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## The Impossible Choices and Sacrifices: An Examination of the Trauma Filipina Migrant Workers Face

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## **The Impossible Choices and Sacrifices:**

### **An Examination of the Trauma Filipina Migrant Workers Face**

Today, I learned that my father's aunt was a domestic worker in Hong Kong for over ten years. My father would travel to his godmother's rice farm every summer as a child in the Philippines (I guess my Lola needed her own break from my father's rambunctious antics). He affectionately refers to his godmother's sister as "Aunt Edith", as she and her sister would watch over their children and my father for the season. Upon hearing that I was going to be writing about the abuse and unethical treatment Filipina domestic workers face, my dad shared Aunt Edith's story. After giving birth to her own children, Aunt Edith realized she needed more stable income as the rice farm wasn't the most lucrative venture. She ended up moving abroad to Hong Kong to care for other children as a nanny to make better money for her own family back home in the Philippines. Aunt Edith spent most of her children's formative years as a nanny for another family in a totally different country. Burdened by intense financial need and a lack of jobs in the Philippines, she had to make an incredibly difficult choice. This is the reality for thousands of Filipina women. I never got to meet Aunt Edith, but I can recognize and respect her bravery, struggle, and power as a woman facing an impossible conflict: wanting to better your family's life and financial means in a country of deep poverty, when one of the few ways out is exploitative labor.

The International Labor Organization (2018) estimated that there are about 164 million migrant domestic workers in the entire world. Approximately 10.4 million of these workers are Filipino people, most of whom are women (U.N. Women, 2016, p.1). Filipina women face several cultural attitudes concerning family and breadwinning,

sexuality, and domesticity in addition to great financial need that often forces them to make impossible decisions. There is a demand for affordable and fast labor for healthcare and child and elderly care in the United States, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In the Philippines, a career in healthcare (especially nursing) is pushed on children due to this demand and the opportunity for more work and money. Unfortunately, countries like the United States and China are taking advantage of the nurse training in the Philippines and exploiting Filipinas for cheap labor at an ethical expense (Ferrer, 2011). Even with such large numbers and impacts, the abuse (physical, mental, financial and sexual) Filipina women face is consistently swept under the rug. Women like Aunt Edith deserve not only recognition and awareness, but change in the form of enforced labor laws, dismantling of harmful cultural attitudes surrounding Filipina women, and accountability thrust upon those who benefit from exploited migrant labor. Ripping up the rug is only the first step in advocating for financial and human rights for Filipina domestic workers.

Understanding the extent of poverty in the Philippines, the Southeast Asian cultural attitudes towards women, and the larger Western view of Asian women are the first steps in dissecting why Filipina women have to choose this lifestyle and why this abuse is happening. It is estimated by the Borgen Project (2020) that 17.6 million Filipinos live below the poverty line (p. 1) This statistic is so high thanks to low economic growth and a weak agricultural sector, two major factors influenced by the Philippines' government and current dictatorial political leader, Rodrigo Duterte. Long before Duterte's reign, there was a series of other dictatorial leaders that stemmed from a complicated history of colonialism beginning in 1521. The intersections between

poverty, politics, and access to resources have only worsened with the global pandemic, as managing a health crisis has had major impacts on employment and resources, especially with access to food. The Borgen Project (2020) reported that the number of families struggling with involuntary hunger has doubled to 4.2 million since December 2019, which demonstrates the impact COVID-19 has had on food production and access (p. 5). The financial need to provide for one's family is so strong that daughters and mothers are faced with the tough decision to make more money abroad as domestic workers. Filipina women will migrate to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, India, and Hong Kong to work as nannies and domestic housekeepers. In Filipino culture, women are already expected to stay at home to care for children, cook, and clean. There is such a demand for Filipina women specifically due to the seemingly feminine nature of this work. For instance, Filipino gender roles look down on a male Filipino being a nanny. As for nursing, men are not discouraged from this profession (my father is a nurse for instance), but Filipina women are used for healthcare labor more frequently due to their desperation for work and their skillset in this field. In an article about Filipinas in the healthcare industry, Nasol and Francsico-Menchavez (2021) write:

