



The forgotten **COST** of domestic help

They care for our families and maintain our homes. Our city relies on them. But for many domestic helpers, leaving behind their own country comes with a huge trade-off. A special report from the Philippines, by Anna Cummins and Mark Tjhung. Photography by Calvin Sit

“ People thought we were rich because my mother was in Hong Kong, sending home money. My friends said I was lucky to be able to go to college, that we had a metal roof on our house – not everyone had that. I did feel like we were different from others in the village. But, I never felt like I was rich. They didn’t know how difficult it was, that I couldn’t be with my mum. They are the lucky ones, because they have a family – not like me. Sometimes, I envy them. ▶

Waiting for help
Two-year-old Jassim Laral. Her mother needs to leave the Philippines in order to earn enough money to feed her children



Missing members
The Flores family show a picture of their absent parents; (below) Ivy Brunio looks at photos of her mother, Lori

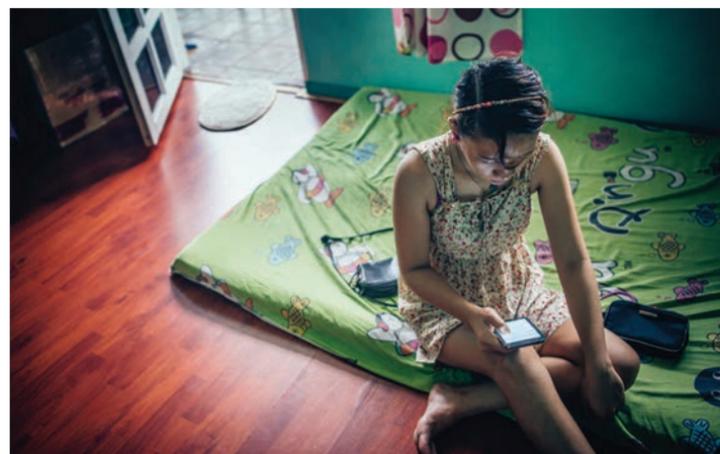
Ivy Brunio is sitting on a bench in the Mexican restaurant where she works in Central Manila. She gets her phone out and shows us a Facebook image – a recent photo of her mother, Lori, smiling in a café in Hong Kong. Ivy doesn't have internet in the small flat she shares with two friends nearby – 'it's too expensive' – so she uses the free Wifi at work when she wants to speak with her mother, something she tries to do as often as possible. They're clearly very close. As Ivy puts it, "She is my mum, my best friend... all of my decisions go through her first."

Ivy grew up in a small town in Bulan, Sorsogon, with two older siblings. When she was two years old, Lori moved to Hong Kong to be a domestic helper. Since then, Ivy has only seen her mother once every year. That was 22 years ago.

It's far from an unusual story. There are 10 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who work abroad in countries across the globe. These OFWs form 20 percent of the Philippines' entire labour force and wire home a staggering US\$22.76b every year – eight percent of the country's GDP. It's all an astonishing legacy of President Marcos' Labor Code of 1974, which promoted overseas work as a way to boost the Philippines' economy. Today, there are one million Filipinos leaving to work abroad every year, and that is rising. There are so many of them that the government has a special arm, the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration, to deal with them all. And for this massive

contribution to the country's economy the government gives them the collective moniker of 'new heroes'.

Half of the 320,000 helpers who work in Hong Kong today are from the Philippines – their good English and friendly nature make them a popular choice for families here. Despite the fact that there are regularly high profile stories in the media about helpers' lack of rights, low pay and mistreatment, Hong Kong remains one of the most popular countries in Asia for overseas Filipinos, where they generally earn several times more than they could at home. The Philippines' average salary is roughly half of the minimum \$4,010 that a helper here earns every month, and the families who make up the poorest 10 percent of



There is a sense of peer pressure to work abroad. Everyone is sending you off and relying on you to support them

the Philippines take home around \$1,000 per month per household. It's clear why people feel the need to move away.

"Women definitely get this sense of peer pressure to work abroad," says Dr Nestor Castro, chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the University of the Philippines. "There is an expectation that everyone is sending you off and relying on you to support them. Even women who are qualified teachers and nurses go to Hong Kong to be domestic helpers – they don't care about the lower prestige of the work. It's causing a real 'brain drain'."

