration...is not only a personal decision but also a decision due to the failure of development policies to provide adequate living and employment (Lane, 1992; Tigno, 1993).

## Filipina Entertainers in Japan

The Filipina entertainers have experienced malign treatment not only from the Japanese community but also from the Filipino community in Japan and in the Philippines. In Japan they are castigated because of the nature of their job and because of the widely spread or publicized conception of the image of the Filipina entertainers. "Magazines, tabloids, and newspapers voluminously disseminated allegories of 'Japayuki' as 'immoral', linking sex work and criminal syndicates operating in forced prostitution" (Sharaku, 1983; Suzuki, 2000). These images have also reached the Philippine society and other countries as well. "Spectators voyeuristically assume the term 'Japayuki' is a euphemism for 'prostitute' and that all 'entertainers' work in the sex industry" (de Dios, 1992; Matsui, 1995; Tyner, 1996; Suzuki, 2000). In reality, there are those who work in the night clubs as *mere* entertainers who facilitate *social* intercourse, but not necessarily commercial sex

work. There are certain types of establishments that include sex as part of their service but there are other night clubs wherein the entertainers merely entertain their clients with frivolous conversations.

The Filipino in Japan (non-entertainers) have mixed feelings towards the entertainers. Being in Japan, non-entertainers know their plight, and understand them to certain extent but at times they are considered to have brought disgrace to the Filipino in general.

In the Philippines, entertainers from Japan are marginalized and castigated despite their contribution to the Philippine economy. The Filipinos in the Philippines believe that they are defiling the Filipina image. They are considered to have stepped out of their gendered niches and hence, stigmatized. There are some appropriate gender roles and demeanors that are completely missing to them. They have lost the sense of being *mahinhin* (demure, virtuous), a characteristic that represents the Filipina womanhood. *Mahinhin* is a description of a woman who preserves and upholds the moral values. The Filipina entertainers from Japan are deemed to have surrendered their values for materialistic gains. They may have alleviated their families from poverty but they are sanctioned by society through various social mechanisms.

Behind smiles, frivolous and hospitable gestures are complicated stories, pain and miseries in their plight for poverty alleviation. They have been compounded with problems even before they come to Japan and after they came. There are some who are lucky to have achieved their goal. There are those who are currently satisfied with their condition but are not wholly content in the longer term.

One has disclosed to me that several Filipinas have suffered from cultural disorientation. Marriage with a Japanese is a heavy endeavor because they feel that they are housemaids rather than housewives. The seen affection prior to marriage had lost. A battered housewife narrated:

*I decided to leave the house together with my two children. I rented another apartment...I have the ability, I'm educated, I'm good in Japanese...I know I can support my children...these are what I had in mind when I made a move. Then I decided to ask the help of a volunteer Japanese organization regarding my condition. I came to know the organization because of the leaflet I received along the way... I approached them to seek their help on*

*the protection being offered by the government or any institution for women like me (personal communication). I asked her, "Why didn't you approach the Filipino Non-Governmental Organization or the Philippine Embassy?" Surprisingly she responded:*

*Being in the sub-urban area, I do not know if there is such an organization nearby, probably there is one in the city but I've never heard of such. If there is, I would think twice if I will ask for help. I don't think they will extend their help much as the Japanese NGO does. Yes! Some Japanese may have put us in contempt but Japanese have willingness to help...help in the real sense of it. Even the Philippine Embassy is not sympathetic to our plight - they are not even friendly to us...entertainers.*

Given this case, it is important for Filipina entertainers to know their rights and to know the institutions or organizations where they can seek help. "There are some of 20 or so major NGO's and NGO networks serving most of the areas that are highly populated by foreign workers in Japan. Most of these non governmental initiatives are undertaken by church-related and church based groups which offer counseling, legal assistance and emergency refuge"(Tigno, 1993, p. 71).

There are some cases wherein married Filipinas are still working in the night clubs. They prefer to work and they are allowed to work by their Japanese husbands as entertainers or as *mama san*<sup>6</sup>. Although they are apprehensive on how their children would think about it and could be the possible cause of bullying among children, they can't help it because of the following reasons:

*My husband does not give me enough money. He has some vices to sustain at the expense of us, his family.*

*I still need to send money to the Philippines.*

*I need to save money for the future. I will soon be old and I want to spend my ripe age back home where people are much caring. I have children here but as typical Japanese, I know they will leave me when I grow old...or maybe they'll put me in a home for the aged.*

The above is a picture of unfulfilled dreams, expectations and a continuous plight. Although they are married and are staying in Japan, they have not reached the economic and social mobility that they really dreamt of. They are still in the night clubs although they are aging. They were once subject of scorn and are still. No one could blame them if they still want to go back. There are others who prefer to stay in Japan due to the following reasons:

*I have my family here, my children are still young and they are Japanese.*

*I have been used to the way of life here, if I will go back, I think it will be the same. I maybe having difficult times here, for sure I will have there back home, maybe even worst.*

Obviously, hopelessness in having a good life back home is conspicuous.