Filipinas are gendered and racialized as "ideal" for care work because of their "gentle and servile" nature, ability to speak English, and familiarity with American hospital systems. These characterizations are bolstered by both the Philippine and U.S. government through marketing materials, labor diplomacy, and bilateral agreements that "sell" Filipina migrants as care workers using racial and gendered tropes. (p. 8)

Not only are gender roles promoted, but in Filipino culture, complaining about hard work is considered pathetic. In an interview about Filipina domestic work conducted by Christine Joy Ferrer (2011), interviewee Katie Joaquin explains that:

In the Filipino culture, we have this 'Bahala na, Utang na loob' feeling. One believes, 'This is just how it is.' Or 'We had no work in the Philippines. We're thankful for work, even if it's bad or underpaid'. (p. 6)

This attitude of hard work is culturally ingrained in children, which they later teach to their own children. This cultural blend of excessive poverty and willingness to work hard allows for extreme exploitation.

In addition to their ethics of hard work and the gendered view of providing healthcare, Filipina women are demonized for their sexuality and treated differently than Filipino men. Traditional Filipino culture favors a more modest appearance and attitude for women. Women are expected to be beautiful and pure, but freedom of sexuality and sex before marriage are forbidden, partly in thanks to the major Catholic influence and culture in the Philippines. This is the more traditional outlook, which has experienced changes in the modern age where women pursue education, jobs, and independence. Instead of molding their identities just around family and the gendered "homemaker" role that comes with it, Filipina women have pushed themselves to pursue jobs and education opportunities outside of their home life. This is not necessarily a rejection of the family, as that is the core of Filipino culture, but rather a new push towards a more holistic self for women that does not limit their lives to only serving their husbands and male family members. Filipino culture follows a more collective approach, where family is the supreme value and always considered for the group's "greater good." In traditional

culture, generations of family will live together for years and years under one roof. When the family's well-being is threatened by extreme poverty and a member is offered the opportunity to provide, it makes sense that they would accept. The need to accept jobs overseas and sending paychecks back to the family is not new or restricted to one gender in the Philippines, but that does not excuse or justify the exploitation domestic workers are then subjected to. It is still unfair to have someone choose between poverty and starvation or accepting an unethical job that saves your family from those dire realities. In the 1940s, it was even common for Filipina daughters to be "given away" essentially as slaves (Tizon, 2017). That practice is not as prominent as it once was, but the connotations and resulting abuse associated with "slavery" still remain in modern-day domestic labor for Filipinas.

With the onset of the devastating worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the problems Filipina migrant workers face has increased tenfold. As nursing is an extremely popular career for Filipinas, the presence of a pandemic has caused the need for healthcare laborers to erupt. Filipina migrant workers have been one of the most desired groups to aid in the frontlines against disease, putting them at a higher risk for exploitation and mistreatment. COVID-19 has seen the development of intense anxiety among Filipina laborers. A study conducted by Yeung et al. (2020) focused on this exact dynamic. The research found that participants experienced a very high level of anxiety symptoms, something the participants attributed to COVID-19 fears such as losing their job, cleanliness of their workplaces, access to coping resources (for example social support groups or therapy), and increased workload due to the pandemic (Yeung et al., 2020). The virus has also exposed many workers' rights violations that Filipina migrant

healthcare workers face, something that has been worsened by the nature of the pandemic. Nasol and Francisco-Menchavez (2021) explain:

There is currently no requirement that RCFEs [residential care facilities for the elderly] must have skilled licensed staff onsite or on call as well as no staffing ratios. . . .In California, for example, the Department of Labor and California Labor Commissioner's Office have found rampant wage and hour violations. Since 2011, caregivers have filed 526 wage theft claims with the Labor Commissioner's Office. Of those cases that went to hearings, workers were found to be owed \$2.5 million dollars. However, approximately 71% of the judgment amounts due (\$1.8 million) remain unpaid. (p. 13)

The fact that this phenomenon is so overlooked and hardly spoken about contributes to this anxiety and emotional pain, especially with the onset of the pandemic. The absence of discussion, and therefore change, keeps Filipina domestic workers trapped in these environments alongside the inescapable poverty in the Philippines. COVID-19 has also put migrant workers in danger of contracting the virus as many are caring for at-risk individuals and must put their health in the hands of the patients they are working for. In fact, COVID-19 has resulted in firings and wage drops for thousands of Filipina laborers (Redfern, 2021). The pandemic has caused this phenomenon across all industries, but the unique and dire job and deportation insecurity in Filipina migrant workers' lives has been exacerbated during this period. All these factors have been magnified by the pandemic, but the abuses and mistreatment existed long before COVID-19.