Marian Bagdoc is a 26-year-old nurse from Quezon City, near Manila. Her eight siblings and mother sit huddled around a television – it seems as though it's the only luxury in their tiny house. Marian is the sole breadwinner. She tells us that she works 16-hour shifts in the hospital in order to earn 7,000 pesos (\$1,200) every month – and even with her credentials as a nurse, her salary is barely enough to cover the rent and her younger sibling's school fees. Her case is typical.

"We really need to explain the condition of our country. There is no opportunity here," says Garry Martinez, chairman of the NGO Migrante International, a global alliance of Filipino overseas migrant organisations. The Philippines' effective unemployment rate is high – 27.5 percent – and one in four Filipinos live in poverty. This hardship is variously attributed to low wages (the minimum wage is between \$37 and \$82 per day), high birth rates, and the rampant practice of short-term, contractual labour.

"The government wants to encourage overseas work," says Father Robert Reyes, a Catholic priest known as 'The Running Priest' who campaigns ▶

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on human rights issues. “They make a sizeable chunk of the national income. But, it comes at a very high social cost – broken families, violence, girls getting pregnant at a young age. These emotional scars, the government doesn’t account for that.”

With such a significant number of OFWs across the world, many of whom are providing for their extended family back home, the ‘social cost’ to which

Reyes refers has a considerable reach. From the range of people we speak to in the Philippines, it seems as if almost everyone has a personal connection to the OFW phenomenon. Garry Martinez, from Migrante International, is one of them.

“My wife worked as a domestic helper,” he says, sitting in the sunny courtyard of Migrante International’s headquarters in Manila. “After a year [away], she called me on the phone one morning, out of the blue, and told me she didn’t love me anymore. How can you explain that? For three years, I sent cards and letters to convince her to start again. But she had a new partner. I got angry. I became depressed. I planned my own funeral and then I borrowed a gun. I covered my bed with a big plastic sheet, I took the gun and I put it into my mouth,” Martinez says, indicating the movement with cocked fingers. “But as I held the gun, something changed. I started thinking about my daughter and I stopped. I ended up cancelling my own funeral, the coffin that I ordered. Luckily, there was no cancellation fee.”

Of course, it’s not only hard for those who are left behind. Lori Brunio, Ivy’s mother, has worked for several families in Hong Kong over a period of 22 years. She’s eloquent, friendly and spends her spare time volunteering for the Filipino community in Hong Kong. “My husband was working part-time, managing a rice field,” she tells us over hot chocolate in a Wan Chai café. “There weren’t many jobs available at home so I came here to earn money for my children’s education. The family I was working for had children who were the same age as my own. It was breaking my heart.”

Lori left her children, then aged two, four and six, with her husband. “At first it was fine. We couldn’t talk often but my family used to record cassette tapes and then send them to me. They wouldn’t even always be talking, it was just the sounds of them singing or cooking or playing. I’d listen to them and it would make me happy.”

But, after a few years, the problems started. “He started going out with his friends, being drunk and eventually started having affairs,” says Lori. “My sister told me what he was doing. Even my children knew about it. It got a bit... chaotic. Stupid man.”

At this point, Lori made a surprise visit home. “When I saw my husband, I gave him a slap. He told me he wouldn’t do it again. What could I say? I didn’t know what to do, because if I stayed in the Philippines, I wouldn’t be able to give ▶



A country in flux
Clockwise: Domestic workers in Hong Kong transfer money back home; religion and whisky make a contrast; Filipinos waiting to submit paperwork at the Overseas Employment Administration; Ninita Laral and her grandson Neil

“**Foreign domestic work comes at a very high social cost – broken families, violence, girls getting pregnant at a young age**”



“**At first it was fine. But then my husband started going out with his friends, being drunk and eventually started having affairs**”



Keeping it in the family
Agencies seeking domestic workers in Manila; (above) men are often left to care for their children alone; (above right) Lori Brunio logs onto Facebook in her employer’s flat in HK



Leaving home

The Philippines is a leading exporter of labour



US\$22.76b

Last year, 10m Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) sent this much money back to their country



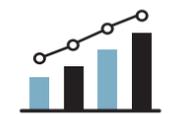
320,000

domestic helpers work in Hong Kong. Half are from the Philippines



4th

Hong Kong’s ranking for number of Filipino domestic helpers, after Saudi Arabia, UAE and Singapore



27.5%

The effective unemployment rate in the Philippines



\$4,010

The minimum salary for a helper in Hong Kong. That’s double the average salary in the Philippines.

a good education to my children. I had no choice, even though I was hurting,” she says. “I had to come back to Hong Kong, for my children.”

