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Filipino Migrants in Spain

Carmen Molina



Migration is a term generally used to refer to the movement of people from their country of origin to a new land. This movement is brought about by causes both positive (a desire for adventure, the search for pleasure), and negative (persecution, whether political or religious, natural calamities and economic hardships) in nature. In recent years the economic factor has gained greater importance as the main cause behind actual migratory trends. The present note examines Filipino migration to Spain, the characteristics and the problems of the Filipino migrant community in Spain, with special reference to the Filipino migrant community in Madrid. The main causes which have contributed to the rise of Filipino migration indicate that it falls under the category of "economic migration." Consequently, in the context of this case study, "migration" refers to the movements of people brought about by economic hardship in the country of origin.¹

Filipino Migration to Spain

In the late 1960s, economic rebirth in Spain, brought about not only the decrease of the flow of Spaniards looking for jobs abroad, but also turned Spain into a receiving country, especially for nationals coming from former Spanish colonies, including the Philippines.

In the decades of the sixties and the seventies, Spain was not a target destination for the Philippines. The strong influence exerted on the Philippines by the United States, the absence of language barriers and the similarity in educational systems, made the United States the first and prime choice as country of destination for Filipinos. At the same time, there were not yet massive departures from the Philippines. The economic and political situation in the Philippines was such that people leaving the country did so mainly to study or to improve their professional skills and their sociofinancial situation. But it was not a generalized situation.

The situation changed drastically during the decade of the eighties. In the first place, the former "strong-man" rule of Ferdinand E. Marcos had given place to his dictatorial government under his absolute power. Strangely enough, the more outstanding political dissidents found their way out of the country, and those left behind went into hiding or looked for ways and means to live on unnoticed. But the dictatorial regime did not limit itself to cause adverse effects in the political arena. The economic situation in the country deteriorated at an increasingly rapid pace. The situation reached such an extreme that the only way out for many people seemed to be to leave the country and look for work abroad.

The first choice for migration from the Philippines still remained the United States of America. However, difficulties started to arise. The US government decided to implement a more restrictive policy for migrating aliens. The Philippines was faced with a quota system. Filipinos queuing up at the US Embassy in Manila were informed that their applications would be considered only after months or even years.

The Philippine economic situation continued to deteriorate and it became necessary to look for other destinations. Europe became the next option, and within Europe, Germany, Italy and Spain were the first choices. In the case of Spain there seemed to be an added incentive which was not brought about by nostalgia for the old historical ties, but was of a rather more practical nature. Since the Philippines were a former colony of Spain, a treaty had been signed by both countries, whereby their nationals were not only exempted from a visa requirement upon entry, but were not required to apply for a work permit as a prerequisite for obtaining a residence permit. As a result of this, Filipinos in Spain only had to register at the Ministry of Labor. Even later, when a visa was required, it was still possible to change status in Spain (from tourist to resident) as long as a Filipino was able to find a job and present the corresponding work contract to the authorities.

This accounted for the steadily increasing influx of Filipinos into Spain during the late seventies and early eighties. The new arrivals had come to join the small group of Filipinos residing in Spain at the time who were mostly grouped in Madrid. These residents were mostly from families of Spanish origin who had decided to live in Spain on a permanent basis, a few professionals brought to Spain for business reasons, plus students and scholars who were in Spain to study for a year or two. The newcomers belonged to a lower

income group, their travel to Spain was motivated purely by economic reasons, their ties with Spain or Spanish nationals were practically nonexistent, and they had a marked willingness to undertake any type of work offered to them under practically any conditions.

The arrival of these later immigrants not only changed the characteristics of the Filipino community in Spain but also modified both the attitude and mentality of the Filipinos in Spain, as well as the attitude of the Spaniards towards the Filipinos. In the case of the Filipinos, it would lead to a certain feeling of "social-professional" inferiority,² and in the case of the Spaniards, to an increasing fear of the implications for Spain's social and economic life.

At present, the Filipino community in Spain is difficult to quantify since those without legal status are outside the range of normal statistics. However it would be a safe guess to say that Filipinos in Spain now number from fifty to sixty thousand. This total is unevenly distributed, with Madrid and Barcelona competing as the main cities of destination. In the case of Madrid the latest reliable estimate sets the total at 15,000 Filipinos. The majority of the Filipinos in Spain are employed as domestic helpers and reside with their employers. The majority of them are women, within the age bracket of twenty-five to forty-nine. During their stay in Spain, which they project will be for a limited period, their main objective is to spend as little as possible and send back home as much of their salary as possible to help in the upkeep of the family and in the education of the children in the Philippines. This family in the Philippine context is not limited to the immediate family but may include nieces and nephews whose studies are being paid for by an uncle or aunt.