The major offenses concerning the treatment of Filipina migrant workers lie in healthcare, pay, physical and sexual abuse/harassment, contract duration, and

workplace practices. In a study exploring the physical health and access to healthcare for Filipina live-in caregivers in Canada, Carlos and Wilson (2018) found that 52% of their participants worked more than eight hours each day (p. 120) and that 48% reported that being a live-in caregiver negatively impacted their physical health (p. 121). Participants noted “worsening of their diet, an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, and exposure to an unhealthy work environment” as signs of their deterioration in health (p. 121). One participant suffered from back pain as a result of having to carry her elderly patient for the day. Another complained of the negative effects her patient’s smoking had on her own health (p. 121). While some participants found being a live-in caregiver did not affect their access to healthcare, about 52% still found that their job posed barriers (p. 121). Participants noted the lack of access to transportation to visit doctors and the ability to make time to seek care in between their long work hours. One participant reported that her work schedule was from “8:00 am to 10:00 pm”, making it difficult to schedule an appointment (p. 121). Many participants in the study were also unable to receive third party health insurance for at least 3 months (p. 122), something that leaves them susceptible to injury and illness. In addition to physical health, Filipina laborers are also at risk for physical abuse from their employers. In the cover story for *The Atlantic* in 2017, “My Family’s Slave”, Alex Tizon profiles the life of his family’s slave from the Philippines, Eudocia Tomas Pulido, referred to as “Lola” (the Tagalog word for “grandmother”). She endured a lifetime of physical abuse (she often took physical punishments from Tizon’s mother), emotional abuse through verbal fights and harassment, and was never properly paid or allowed to return home, even when her own mother died. Lola was often unable to speak up because she could not speak

perfect English, had no other resources in the countries she was being moved to (mainly the United States), and zero money. Tizon (2017) describes the moment where his brother laid out Lola's situation to him:

Do you know anybody treated the way she's treated?" Arthur said. "Who lives the way she lives?" He summed up Lola's reality: Wasn't paid. Toiled every day. Was tongue-lashed for sitting too long or falling asleep too early. Was struck for talking back. Wore hand-me-downs. Ate scraps and leftovers by herself in the kitchen. Rarely left the house. Had no friends or hobbies outside the family. Had no private quarters. (Her designated place to sleep in each house we lived in was always whatever was left—a couch or storage area or corner in my sisters' bedroom. She often slept among piles of laundry. (p. 27)

Lola also filled many emotional and parental roles for Tizon and his brother. Tizon demonstrated this dynamic with many touching details, writing:

For days in a row Lola would be the only adult in the house. She got to know the details of our lives in a way that my parents never had the mental space for. We brought friends home, and she'd listen to us talk about school and girls and boys and whatever else was on our minds. Just from conversations she overheard, she could list the first name of every girl I had a crush on from sixth grade through high school. (p. 49)

Lola, and the many women like her in various working positions, leave lasting impacts on people's lives, despite the pain of their own. This speaks to the strength of family and love in Filipino culture, and how the current labor system works to abuse and exploit that to its advantage in healthcare, service, and nanny industries. While Lola's story

took place from the 1940s to the 1990s, through a multitude of different eras and cultural values, her story still rings true to the universal elements experienced by migrant workers today. As there is no union and the threat of deportation looms in the distance, a lot of physical and work abuse goes unreported and uncared for.

