

Filipino maids for export

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Twelve percent of the Philippines' GDP comes as remittances from nationals abroad. Many of those are maids, sent all over the world into domestic service to support their children back home. The Philippines government is even training them in servitude

Contents

- ['Give thanks to the Lord'](#)
- [Welcome to Little Hong Kong](#)
- [A factory for workers](#)
- [Doctors, teachers, graduates](#)

Béatrice, a Franco-Belgian expatriate, lives in the gated community of Stanley Knoll, named after the explorer Henry Morton Stanley, in a house that overlooks Hong Kong Bay. She, her French husband Paul, a senior executive with a French bank, and their four children have lived here, half an hour from the heart of "the most free economy in the world" [1], since 2005. She does not have a job, but does humanitarian work for a French NGO, swims in Stanley Bay and plays tennis. They need a maid to help with their house and children. "Lennie is so devoted," says Béatrice. Leonora Santos Torres looks after the children, cooks and cleans. She is one of the 290,600 foreign maids currently working in Hong Kong. Like most of them, she lives in a room measuring less than five square metres, on call day and night.

Béatrice has not set foot in a supermarket for four years, and says she feels "liberated" by not having to do domestic tasks. She is still surprised when the maid dries her swimsuit as soon as she returns from the beach. Béatrice and Paul pay Leonora \$650 a month to be available 24 hours a day, six days a week, a quarter of the cost of such help in France. "It's \$144 more than the minimum wage for maids in Hong Kong, based on at least 10 hours' work a day," said Béatrice. They add \$80 a month for food, because Paul does not want Leonora helping herself from the fridge. "That's the law in Hong Kong," said Béatrice [2]. "\$650 is a good salary. Some expat families pay \$860-\$1,000 a month. They're spoiling the market for the rest of us."

Leonora, 47, is from the northern Philippines province of Luzon, and has a diploma in telegram transcription. She left three of her five children in the village of Calatagan in 1999 to work in Hong Kong to support her family. "Every month I send four-fifths of my salary, minus the Western Union transfer charge [\$3.5 per transaction], to pay my three children's university fees. Education in the Philippines is so expensive we have to make sacrifices." "Sacrifice" is a word you hear again and again when talking to Filipino maids. "We are usually not free to come and go in our employers' homes, the food is rarely enough and we have to be completely dedicated to the family. Many of my compatriots live in terrible conditions," said Leonora. They may be verbally or physically abused, subjected to their employers' whims, underpaid and exploited. According to the Hong Kong Labour Department, 10% of domestic workers lodge complaints against their employers every year for non-payment of wages, infringement of contract, ill treatment or sexual harassment (25,000 complaints a year). Leonora was badly treated by a Hong Kong family ("They wanted me to give up my day off") before she walked out after six months, then by a Chinese family she was with for six years, where

the grandmother used to beat and insult her. Her current employers are good to her, she said. Many domestic workers don't dare complain because they only get 14 days to find a new placement, or leave Hong Kong once a contract has terminated.

'Give thanks to the Lord'

"It's in their genes," said Béatrice, explaining her employee's devotion. "Filipino women are very good with people. It's in their culture to be devoted. And they love children. That's what they enjoy doing, because their lives are not much fun. What keeps Lennie going is her involvement in the parish." Like many Filipinos, Leonora is a devoted Christian, who "draws strength from her relationship with the Lord". Her moral code fits in well with her employers' rules: "I listen to the Lord, who does not distinguish between rich and poor." In her little room she has a computer connected to Skype, Facebook and Yahoo!, a baby monitor, and photographs of her own children. A large picture has pride of place above the computer, with the words: "Give thanks to the Lord for His love endures forever."

Every year more than 100,000 Filipinos go abroad to work in the service industry. President Ferdinand Marcos (1965-86) started exporting manpower in 1974, when the economy was derelict, and he saw an opportunity in the rapid development of the Gulf states after the 1973 oil crisis. In 1974 35,000 Filipinos found jobs abroad. It was meant to be temporary, but 35 years later this trickle has turned into a flood, involving more than 8.5 million Filipinos, mostly women — just under 10% of the population and 22% of the working age population. According to the World Bank, foreign workers contributed 12% of the Philippines' GDP in 2010 with \$21.3bn in remittances [3]. This is the fourth highest number of foreign remittances after China, India and Mexico.

