

# The Meaning of Living in Poverty for Migrant Women and Their Families

by Motoko Yamagishi with Leny Tolentino

## Limited Choices

KALAKASAN, a non-profit women's rights organization, has been working to provide consultation for numerous Philippine women who were originally married to Japanese men, but later became single mothers because of domestic violence. We understand that for Philippine migrant women the issue of finances relating to the family is a major problem. Despite these financial problems, it would be inaccurate to claim that migrant women are living in extreme poverty, since, in terms of income levels, it is clear that many Japanese single mothers live below welfare standards. And, viewed from different angle, it is perhaps true to say that despite hardships, there is still a social and spiritual richness to the lives of migrant women-something which many Japanese communities are losing. However, it is also true that they remain extremely vulnerable in comparison with their Japanese counterparts, and are virtually in poverty, mainly because of the limited options available to them at the various stages in their lives.

In terms of the labor market for migrant women, the service industry (including sexual services) and factory work are the only available options.

Even if they are able to find factory work, the choices are exceptionally limited. In reality, their jobs are in catering, cleaning, hotel maid service and other similar jobs.

Philippine women are disadvantaged right from the start. Before coming to Japan they have only a very basic education and few vocational opportunities mainly due to the fact that they were raised below the poverty line. This situation is the cause of their turbulent international marriages which were supposed to help migrant workers escape from the hardships in their native country.

To make things worse, there is no choice other for them to stay in Japan even if they are exposed to brutal violence (including domestic violence) and various kinds of discrimination. Limited choices in education and employment are the main problems in the issue of the "poverty of migrant women."

## Migrant Women Who Support Two Families

The fundamental difference between Japanese women and Philippine women is the need for Philippine women to send money to their home country to support their families. Since they are

responsible for earning the total living expenses of two families (both in Japan and the Philippines), they struggle to meet their expenses, in a climate of very limited labor markets, which further differentiates their situation to that of Japanese women.

Regardless of how hard they work or the kind of work that they perform, it is impossible for them to earn a sufficient wage, usually earning just 800 yen an hour. Most single mothers who have been granted proper visa status are on partial welfare and from this perspective it may appear easier for Philippine mothers to receive welfare than Japanese single mothers. However, when an unexpected event occurs which requires additional funds (money for a parent's medical bill or money to travel home for a funeral) the welfare system does not cover these expenses. Furthermore, the welfare payment would be reduced according to the duration of their travel abroad.

There are other problems which exist for migrant women including a welfare system that is too complicated to understand since official papers from welfare offices are written in Japanese which the women are unable to read.

### **Networking as a Last Resource**

During the current global financial crisis, these women now face new problems of fewer job opportunities and reduced benefits. Furthermore, the added pressure of their families back in the Philippines asking for more money heightens the difficulty of their situation.

KALAKASAN organizes small discussion groups for mothers accessing welfare support. In groups, they can talk frankly about the difficulties they face in

their daily lives and voice their complaints regarding the rigid demands placed on them by officials. KALAKASAN also helps to expand interactive networks to Japanese single mother groups.

The lives of migrant women without visas are much harder. They are compelled to do two jobs working all day and night which results in children frequently left at home unsupervised.

The Japanese government's newly introduced "job situation report system" only exacerbates the plight of migrant women. More and more women are taking on night-shift work or domestic work as it becomes increasingly difficult to secure regular jobs. There are two categories of Philippine mothers—those with visa status and those with no visa status. They provide support for each other in a variety of ways including the provision of child-care for a mother who works during the day by a mother who does not have a visa.

Without this network, it is an extremely arduous task not only to find work but also to find housing and from a perspective of having such a support network, the situation for non-Philippine women is perhaps more difficult, since these other women may not have strong community ties. KALAKASAN is concerned that there are numerous migrant women who are not in touch with these local networks and are at home alone.

### **Measures to Break the Cycle of Poverty**

Poverty has a harmful effect on children. They face various hardships such as economic-related problems, domestic violence, bullying at school, as

well as being left alone at home. Socio-economic and emotional poverty weigh down heavily on them leading to identity confusion. This situation could adversely affect a child's ability to construct social relationships, develop their own abilities and find future direction.

If students start missing school at the junior high-school stage, do not enter senior high-school, or drop out of school, they would only be able to secure menial, part-time work. What would happen to those children in the near future? Would they continue the cycle of poverty? These are the questions that the members of KALAKASAN's Children Support are constantly worried about. How to support teenagers is one of the main challenges for us. Especially if they were children who came to Japan with their mothers after being raised abroad, they may be at risk of becoming juvenile delinquents, or drawn into gang-related organizations, as they feel they have nowhere to go in this society.

KALAKASAN has been developing self-help community groups among migrant women joining hands with church communities and other organizations. However, we know that without proper public support, it is impossible to rescue these women by family and community ties alone. Of course, there is a limit to relying only on government support. KALAKASAN's involvement is essential to provide opportunities for shared experiences within communities and emotional support.

Regarding the recently introduced



“Fixed Cash Handout,” it was not clear at first whether the system applied to foreign residents. KALAKASAN carried out lobbying activities together with homeless support groups and other organizations to address this issue. As a result, the government decided to apply this policy to foreign residents, but only those with visa status.

Of course, we do not expect much from the cash handout itself; the main aim of the lobbying was to force the national government to acknowledge the existence of migrant women and to treat them as equals of their Japanese counterparts.

The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare and other agencies have never collected any statistics about the situation for these women living in Japan. It highlights the Ministry's lack of basic awareness concerning the very existence of migrant women. Therefore, at KALAKASAN, we seek sustainable public support for migrant women including the expansion of job opportunities and improvement of their working conditions.

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*Translated by Akemi Marumo*