As for sexual abuse, offenses also go largely unreported. Referring back to the cultural attitudes about Asian women, they are demonized for their own sexuality, but are often fetishized by Western culture and white men. Asian women across different Asian cultures suffer from the ‘mail-order bride’ and ‘subservient, sexy “Anime school-girl” tropes—all wrapped into one. Nasol and Menchavez (2021) note the racialized fetishization of Filipinas as “promiscuous and dirty” (p. 11), carried on from Western colonization and stereotypes. Southeast Asian women, particularly Filipina women (depending on the region), are also darker skinned which invites not only traditional racism, but a sexualized blend where they are even more susceptible to harmful stereotypes and abuse because of their darker skin tones (Chang & Groves, 2000). Chang and Groves (2000) write:

Filipinas are held as “morally suspect” by many local residents and employers, who presume that the women have an ulterior motive in going abroad: “to find a man and obtain financial security” and Filipina domestics are thus judged and held accountable, not for the “intimate labor”, which they provide for the families of Hong Kong, but as women who leave their own families to sell their services abroad for economic gain. (p. 4)

This is a phenomenon that resonates all the way into 2021 with racist and fetishized roots. From the colonial seeds planted in 1521, Filipina women have long suffered the

unique mixture of objectification and racism that, particularly darker-skinned, Asian women face. The Philippines has also been a battleground for multiple wars, most notably World War II, where Filipina women were vulnerable to increased human trafficking, physical and sexual abuse from the opposing country's soldiers, and racist attitudes formed during the wars fought on their soil. Those cultural attitudes return home to the Western countries who have colonized and ravaged the Philippines and its people. The position of being a domestic caregiver already places Filipina women at a power struggle with the family they are serving. Coupled with the numerous sexual and racial stereotypes assigned to them, Filipina workers continue to be extremely susceptible to unreported sexual abuse.

In conjunction with physical and emotional pain, Filipina workers are also economically exploited when it comes to the duration of their work and compensation. As we saw in Lola's story by Tizon, Lola was not sufficiently paid or allowed time off, despite her physical and emotional toil. According to Tizon (2017), Lola was never under a physical contract, but was "given" by her father to a lieutenant in the Philippines in World War II. Lola stayed in this unwritten partnership due to the financial and emotional control from the family, and this is still a reality for many Filipina workers (Tizon, 2017). Katie Joaquin weighed in on the issue in her interview with Christine Joy Ferrer (2011), saying:

When you think about the domestic workers, we're talking about our mothers, our lolas. Over 50 percent of them are primary income earners. They are the ones their families rely on for money and support, and some are making as little as \$50 per a day [sic], working 24 hours. It requires round the clock focus. (p. 5)

The labor to compensation ratio is abysmal for migrant workers. There are many legal rights for migrant workers put in place, especially in the U.S. (authorized and fought for by organizations such as the United Nations of Human Rights), yet employers will outrightly abuse these. These exploitations are often overlooked due to elitist and racist Western attitudes, cultural apathy, and unawareness. For instance, a lack of legal accountability is what allows the residential care facilities for the elderly, profiled by Nasol and Menchavez (2021), to get away with underpaying and overworking their workers. The laws need to be strengthened and actually enforced. For instance, a migrant worker may legally be able to work in the U.S. or China under certain contracts, but fear of deportation keeps migrant workers silent while companies and families abuse them for cheaper labor. The waters get even murkier when migrant workers are employed by or assigned to private families through caregiving agencies. This is a huge part of the fight for not only Filipina migrant workers' rights, but the larger issue of all migrant workers' rights. Filipina domestic workers are also employed under "temporary contracts" that will eventually come to an end, and they can return to their families. However, the fragile nature of such contracts ends up putting Filipinas in more vulnerable and confusing positions. In an article about Filipina workers, Boersma (2018) reports:

Domestic workers in Hong Kong experience different temporal constraints. They are employed on two-year contracts and cannot apply for permanent residency. This is in contrast to immigrants in other jobs, who can apply for a permanent residence permit after seven years of uninterrupted residency. (p. 6)

Another temporal constraint is imposed by the “two-week rule” that is part of their visa conditions (Hong Kong Immigration Department, 2015.) The “two-week rule” is the fourteen-day period in which a migrant worker must find a new employer before they must leave China (Boersma, 2018). These jobs are the sole sources of income for these women and oftentimes their only tie and source of stability in a foreign country. Much like the conflicting distress Lola felt, Filipina laborers are forced with another incredibly difficult decision. The result is acceptance of just as shady and exploitative labor positions where more health and emotional concerns can go overlooked—all in the name of a better life that Filipina workers want so desperately for their families.