Most of the permanent and temporary diaspora (of whom a quarter are illegal) are in the US, Canada and the Middle East. A million are in Saudi Arabia, even though it announced a ban on Filipino and Indonesian maids last July. Gloria Arroyo, the former Philippines president (2001-10), described them as "modern heroes". In 2006 (after Israel's bombing of Lebanon, where 30,000 Filipino workers lived) she launched the "supermaid" programme [4]. She wanted to train domestic servants "in the language of their employers" and educate them, through a national diploma, in the use of household appliances and first aid. The aim was to do away with agency fees, ensure that every maid earned at least \$400, and reduce the structural violence (economic as well as physical) affecting women. Five years later there are training colleges all over the country, but the promise of basic rights for Filipino overseas workers has proven empty.

Welcome to Little Hong Kong

"Welcome to Little Hong Kong," said Michelle Ventenilla, one of four teachers at Abest, one of the Philippines's 364 registered private training centres for domestic servants, in Manila. The small brick villa resembles a typical upper middle class home in Hong Kong, with a saloon car, an aquarium with rare fish, western-style bathrooms and bedrooms with pink curtains and bright green walls. Since 2007 Abest has "exported" 1,500 domestic workers to Hong Kong, which is only two hours away by plane. The school's fees are \$212, and it is linked to a recruitment agency.

It was the day of the final exam, and candidate number five, a frail-looking woman, sweated as she carried a porcelain tureen in both hands to the table, and then mimed serving a bowl of soup. Lea Talabis, 41, was one of around 100,000 candidates per year to take the National Certificate II exam, after 216 hours of training. The inspector from the Technical Education and Skills Development

Authority (Tesda), Rommel Ventenilla [5], watched the candidate as she performed the table service test. Talabis, a former primary school teacher who became a maid to support her family, approached her fictitious boss and asked: "Would you like some soup, sir?" Ventenilla nodded his head and grunted. Talabis hesitated — after serving him from the left, should she take the tureen back to the kitchen, or leave it for him to help himself? Confused, she lowered her eyes and put the tureen down on the sideboard.

The examiner gave her a second chance with the question and answer part of the test. Indicating the table, laid out for a typical middle class Hong Kong family with three placemats, fish and meat knives, and glasses, he asked: "How much water do you pour into the glass?" Talabis moved to his right hand side carrying a carafe, and filled his glass three-quarters full. Ventenilla validated the test and Talabis went back to the kitchen. The final part of the exam could include making the bed, washing the floor, cleaning the aquarium, ironing clothes or washing the car.

"The final mark is made up of 20% skill, 20% theory and 60% behaviour," said Ventenilla, indicating that future maids are tested less on their medical, housekeeping or cooking abilities than on their capacity to obey the rules. "We don't use the term maid any more," said Susan de la Rama, head of the programme. "We now say 'domestic helper'. We don't want the Philippines to be labelled a country that exports maids, as it was a few years ago." The second definition of a Filipino woman in the 2005 Merriam-Webster dictionary is "maid". This angered the Filipino government, prompting it to professionalise the industry.

"Many employers are looking for domestic workers who are polite, respectful, patient and quiet. Here we try to get them used to the excitable temperament of Hong Kong employers. You have to be patient, and work from the heart," said Michelle Ventenilla, delivering a key point of the super maid programme. Above the aquarium (symbol of social success within Asian families) is written the college slogan: "Cleanliness is next to godliness". On the classroom wall, a poster distinguishes winners (those who "look for solutions" and say to their bosses "let me do it for you") from losers (those who "look for someone to blame" and "always have an excuse" for not doing what they are asked). The Code of Discipline stipulates: "DO NOT ARGUE with your employer"; "Do not talk to other maids"; "Do not show a temper or long face when scolded by your employer"; "Contact your agency whenever you have problems and don't rely on your friends".

A factory for workers

There is no chance of socialism here: no union, no strikes, no political meetings, no questioning the basis of servitude. "Always be punctual", says chapter six of the manual, while the "Things Not To Do" section lists "Don't count the work you are doing".