Recently it has been possible to observe a certain awakening within the Filipino community in Spain, a growing awareness of their situation and an increasing concern for their plight. At the same time and within a rather limited time span, the characteristics of the Filipino community in Spain have changed drastically. Filipino migrants who have been in Spain for the past ten to fifteen years have opted for Spain as their permanent place of residence. Consequently they have petitioned for their spouses and/or children below eighteen, and are slowly moving out from the house of their employers to set up their own place of residence (at least for use during their day-off). Also, there have been a large number of marriages and even of intermarriages. All this plus the rise of the second generation makes it necessary even now to reassess the analyses done to date of the Filipino immigrants in Spain.

In May 1991 the Spanish government approved a decree whereby illegal foreigners residing in Spain would be given the chance to legalize their situation. Basic requirements were entry into Spain prior to 15 May 1991 and proof of a concrete form of employment or any income-earning activity. Applications could be filed from 10 June to 10 December 1991 at various government offices set up for this purpose. Church authorities, who had contributed to the lobbying for this decree, also set up an information and assistance network to ensure that the largest possible number of foreigners would benefit from this measure.

Although the period allowed by the Spanish government ends on 10 December 1991, the following data, obtained from reliable sources for the period 10 June through 31 August 1991, reveals some interesting information. A total of 49,798 applications have been filed. Reliable sources have informed the author that as of 15 October 1991 the total had increased to 57,289. Compared to the nine-month amnesty period granted in 1985–1986, this total (filed during the above-mentioned four-month period) represents approximately one-third. A comparison of various regions reveals that Madrid leads with a total of 17,157 applications filed (34.45 percent) as compared to Barcelona, the second region, with a total of 5,443 applications (10.93 percent). If we take into account the nationality of the applicants, the Moroccans lead, with a total of 6,584 applications filed (47 percent). Other leading nationalities are the citizens of the Dominican Republic (8.23 percent), the Argentinians (5.69 percent) and the Filipinos (5.37 percent). Taking into account the field of activities, the service sector comprises 68 percent of the total number of applications filed as compared to the agrarian (12.4 percent), the industrial (5.4 percent) and the construction (13.15 percent) sectors. The distribution by nationalities would be as follows: Moroccans, 22.4 percent in the agrarian sector and 21 percent in the construction sector; Argentinians, 10 percent in the industrial sector and 10 percent in the construction sector; Poles, 32.8 percent in the construction sector; Filipinos, Dominicans and Chinese, over 96 percent in the service sector. A comparison by sex shows that 60 percent were male applicants as compared to 40 percent female applicants. The applicants fall into the 20–55 age group. The government has foreseen a special period for the regularization of minors residing in Spain prior to 15 May 1991. The requirements and procedures have yet to be published.

If we consider government action in respect to the applications filed, these same sources show that 30,500 of the total number of applications received have been considered in a positive manner and 14,200 have already been approved. Of the applicants, 537 were requested to provide additional documents, 1,300 could not be considered because the applicants had a legal case pending, and 65 were denied because the applicant could not present proof of entry into Spain prior to 15 May 1991, applicant is not residing in Spain, the applicant was a minor. Action has already been taking in respect of applications received in June and applications received in August are being processed. In Madrid, 59 percent of the applications received have already been processed.

The Filipino Migrant Community

More than one million Filipinos are at present working abroad. More than fifty thousand of them have found their way to Spain. For those who made the move before summer of 1985, the going was not so difficult. Prior to this date, Spanish legislation not only allowed Filipinos to enter without a visa, but also permitted them to undertake any type of professional activity in Spain. In fact, even when a visa was required, Spanish legislation allowed Filipino tourists wishing to remain in Spain to change their status and obtain permission to work in Spain.³ The situation changed when Spain approved, in July 1985, a new law governing the status of aliens in Spain. Different voices rose in protest at the time. This note, in view of the nature of its topic, does not enter into the debate on this issue, although it does seem that the new law not only leaves much to be desired in the area of protection of aliens, but also does not foresee the full integration, protection and development of migrant aliens in Spain.⁴

Recent figures indicate that less than one-fifth of the Filipino community is legally in Spain. In 1989 the figure decreased. Although this could have been caused by Filipinos having acquired Spanish nationality, an important number of them have actually "lost" their residence permit by having been unable to renew it due, primarily, to the restrictions imposed by the "Ley de Extranjeria."⁵ Illegality, lack of necessary documentation, therefore, is one very important characteristic of the Filipino migrant group in Spain. A second characteristic would be that the Filipino community is made up mostly

of women. Among the various ethnic groups of aliens residing in Spain, it is only the Filipino community which shows a majority of women, as much as 85 percent. In other groups, the percentage is 53.8 percent men and 46.2 percent women.