After facing all of this physical and emotional trauma of being abused by families while simultaneously being kept away from their own, Filipina workers are at major risk for mental health issues, especially PTSD, anxiety, and depression. In a recent study, researchers Garabiles et al. (2020) found that a majority of participants experienced PTSD and depression symptoms, most notably with negative thoughts, loss of concentration/focus, difficulties with sleep, and feelings of worthlessness. These symptoms are clearly attributable to the separation from family, physical and emotional abuse, the health implications from the nature of caregiving domestic work, and/or the years of forced cultural gender roles in a patriarchal society coupled with the unique racialized experience of being a Filipina woman in a vulnerable work position. Harkening back to Carlos and Wilson’s study (2018) about Filipina workers’ access to healthcare, the strongest impact on mood was the separation from one’s family back in the Philippines. Participant 12 in the study was quoted as saying, “... sometimes you cannot eat. Sometimes you cannot sleep. Thinking about your family, how they've been

doing, you know” (p. 121). All of these deeply emotional conflicts and feelings swirl together to create susceptibility to depression, PTSD, and anxiety.

Filipina domestic workers’ lives are full of incredibly difficult and painful decisions that are difficult for people who are living in wealthy countries to understand. Culturally, Asian countries are far more collective than Western typically individual countries, and family is vital to identity and life in the Philippines. Empathy and understanding are vital to the change that needs to happen. No one mobilized group can end poverty in the Philippines or reverse generations of patriarchal attitudes toward Filipina women, or the centuries of fetishized racism Asian women face in every facet of their lives, but discussion and awareness bring these issues to the table. However, awareness can only do so much. In order to enact true change, we must act upon the empathy felt for these women and translate it into action. Prominent employers of Filipina migrant workers (for example, residential care facilities for the elderly) should get spotlights shone on them in the name of accountability by the public and lawmakers. Even if you do not know a Filipina migrant worker, you could get involved in grassroots organizations, such as GABRIELA-USA (2021). GABRIELA-USA is a nonprofit run by Filipina women that works to empower other Filipinas and advocate for their rights. For my fellow Filipino, educating yourself and your family members on the traditionally oppressive attitudes towards women in Filipino culture is a part of the fight. It is just as important for non-Filipino people to check themselves when they benefit from migrant work or know others that do. The exploitation of Filipina migrant workers is a multi-layered issue, and it will not improve without direct conversation, accountability, and the

donation of time, resources, and care from privileged people who want to see real change.

For instance, I am biracial, half-white and half-Filipina. I am white-passing and have lived in the United States my entire life. This is the first time I have been fully exposed to this issue. Learning about Aunt Edith and thinking about my own Lola and titas and the incredibly painful decisions and sacrifices they have had to make in their own lives has opened my eyes. The racial and labor intersections at play in a Filipina worker's life need to be understood and respected for their complexity. We cannot effectively enact change without these acknowledgments and education.

It is important to know these statistics about Filipina workers, but bare statistics can also be incredibly impersonal. Each of those women has a name, story, and her own sacrifices she makes every day to send money back home to her children while she takes care of another family's kids in a totally foreign country for more than eight hours each day. Each woman has her own aches, her own scars, her own thoughts and longings that keep her up at night. Filipina domestic workers are not the "saints", the "prostitutes", or "greedy mail-order brides/servants" they are seen to be. It is a violation of human rights to be worked so hard, especially for such low wages, without access to healthcare, and to be in a constant limbo of deportation, in fear that they might not be able to continue working and providing for their family in dire circumstances back home. The fact that these women's hours go unregulated (and therefore abused), in some cases unpaid, and their stories of abuse of all kinds go unnoticed is unacceptable. This issue feeds into the larger stereotyping and mistreatment of people of Asian and Pacific Islander descent across the world. Migrant workers of all backgrounds deserve safer

conditions and for their rights to be recognized. There is no equitable social justice and change without acknowledging every layer of human rights violations. Filipina domestic workers are a huge percentage of that statistic of migrant workers, and they deserve justice. They come from a beautiful culture where family is more important than life itself and they will do anything to preserve that. They deserve better. They deserve to be known.

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