Lori’s husband left the house four years ago. “My father is a womaniser,” says Ivy back in Manila. “At first, I hated him for it but after a while I realised it’s his loss, not ours. I don’t have any idea where he is any more.”

Lori’s sacrifices have, of course, led to an improvement in her family’s situation. Ivy and her siblings were all able to attend a private school. Ivy went on to study computer science and hospitality at college – something she would not have been able to do if her mother had stayed at

home. “My mother told us that she needed to leave because of our future. Education is important, and unless you have a very good job here, you can’t afford it,” Ivy says, wiping away tears. “But I always missed her. I remember she missed my first menstruation. In our culture, that’s the time when your mum will take care of you. But I had to look after myself.”

The story behind Lori’s marriage breakdown is, apparently, all too common. She estimates, at least among her own friends and acquaintances, around 80 or 90 percent of overseas workers end up having problems with their relationships. While figures on the number of separations are difficult to determine (the Philippines is the only country in the world that doesn’t allow divorce, aside from the Vatican) the same sentiments are echoed by dozens of domestic helpers and families we speak to in Hong Kong and the Philippines. A spokesperson for The Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers’ Union tells us that they warn all new members about the likelihood of their marriage breaking down.

“But it’s not just the men,” reasons Father Reyes. “[Helpers] become emotionally drained [in Hong Kong] – when they go out on Sunday they are looking for affection. Either way, we are gossipy people! Whoever cheats, eventually it will get found out.”

In the Philippines, we hear stories of the husbands of domestic helpers partnering up with neighbours, friends and even the sisters of their wives. As one ex-helper puts it – ‘my neighbour borrowed my husband when I was in Hong Kong, and never gave him back. She can keep him!’

In Quezon City, north of Manila, we visit a popular local drinking spot surrounded by ‘massage’ joints and KTV parlours – we’re told by locals that if we look here we will find men who have wives working away from home.

The bar is packed and the music is pumping, even though it’s a Monday night. A group of men aged about 30 walk in. We consider going to speak to them, but it’s not long before one of them approaches us aggressively, asking why we have a camera, seemingly wary of any photos of him being taken. We decide it’s best to leave.

The absence of a mother – women make up an overwhelming majority of OFWs – and the all-too-common departure of their husbands puts enormous strain on families. Seventeen-year-old Jhonelle Flores lives in a cramped house in Biñan City, Laguna Province, with his four siblings. His mother, Ruby [full name changed upon request], has worked in Hong Kong sporadically for the last 12 years. Two months ago, his father left with another woman. For the last decade, Jhonelle’s father has been spending Ruby’s remittances on drink and drugs. Jhonelle’s sister, Rosalinda, had a child four months ago – at the age of 13. She has since dropped out of school. “This is the product of poverty,” laments their grandmother Marilou. “[Ruby] had to go abroad, and the children had the freedom to explore. They are hard-headed.”

“I know many children of overseas workers left in Manila who live waywardly, because they’re not guided by parents,” says Father Mark Bunag, a local Catholic priest. “They have vices.”

For many, however, these social consequences do not outweigh the advantages of leaving. The Loral family also live in Biñan City. Their house, consisting of a claustrophobic room with a small mezzanine, currently has seven people living inside it – 31-year-old Eve, her husband, their three young children, plus Eve’s mother and sister.

Eve worked as a helper for eight months in Hong Kong, but recently returned when her contract ended early. Now, no-one in the family has a job. Eve’s husband spends most of his days asleep. She is urgently looking for another position – the family are struggling to buy enough food to stave off hunger. “We feel sad that she’s returned,” Eve’s mother, Ninita, tells us, with heart-breaking despondency.

When Eve went to Hong Kong, her salary of \$4,010 allowed her to send home 13,000 pesos (\$2,300) every month. “[Working away] is better for the children,” she explains. Neil, Eve’s shy 12-year-old son, is listening intently. “I was happy when mum went to Hong Kong,” he whispers, before running off with a gaggle of friends.