"These schools are a disgrace to our country," said Garry Martinez, chair of the NGO Migrant International in Manila. "Every day the bodies of six to ten Filipinos who have died working overseas are repatriated. The Philippines has become a factory producing workers."

Ten years ago Talabis worked as a maid with a middle-class family in Hong Kong, but she came back "to bring [her] skills up to standard", and to get National Certificate II, which allows her to work overseas legally. She had resolved to go abroad again, leaving her fisherman husband and two children. "I'm doing it for them. In Hong Kong I would earn twice what I earn here as a teacher." She acknowledged that the college taught her to obey and submit to the boss's rules, but it didn't surprise her: "It's to make sure we complete our contracts, because we get into debt to become maids."

She had to use her savings to pay the agency fee of \$1,839, the equivalent of six months of her salary as a teacher. “I paid cash and got no receipt. The agency is approved by the department for Filipinos working abroad, but they were clear — take it or leave it. I had to pay the fee if I wanted to work in Hong Kong.” She hoped her husband and children would join her later. Her eventual aim was to go to Europe, like 10% of her fellow expatriates [6]. “I don’t want to be a maid all my life,” she said. Three weeks later, after she had arrived in Hong Kong, she said she was delighted because her employers told her to think of them as her second family. But the best thing was that the house had Wifi: “Every evening I can use the web cam to talk to my children and husband. For the moment I’m very happy.”

Joseph Law, 65, opened the door to his 13th floor apartment on Elegant Terrace, a building with caretakers and a swimming pool in Mid-Levels, a fashionable part of Hong Kong. “Elena!” he shouted to the maid. “Julien is a French journalist. He’s writing an article about the daily life of Filipino maids in Hong Kong. Go and make us some tea with milk.” Joseph showed me his shirt: “I like them well ironed, with a crease down the middle.” He flopped on to his leather sofa: “Do I like being waited on? That’s a good question. I admit I have always preferred being waited on than doing things myself. I’ve been hiring foreign maids for the last 35 years, and my favourite by far are the Filipinos. They speak better English, are less risky than the others and are generally much more devoted to their job.” His apartment and his appearance are impeccable, thanks to Elena’s hard graft. “I pay her the legal minimum: HK\$3,580 [US\$459]” [7], said Law, former assistant manager of the Hong Kong fire brigade, now chairman of the official Employers of Overseas Domestic Helpers Association, the enemy of the six maids’ unions in Hong Kong.

Elena Meredores is 51, has an 18-year old daughter in the Philippines, and has been a maid for more than 16 years. She entered the room wearing cropped trousers and a t-shirt wet from doing the washing up, and put a tray with two cups and a teapot on the table in front of her boss. After acknowledging a complaint from Law (“Next time I have guests, bring a bigger tray”), she perched on the edge of the sofa. “Why are salaries so low?” Law continued. “It’s because Filipinos like Elena have no qualifications and low skills. Isn’t that right Elena? No qualifications.” She lowered her eyes and agreed: “That’s right, sir.”

Doctors, teachers, graduates

Sensing that she felt obliged to agree with him, Law told Meredores to speak “freely”. She laughed, then said: “No sir, you can’t explain our low salaries by saying we are under-qualified or have few skills. Many of my fellow maids are doctors, teachers, university graduates, but they are obliged to become maids to support their families. And the government has created training centres to train them.” Law dismissed these schools (“They are the biggest joke, and the biggest source of dispute between employers and employees”) and asked: “Elena, I think 50% of foreign maids in Hong Kong enjoy a peaceful and harmonious relationship with their employers, like you and myself do. Don’t you agree?” “I would say 15% sir,” she replied. “No, come on, 15%?” said Law, irritated; “Be fair, Elena.” “Many employers claim to have a good relationship, but it’s a lie. They say that just to show off. Not like you, Mr Law.” He interrupted her: “Hong Kong is paradise for foreign maids. Paradise!”

When I drew a comparison between his monthly income of more than \$14,000, and his maid’s salary, he got angry. “Hong Kong is their dream location. They get an employment contract, a minimum wage, and on top of that they get room and board, plane tickets, health insurance and long-service payment after five years. The whole package costs employers an average HK\$5,500 [\$705] a month. That’s a lot of money.” He conceded that most employers were upper class, but he said giving small gifts helped to even things out: “Every year I give her presents. At New Year, Chinese New

Year...isn't that right, Elena?" Meredores recalled getting a brown envelope at New Year, containing almost \$60.

