

The Gender Dimensions and Challenges of Labour Migration in the Philippines within the Context of the APEC

by

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I would like to talk about the emerging global challenges, especially those facing the world today. These are:

- Climate change —the major problems being faced by different countries are population pressure, over-exploitation, pollution and deforestation.
- Peace and human security and human development—as a result of protracted and long-term armed conflict in the Philippines, and other countries around the world, efforts to combat poverty, loss of life and property, internal displacements, massive migration, re-channelling of funds to finance militarisation and counter destabilisation.
- Trade liberalisation and development. Why does the Philippines import rice when it is one of its top commodities? Why do products from China flood the local and international market, causing the local industries to shut down? Why does the government encourage the Filipinos to go abroad and earn dollars for the country? The World Trade Organization (WTO) has argued that trade liberalisation would reduce poverty as it would promote economic growth to developing countries, but is it happening?

My presentation focuses on migration, particularly women's international labour migration for both skilled and non-skilled workers in the Philippines. It responds to these concerns:

- To examine the mobility of the Filipino people within the changing context of labour migration in the APEC region.
- To ask, do the existing state policies of the Government of the Philippines protect the rights and welfare of migrants? Consequently, there have been mounting entries of irregular migrants, and women have outnumbered men in the migration process.

How do we respond to the feminisation of labour migration —with more than half of the migrants from the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka being women? What about the obscurity of some APEC economies with regard to state policies on acceptance of foreign workers, particularly unskilled workers?

It has been noted that the Philippines sends the highest number of labour migrants from the Southeast Asia region (4.8 million), followed by Indonesia (2 million), Myanmar (1.1 million), South Korea (0.6 million), and China (0.5 million). Likewise,

our country is known as the leading exporter of workers like nurses and seafarers, and the second leading exporter of doctors, not to mention domestic helpers.

Looking at the macro level, the country has significantly benefited from remittances of overseas workers, which accounted for at least 9% of the Gross National Product (GNP).

APEC includes among its members the world's two largest exporters of labour: Mexico and the Philippines, as well as the world's three largest destinations of permanent migration: the United States, Canada and Australia. But in the Philippines the main destinations are the Middle East, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea, because of the tough immigration policies of the United States, Canada and Australia.

Policies and actions on labour migration were recently established in the Philippines. The medium-term development plan of the current administration is to generate 10 million jobs for six years. The plan has promised to generate six million jobs for overseas workers and four million from local employment. The Department of Labour and Employment launched the Labour Opportunities Program, while the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration proclaimed that the country would deploy professionals and highly skilled workers to meet the demands of the hotel and restaurant industry in the Caribbean.

The Philippines Government has made regional commitments at APEC and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for mutual recognition of qualifications to facilitate the mobility of professionals.

The following are the key issues and challenges surrounding labour migration in the Philippines:

- The negative effects of skills depletion. The Philippines is a classic example of this. The success in exporting nurses has created a major crisis in delivering health care in the country.
- The brain drain effect. Outward migration of the highly skilled and professionals is seen as a brain drain. It has a negative impact on the development potential of the sending country because the supply of scarce human resources has been depleted.
- Remittances. In the case of the Philippines, the government has over-relied on remittances.
- The social consequences. Problems arise as many migrant workers are labelled as carriers of various diseases, and the cause of social crimes.

Here are some recommendations:

1. Given labour migration in the Philippine context poses similar problems in other developing countries, we are proposing recommendations that can help address the problem in migration. The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, being a non-binding regional trade organisation that genuinely practices open regionalism, is an ideal platform to facilitate the movement of people (skilled

and non-skilled), trade, services and goods. Being regional, it could facilitate learning from each other's experiences on how to manage and cope better with regular or irregular flows of labour migration, particularly by affording protection to and safeguarding the rights of migrant workers —especially women and children who are being exploited and trafficked as mail order brides and prostitutes.

2. The APEC HRD Working Group, particularly the sub-committee on Labour and Social Protection Network, could initiate policy debates on labour migration of unskilled/semi-skilled workers, and identify social protection measures that must be in place.
3. The Women Leaders' Network must ensure women/gender mainstreaming in labour migration issues at all levels (forums, economy, and regional) as part of discussion, processes and other mechanisms within APEC, ASEAN, and other regional bodies.
4. Support for the generation of sex-disaggregated data on labour migration must be accorded a top priority. This will aid in collecting accurate information for informed discussion, policy and decision-making, and value migrant workers' contribution to the economy.
5. Finally, the WLN should support and encourage the participation of women in formulating gender-responsive policies and plans on issues related to finance, trade and investments, economic and planning, and labour migration, among others.