I also tried to ask some questions related to their working condition when they first came here. Those who finished a degree, consider the high earnings that they have in Japan than they had in the Philippines. Although the education and the training that they had do not correspond to their work in Japan, they are somehow satisfied with their earnings. Both the educated and the less educated have been trying to endure or tolerate even the exploitative and inhumane working conditions and treatment due to the desperate economic needs and the long and costly process of getting a job abroad.

The plight does not stop there, when these entertainers return to the home country, they become the subject of

scorn. They are not considered as "*nagpunta sa Japan* but *nagputa sa Japan*"<sup>7</sup>. Aside from this, others have considered them as "*balikyabang* rather than *balikbayan*"<sup>8</sup>. They are not only stigmatized in the Japanese society but also in their own country.

## Two Cohorts

In the course of in-depth interview and through the gathered information from the questionnaires, two cohorts of Filipina entertainers were revealed. The older cohort is considered as the Pre-transitional or the "mere entertainers" and the younger cohort is the Post-transitional, the period when Filipinas are aligned with prostitution and are called as "Japayuki". The former are those who came to Japan 20 years ago while the latter came 10 years ago.

The table below summarizes the experiences of the two cohorts, the pre-transitional and post-transitional Filipina entertainers and their perspectives on working in Japan.

Pre-transitional Filipina	Post-transitional Filipina
Educational Attainment Professionals/College Graduate/ Undergraduate	Undergraduate/High School Graduate/ High School
<p>Perspectives towards work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Entertainers are those who dance, sing, serve drinks and chat with male customers.</li> <li>-They feel that they are respected and they have a sense of respect to themselves as well.</li> <li>-They do not feel that they are looked-down by the Japanese.</li> <li>-They <i>may</i> have been rare cases of prostitution.</li> <li>-If they go out with customers, they end up marrying them soon so they don't tend to go out with different men.</li> <li>-Filipino values are operative in dealing with customers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Aside from the mere entertaining they are forced by circumstances, they go out with different customers.</li> <li>-Prostitution became rampant and deem as ordinary, normal and part of the job.</li> <li>-They do not feel the sense of respect coming from the Japanese and Filipinos.</li> <li>-They feel lucky if they end up marrying the customer their going out with, especially at an early stage.</li> <li>-Deception of customers seems to be part of the game.</li> <li>-There are Filipino values that are neglected and considered as irrelevant.</li> <li>-Aim is to get material gains no matter what it takes.</li> </ul>

## **Relationships of Educational Attainment and Perspectives Towards Work: In Brief**

How is educational attainment of the Filipina linked to perspectives towards work and lifestyles in Japan? First, those who are educated know how to put limitation to their jobs thus gain respect from their co-workers and the Japanese community. Second, education enables the Filipina to deal with the different kinds of people in a professional way. Third, education leads them to put into practice the upheld Filipino values.

Both cohorts agree to the fact that poverty (among other reasons) has led them to work to Japan. They both want to alleviate themselves and their families in the Philippines from poverty, but their perspectives of overcoming it (as they work as entertainers) are different. The older cohort prefers the decent and legal way whereby the younger cohorts seem to neglect those concerns. There are two seen influential factors that shape the variation of their perspectives and approaches. First, is the level of maturity, those in the older cohort came to Japan in their late 20's and early 30's. In the Philippines, their work experience is related to their educational attainment. Those in the younger cohort came to Japan in their late teens and early 20's.<sup>9</sup> They are less educated, which is a contributory factor to their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Second is the extent of poverty<sup>10</sup> in the Philippines. The younger cohort is presumed to have experienced the greater yoke of poverty than the older cohort. The period when the younger cohort came to Japan was during the time wherein the Philippines was experiencing great socio-economic and political upheavals<sup>11</sup>, hence, the deployment of entertainers to Japan started to increase. Those young Filipinas who work as entertainers find it difficult to continue their studies due to financial constraints. This serves as one of the reasons that contributes to their lack of motivation to study and instead help their families through labor migration. "In 1983 to 1987, there had been less deployment of migrant workers coming from the production sector but there was a steady increase in the deployment of service and entertainment sector to Japan" (Tigno, 1993, p.61). The Philippines is one of the top five countries in Asia who send workers to Japan.<sup>12</sup>

How do the two cohorts of labor migrants see the value of education?

According to those who belong to the older age cohort, education enables them to deal with the different types of individuals. One of whom I had an in depth interview is very much grateful that she learned English in the Philippines.<sup>13</sup> She was able to deal with the different types of customer at the professional level. She believes that her English language ability contributes to the sense of respect she earned from the Japanese and her co-workers. Moreover, those who belong to the older cohorts believe that those values taught in schools are very important to their lives. Through those values they can stand proud of themselves as Filipinas and as mere entertainers.

For those who belong to the younger cohorts, education has no practical bearing to their lives. At most, they appreciate that they have learned the basic skills of reading and writing as well as a certain level of English communicative skills. With regards to values, they have acquired it from their parents and from the experiences they had in life.