At the end of 2010 the Philippines' government announced that Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) would have to pay HK\$200 (\$25) insurance, and it intends to introduce a minimum wage of \$400 for its 10 million overseas workers. It's a proposal that angers Law: "I warn the Philippines and Indonesia: if they carry on adopting such stupid policies, and demanding higher salaries, I will call for the embargo on Chinese maids to be lifted" [8]. He has cause to be nervous: both the Philippines and Indonesia — who are the most aggressive defenders of overseas domestic workers — announced in June 2011 they intended to ratify the International Labour Organisation's convention on decent working conditions for maids. "We employers are strongly opposed to this convention, because it is impossible to count hours in this kind of work," said Law.

Early next Sunday morning, Meredores went to the Catholic church. "I'm going to pray for my family, and also for Law's family. You mustn't be selfish in your faith." Afterwards she went to the big weekly gathering of Filipino maids in the financial district, where Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) has its headquarters, between the Bank of China and Van Cleef and Arpels jewellery. Tens of thousands of maids like Meredores meet at the foot of this steel and glass skyscraper every Sunday. "We meet here because we have nowhere else to go on our day off. All week we are alone, cleaning their apartments, then once a week, we can free ourselves of our employers. That gives us our dignity," she said.

That week a fashion parade had been organised by the federation of Filipinos from Benguet province in the northern Philippines to celebrate Mothers Day. The theme was "women as daughters, wives and mothers". This promotion of women in stereotyped gender roles has led millions to become domestic servants. Filipino women in their 40s and 50s — nurses, housemaids — paraded across the podium, opposite Bank of America, hoping to win titles such as "most beautiful secretary". Fifty metres away, thousands of maids waved their Western Union flags: the company that handled most of the \$21bn sent in remittances in 2010 had organised a concert of Filipino singing stars for the Fiesta at Saya festival.

Two bronze lions flank the HSBC tower, representing the bank's founders AG Stephen and GH Stitt. The lion on the right, Stitt, has a serious expression, while the other one, Stephen, seems to be roaring with pleasure. Over the years it has become a favourite meeting place for expatriate Filipinos. "I like having my photo taken in front of the laughing lion, because it represents our hard work," said Gorgogna, who is a maid on a low salary, after 22 years in the country. The lion, symbol of employers and their wealth, has eaten well, and looks up towards the top of the HSBC tower, while at the bottom, thousands of domestic servants savour their day off. "To the Chinese, the lion symbolises money," said Gorgogna. "If it weren't for us, it wouldn't be so well fed."

Julien Brygo

P.S.

* Source: Le Monde Diplomatique (English Edition):

<http://mondediplo.com/2011/10/12maids>

* Julien Brygo is a journalist

Footnotes

[1] The Index of Economic Freedom measures 10 criteria (business, trade and fiscal freedom, government spending, monetary, investment and financial freedom, property rights, freedom from corruption, labour freedom) in 183 countries. In 2011 Hong Kong was rated number one.

[2] In fact, employers who do not feed their maids are required to pay them a food allowance of \$96.

[3] "Remittances to PH ranked 4th biggest in world", OFM Ngayon, 11 November 2010.

[4] "Housemaids to Supermaids soon!", OFMGuide, 24 August 2006.

[5] No relation to Michelle Ventenilla.

[6] In 2009, 41.7% of the 8,579,378 Filipinos abroad worked in America (33.5% in the US, 7.4% in Canada), 28.2% in the Middle East (13.5% in Saudi Arabia, 7.1% in United Arab Emirates), 12.5% in Asia and 8.4% in Europe. Source: Commission on Filipinos Overseas.

[7] The minimum wage was frozen at HK\$3,580 (\$459) between 2009 and 2011, but was raised in June 2011 to \$3,740 (\$480); it is still below the 1999 figure of HK\$3,860 (\$495) (pre-financial crash value).

[8] The British authorities in Hong Kong declared an embargo on Chinese domestic workers in the 1970s.