The primary concern of all Filipinos coming to Spain is to find work, and to find it quickly. This enables the migrant worker to send back money to the Philippines. This remittance pays for basic necessities, at home, for the education of the children, and for other needs, once the first two have been met. This would explain why after a period of years working in Spain, the migrant begins to send money to pay for a house or to buy a lot in his/her hometown in the Philippines. The first possibility offered to the Filipino migrant (usually a woman) is to work as a domestic helper. For the newcomer, this type of work has the added positive factor of providing food and shelter. With these two basic necessities fully covered (a third, clothing, is also often covered since domestic helpers are expected to be in uniform), it is easier for the migrant worker to concentrate on sending home practically his/her entire salary. A second group of migrants are those who are in Spain, not to cover basic necessities of the family, but to find an additional source of income which would allow the children to have access to higher education in the Philippines. This second group would be able to set aside more money for their own individual comforts.

A third group of migrants comprise those who venture into some sort of investment (house and lot) since the other basic needs of the family have already been met. In the latter case, it is easier for the migrant woman to attempt to look for other means of livelihood. This would normally still entail house cleaning⁶ but instead of being "interna," i.e., living with the employers, the migrant would be able to rent an apartment or a room and work as an "externa," i.e., living on her own and being paid by the hour.

The Filipino migrant males, although significantly fewer in number, would be engaged in restaurant activities, either as dishwashers, cooks or waiters. This last occupation would only be open to those who have managed to learn the language. There are also cases of Filipino males working in the house, either as gardeners or drivers. In these cases, the wife is normally engaged by the same employers as a maid or cook or nurse for the children.

Most of the Filipinos coming into Spain have completed not only elementary but even secondary or a higher level of education.⁷ If compared to other groups of migrants in Spain, they are the most

educated and best prepared to have access to other types of professional or technical activity. Many of them could be employed as midwives, nurses, teachers, or administrative clerks. Their preparation and experience, however, is counteracted by the fact that their knowledge of Spanish leaves much to be desired, and the administrative and legal difficulties created by the Spanish legislation only worsen the situation. In these fields, the competition is also stronger and the chances of landing a job quickly are less. This postpones the moment when income can be received and sent back to the Philippines.

Another characteristic of the Filipino migrant in Spain to be taken into consideration is the existence of closely-knit family ties in the Philippines. This means that the recipients or beneficiaries of the migrant could be anyone within the family nucleus, e.g., spouse, children, parents, nieces and nephews. This creates strong dependency links between the migrant and his/her beneficiaries. Practically one-half of the Filipinos who migrated to Spain had either a relative or a friend already residing in Spain. This serves to emphasize the close links which exist among the Filipinos (either relatives or town mates) which spread out to include more and more individuals (the so-called grapevine phenomenon).

As mentioned earlier, the main concern of Filipinos coming to Spain is to earn enough money to send home, and to return to the Philippines, once the economic situation of the family has changed. This is the initial expectation. But after having resided and worked in Spain for a period of time, reality reveals a different picture. Although 70 percent still hope to return to the Philippines, 20 percent think they never will (either due to their lack of legal status or financial means) and 10 percent prefer to convert Spain into their permanent home. This 10 percent have opted not only to reside in Spain but many within this group are seriously considering acquiring Spanish nationality. In their case the process of integration goes hand in hand with the practical desire of being able to do away with the difficulties of renewing their residence/ labor permit and other administrative barriers which most foreigners face. Lately, Spain's expected full entry into the EEC labor market has brought about a firmer conviction that this is the only way out for those who desire to live in Spain on a more permanent basis.

A note might be made that the Filipino community in Madrid, as compared to other migrant groups, has had the least problems with the law in matters relating to peace and order. Most of

the complaints filed have to do with isolated cases of personal brawls or noisy parties. It can therefore be considered a law-abiding community.

Problems of Filipino Migrants

The illegality of their status has created within the Filipino community a fear of being caught by the police and being deported. This fear has interfered with mobility and removed any desire to improve or better their condition, allowing in several instances for cases of abuse and exploitation on the part of the employers. Many Filipinos choose to remain in their place of work (i.e. employer's residence) and avoid walking around the streets for fear of being stopped by the police. Oftentimes, rumors of possible police action in certain areas have led Filipinos residing on their own to search for a new place to stay. The lack of documents obliges most of them to remain within the same place of employment with little chance of working in better conditions. The employer is his/her safety shield. This knowledge may then be used to the advantage of the employer who may not hesitate to point this out when faced with the employee's demand for better wages or other forms of compensation.