“We are very afraid what will happen when the children of overseas workers become adults,” says Martineez. “I visit different parts of the Philippines to talk about migration and, when I ask young girls and boys what their ambition is, they say ‘I want to be a domestic worker... I want many chocolates, many toys’. It’s because they have witnessed

Near and far
The entrance to Hong Kong Village in Laguna Province; (below right) two generations of two families near Manila; (below left) domestic workers in Hong Kong box gifts to send home to their loved ones



“**I didn’t know what to do. If I stayed in the Philippines, I wouldn’t be able to give a good education to my children**”



their neighbours’ parents working abroad and see them receiving packages full of toys and sweets. It makes me want to cry. What will happen to our country? The government and NGOs like us need to re-educate the public, that this emigration is destroying our country.”

The impact of the OFW culture on the Philippines is clearly complicated, and the effects are often very tangible, whether for worse or for better. Nestled on the edge of Cabuyao City in Laguna Province is a relatively grandiose arched sign, welcoming you to Hong Kong Village. This small settlement is home to a few hundred families who all have something in common – a family member who is working, or has worked, in Hong Kong. The calm rows of tree-lined streets boast spacious, sturdy and well-presented homes. The streets have names such as ‘Tai Wo Road’ and ‘Kowloon Park Drive’. It’s incongruous in some ways,

yet equally seems a million miles away from the cramped residences that many of the Filipino families we’ve spoken to live in.

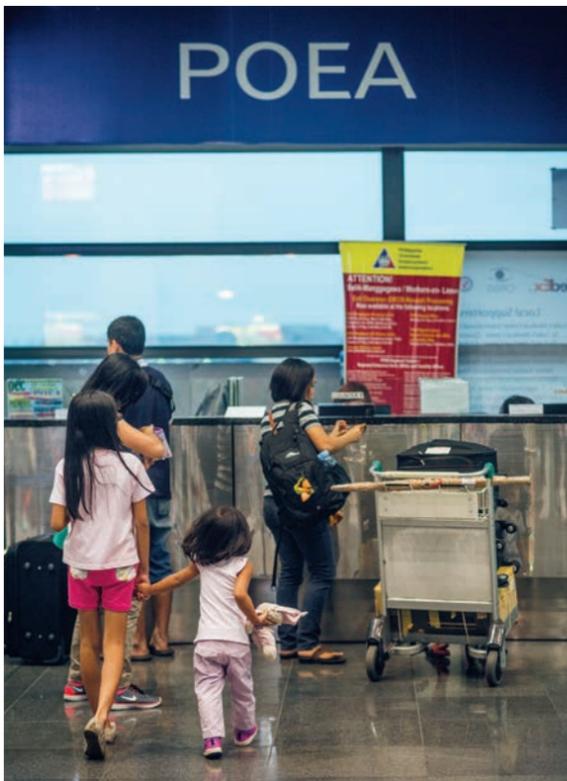
The village was the brainchild of a Filipino property agency that operated in Hong Kong and sold the houses to domestic workers, allowing them to pay in instalments. “I was sending home half of my salary to pay for the house, and the other half for my kids’ schooling,” recalls village resident Fely Cabbab, who worked as a helper in Hong Kong for 18 years. She speaks with pride about how she saved 30,000 pesos (\$5,300) in one year of working in Hong Kong – enough money to put a deposit on the new 360,000 peso (\$63,000) ‘dream house’ that she now lives in. “If I never went to Hong Kong, I would never have this house,” she says, while showing us how she painted the living room her favourite shade of yellow.

It’s a bittersweet story, however. Cabbab and her husband separated a few years after she left. Of her three children,

only one completed his education – training to become a mechanic. So far, he has only found work as a security guard and is struggling to support his own three children. Fely says her other daughters told her they were too ‘tired’ to finish their studies. “I cried for almost a month,” she says. “They don’t understand how hard I worked [for them].” Despite the hardships she went through, Fely is now encouraging her children to go abroad, in order to secure themselves a stable future – maybe even their own ‘dream house’.

There’s an overpowering feeling, across almost everyone we meet in the Philippines, that the upcoming generation will seek work abroad even more than their parents did. As for what that means for the country, it’s hard to know. As we turn to say goodbye to Marian Bagdoc and her eight siblings in the tiny house in Quezon, she falters.

“I need an employer to get me out of here,” she says with wide eyes. “Do you need a helper?” ■



Arrivals and departures
Enjoying spare time at a bar in Quezon City; (above) A domestic worker processes paperwork at Manila International Airport, shortly before leaving her family





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