## **Reflection on the implication of the flight of the Filipina entertainers in Japan to the Philippine education**

Let me end with brief observations on the possible implication to education of the experiences of the Filipina entertainers in Japan. First, the need to strengthen the teaching of values among the Filipino students is great. This has to be done in the period of basic education since the current pattern of labor migration of entertainers to Japan reveals that girls in their teens are vulnerable and are easily lured by the bait of materialism/high economic expectations. Second, in as much as the Philippines is involved in sending labor migrants to the different parts of the world, (a way through which the economy can be sustained and developed), the quality of education must be improved and the teaching of English language must also be further improved, since it is the edge of the Filipinos in the international labor market. Third, there must be a provision of relevant and globally aware education. The educational system must exert an effort to inform the students on the plight of the Filipino labor migrants in the different parts of the world, especially in Japan. It is certainly necessary to let the students know the experiences of the Filipinas in order to provide cautionary measures.

I am overwhelmed by the alarming social, economic and cultural realities. How can we address the balance between the importance of cultural values at the height of poverty in the efforts for women empowerment? How can a balance be possible between individualism, collectivism and universalism in the effort to alleviate poverty? Indeed, to put the Filipina entertainers in contempt would serve no worth to their ailing condition/plight but instead, to understand them and know what can be done for their welfare and protection is the best way to reach them.

*Acknowledgement:*

I owe a debt of gratitude to the Filipinas in Saijo, Hiroshima and Hiroshima City for their cooperation, to Prof. Ninomiya for his concern and encouragement to pursue this paper and to Ma. Rhodora Tiangco and Eusebio Angara for their assistance in the dissemination of questionnaires.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Filipina refers to the women of the Philippines. "They have been economically active, they began to take jobs abroad starting from the 1960's"(Suzuki, 2000, p. 432). "In 1995, 52% of the migrant workers are Filipino women. In the same year, overseas Filipino workers contributed foreign exchange remittances amounting to about 7.6% of the country's GDP. Women migrants contribute to poverty alleviation of numerous rural and urban households through direct funds transfer that are used for food, education and health related expenditures"(Illo, 1997, p. xii). Despite the women's contribution to the economy, there are several and widely noted problems that are neglected by the authorities. There must be some measures for their welfare and protection. In Japan, there are several problems confronted by the entertainers/ Japayukis but they have little redress.

<sup>2</sup> Those who merely dance, sing, serve drinks and chat with male customers.

<sup>3</sup> The word *Japayuki* was coined by Yamatani Tetsuo (1985), who combined *Japa-* (Japan) and *-yuki* (to go). It is based on the work *Karayuki* (China bound Japanese prostitute women) used for women who were deployed in greater Asia before and during World War II (Susuki,

2000, pp.441).

<sup>4</sup> Women's earnings are generally lower than males but despite of that they endure the low wages, (had it been the case that they prefer to stay in the country) in order to support and to stay close with the family. Recently, the "Filipino women's participation has been increasing steadily, from 47.8% in 1993 to 49% in 1996" (Illo, 1997, p. xii). Women in the country usually work in the factory, agriculture, in some informal sector and they also enter in some subcontracting arrangements.

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that marriage is not solely restricted to Japanese but to other foreigners to whom they can achieve their goal. There are those respondents who hoped that they will be able to find other foreigners who can relieved them from their condition.

<sup>6</sup> The one who manages the bar and looked after the services/works being done by the young and new entertainers.

<sup>7</sup> *Nagputa* means went but *nagputa* means became a prostitute. The Filipina entertainers are not known merely as those who have gone to Japan but those who prostituted to Japan.

<sup>8</sup> *Balibbayan* refers to any Filipino who returns to the country but *balikyabang* refers to someone who returns to boast. It has to be noted that this is not solely a remark for the returning Filipina entertainers.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the ILO, Asian Regional Program on International Migration, *Statistical Report 1990* as cited by Scalabrini Migration Center (1992), Tigno(1993), entertainers who goes out of the county significantly increased in the late 80's. Moreover, based in the Japanese Ministry of Justice as cited by Murashita in Tigno (1993), the females who entered Japan in 1991 is ten times greater than the males and majority of them belongs to earl 20's, 20-24(43,690), while those in the late 20's, 25-29(25,830). What is significant to note, however, is that these percentages are dominated by females in the 15-19 and 20-24 year age brackets, both of which have a female to male ratio of 10.01 and 10.18, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> This is between 1985-1991 and this is much higher in rural areas than in towns and cities. In 1991 rural poor households accounted for 56% of all households; in urban areas the comparable figure was 37% (Illo, 1997, p.35).

<sup>11</sup> This is marked by Marcos regime, Marcos-Acquino transition and the Acquino regime's struggle to improve

the economy and the low exchange rate.

<sup>12</sup> There were 85,267 Filipino Entrants to Japan in 1987 and 493,751 in 1992 (Japanese Ministry of Justice as cited by Murashita in Tigno, 1993, p. 61). This is of course significantly smaller in number, compared to other Asians, particularly those from Korea and China but there has been a significant increase in number through the years and generally they are young females.

<sup>13</sup> She speaks fluent English. In the course of interview, I feel free to use English words without translating into Filipino language. My first encounter with her was two years ago and I knew then that she is an educated person. The way she talks and moves markedly differentiate her from the others.

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