One other negative factor closely linked to the importance of the family to all Filipinos is the knowledge that "no papers" means "no trip home" to see the family. Many have tearfully had to renounce to the possibility of being with their family in moments of celebration (weddings, graduations, etc.) or sorrow (death and sickness). For illegal migrants, to travel home to the Philippines automatically means giving up all possibility of returning to Spain. This often leads to a feeling of loneliness, to varying degrees of depression, to the anguish of missing out on so many of the family's experiences, the very family they are working for.

The effects of the culture shock migrants go through are difficult to evaluate. For the Filipino migrating to Europe, Spain offers some familiar ground: the Catholic religion, Spanish words incorporated into Pilipino and other Philippine dialects, extended family ties, and other customs. These, however, are not sufficient to offset the aggressive character of the Spaniards, their bluntness and direct approach, as well as the rapid pace and cold atmosphere of European society. Traditional customs and beliefs are soon brought to the test of standing up to comparison with new customs and beliefs. The

internal psychic balance is continually tested and many times the individual is confronted with an identity crisis. This can be further aggravated by the unfamiliar environment, the apparently "inferior" job, the new language, and the absence of family members or friends. This lack of roots often leads to insecurity, resignation, and loneliness, bringing to the foreground one sole reason for living: earn money and send it to the family.

The lack of documents means the absence of any possibility of finding better employment. The lack of personal ties leads to personal insecurity. Soon, the migrant worker begins to question his/her own capacities and capabilities. Any initiative which have originally existed is soon buried under this feeling of incapacity. All his education, training and know-how are no longer valid in his new environment, and all too soon he stops feeling qualified to undertake new employment. This lack of incentive is the start of a vicious circle as the migrant Filipino decides to accept his new situation as his "destiny" or "karma."⁸ This feeling often leads to a false sense of security which does not allow one to dare venture into new undertakings.

The need to care and provide for their children is the main motive of the majority of the Filipinos who migrate. In view of the fact that the women comprise the main group within the Filipino community in Spain, and that most of them are married, it is possible to conclude that they have had to find a means to have their children taken care of. Normally this brings the grandparents in the Philippines into play. It becomes their duty and responsibility to raise the children of their children. The parents provide the money, the grandparents provide the day-to-day care of the children in the Philippines. It is still too soon to determine the consequences of this action. It is not possible at this stage to know how these children reared by their grandparents will turn out in the future or how the absence of their parents will affect their upbringing.

Filipino migrants in Spain have evolved certain coping mechanisms to handle this social/family problem of the children. One is the *Reagrupacion familiar*. This term is used to describe the situation when a migrant claims his/her spouse, children below eighteen and/or parents (the latter, if of retirement age). A close look at the Filipino community in Madrid reveals certain interesting and important changes. There is an important segment which has decided to make Spain their new place of residence. This segment, comprised mostly of women, have begun to claim their spouses and children below

eighteen. It has now become necessary to take into consideration this new phase of Filipino migration to Spain.

A second social arrangement is the *piso*. The shift from "interna" to "externa" mentioned above is now more obvious than ever.⁹ It has led to Filipino migrants grouping themselves together to rent an apartment or flat. This has a positive side to it. It reflects the fact that the migrant has been able to find other means of livelihood and is no longer dependent on his employer for board and lodging. Also this step normally leads to a search for other jobs and, at the very least, the possibility of a more independent life style. For married couples, it also offers the possibility of having a home of their own, and a place to live with their children. In the case of "internas," the children are normally left in a week-care center and the mother visits them only during weekends. But the shift to "pisos" also brings with it the creation of new artificial family units. It has been observed that these units have clearly defined roles for the members. In many instances it is possible to clearly distinguish the dual role (father/mother, male/female) although the members of the unit are all female. It is still too soon perhaps to be able to analyze this social structure since this is a relatively new phenomenon.

Conclusion

What does the future hold for the Filipino migrant in Spain? It is necessary to make a very clear distinction between migrants who are in Spain legally and those who have no documents.

For the legal migrant the choice is twofold: to stay on in Madrid on a permanent basis or to return home to the Philippines with enough savings to start a new and improved lifestyle. Reality shows that the income earned by a domestic helper or restaurant employee in Spain is never enough to "strike it rich." The family back home will always have new needs or demands on the migrant relative. Either the migrant worker sets a time limit to the period of stay abroad, or this period will be successively extended until the idea of returning home for good practically disappears. It is important that the migrant worker be aware of this in order that a decision may be taken in this regard. If the choice is to stay on in Spain, it is necessary to think in terms of integration or incorporation into the Spanish lifestyle. The migrant worker, while keeping a firm hold on his roots, should consider taking steps in this direction. If the decision is to return to the Philippines, it is necessary to set a time limit.

In this case the migrant workers' reintegration will also call for a period of readjustment in the Philippines.

For the "illegal" migrant the situation is rather bleak and depressing. The protective attitude shown by the European countries with respect to their own labor force will make it necessary for most of the illegal migrants to become part of a submerged economy, living in fear of being caught, accepting very low remuneration for their labor, being unable to profit from any form of social or welfare assistance, and sadly aware that their situation has little hope of improvement short of deciding to return home to the Philippines. In this respect it is the hope of many that before migration laws affecting the European countries as a whole are voted on, ways and means may be found to allow for the so-called regularization of the status of those migrants who are already based in Europe, and who, in fact, may have been residing in Europe for many years.

The migrant workers who decide to stay on (either due to personal choice or to unavoidable circumstances) inevitably have to think of settling into their new place of residence. This leads to not only the problems mentioned above of integration/incorporation, but also a second important issue—the second generation. This second generation may be either the children of two migrant parents or the children of a mixed marriage. In both instances, the complex dialogue between the demands of the new environment and the importance of preserving one's roots will always be present. Migrant parents (whether both or only one are migrants) will be constantly faced with a questioning look from their children: who am I? At the same time, their different lifestyle (a carry over from the country of origin) will be continually put to the test by their children who will want to prove they "belong," who will not want to be pointed out or stared at as "foreigners." In some instances, these migrant parents will also be faced with the criticism of their children for their poor knowledge of the Spanish language. It is important that migrant parents fill their children with love and respect for the country of their birth or for the the country where one or both of their parents were born while at the same time encouraging them to feel part of the country their parents have chosen as their place of residence.

A third aspect to be considered is that of self-development and promotion. This is applicable only in the case of legal migrants who have the possibility of access to other types of employment. The present legislation does not facilitate this, neither do the present employment possibilities and the existing language barrier. These,

however, are surmountable problems. But although external circumstances are contributing factors, any steps taken in this direction will have to come from the migrants themselves. This decision, however, will be subject to their particular situation, i.e. whether they wish to stay on or return to the Philippines after a certain period of time and, in the former case, whether they are content to remain as they are or whether they are willing to risk venturing into new jobs and areas of responsibility.

Notes

1. Statistical data utilized in this paper is taken from "Los Inmigrantes en España" (Documentación Social - January-March 1987 issue), as well as from the "Anuarios de la Comisaría General de Documentación, Fronteras y Extranjeros, Dirección General de la Policía (Ministerio del Interior).

2. It should be noted that the new arrivals came mostly to work as maids, although their educational level was generally of secondary school level.

3. Available figures indicate that 81 percent of the Filipino community came as tourists and only 16 percent came with a contract.

4. The "Defensor del Pueblo" presented a case of unconstitutionality against some of the Articles of the new "Ley de Extranjería" or law governing the status of aliens in Spain. Among them, he questioned the limit it imposed on the right to meet and form associations, the possibility on the part of the authorities to prolong the period of preventive arrest up to forty days. To this he added his concern at the manner in which the law was being applied. The "Reglamento," for example, was put into practice one year after the law was proclaimed, which meant that for a period of one year its application was made by way of circulars and internal instructions. Also, administrative hindrances often led to such delays in the concession of residence permit that by the time an alien received his permit it was practically time to file again for its renewal.

5. Data obtained from the "Anuario de la Comisaría General de Documentación, Fronteras y Extranjeros" (1987, 1988, 1989 issues) indicate that whereas there were 8,404 legal residents in 1988, the figure decreased to 6,379 in 1989.

6. Although still in limited numbers, there have been several cases of Filipino migrant women who have ventured into other types of employment (salesgirl, hair-dresser, and even language teaching).

7. According to figures based on recent studies, 12 percent have completed their elementary studies, 51 percent have completed their secondary or high school studies, and 37 percent have had some form of higher education.

8. Word commonly utilized to refer to the destiny imposed on a mortal by the gods. There is an indirect reference to the prelife since "karma" can also be utilized to mean punishment for sins or errors done by a mortal in his previous existence.

9. It may be recalled that the term "interna" refers to domestic helpers by residing in their place of employment, while "externa" refers to domestic helpers living on their own and working by the hour.