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Labour Migration to South Korea:  
The Case of Philippine Workers  
*Stella P. Go*

## **Comments**

**Seok-Choon Lew**

Stella Go's chapter is informative, with policy recommendations to improve the current situation of foreign workers in South Korea, particularly Filipino workers. I have no quarrel with Professor Go's chapter, especially the policy suggestions made towards the end. Her suggestions deserve serious attention from both South Korea and the Philippines. Since I am in agreement with her, I will not review her chapter in detail.

There once was a time in the jungles of Vietnam when South Korean youngsters literally 'sold' their blood for money. They said that it was for the sake of freedom there, but nobody sheds blood only for a glorious cause. Frankly speaking, it was for money. We sent our youths to an alien land to fight against an enemy whom they had no knowledge of — all for the economic reason, using their blood and lives as collateral. With that money, we built highways, factories, and exported our products. From the general viewpoint

of South Koreans, sending our youths to Vietnam might have been unavoidable. In a country where labour was the only resource, in order to reach the living standards of other affluent countries, it was only natural to make such efforts and sacrifices.

With the economic progress we have made based on those sacrifices, we are now in a position to apply for membership in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which grants its membership exclusively to the advanced nations. We are on our way to becoming a developed nation. When Korean cars race down the highways of Europe and the United States, and when Korean computer chips pour into Silicon Valley, one cannot help but feel that South Korea is becoming an advanced nation. Evidence that we are becoming more developed is not only found in the outside world, but also in South Korea itself. The voice is growing louder that it is time to critically look at ourselves after the breathless rush for economic growth, and to reassess the meanings and values of our society. The South Korean people no longer believe the problems we have now can be solved by mere material progress. The fact that we are now placing more emphasis on quality of life is another indication that we are on our way to becoming a more developed nation.

As our focus shifts to qualitative aspects of life, the problems we have been ignoring are now gaining fresh attention. One of the most important problems is a tendency among our youths to avoid the so-called 'dirty, difficult, and dangerous' jobs. Nobody wants to work in positions where work is arduous but wages are low. So we fill these positions with Southeast Asian youngsters who have worked in even worse conditions. Filipino housemaids are now employed as domestic help in wealthy towns, and Nepalese workers are working in small textile factories.

There may come a time when nobody needs to work in 'dirty, difficult, and dangerous' conditions. But until then, somebody has to do such work. So we rely upon people who live in countries worse off than South Korea to do these jobs while we seek to enhance the quality of our life. Latin American workers in the United States, Indians in Britain, Algerians in France, and Turks in Germany are, for the same reason, exploited in alien worlds where cultures and systems are dramatically different from their homelands. Just as our youths sacrificed their lives in the Vietnam War, these foreign workers in South Korea are taking jobs which the local people turn down.

A wise old Korean saying tells us to "Work like a dog, spend like a king". If the days when we sought numeric growth were the days when we 'worked like a dog', the time to 'spend like a king' is when there is an increasing concern with quality of life. During the past forty years South Koreans have literally 'worked like dogs'. People can now afford to travel abroad and 'spend like kings', which was once unimaginable. What we see in Southeast Asia reminds us of our own past. As we pass the slums of Ho Chi Minh City, Manila,

or Bangkok comfortably seated in an air-conditioned tour bus, we are reminded also of the time when we 'sold' our blood in Vietnam for economic gain.

Not too long ago, in the summer of 1995, the South Korean Minister of Education was fired because of her controversial remark on the role of South Korean troops in the Vietnam War. What was our role in Vietnam, beyond economic gain? We do not have the answer. As we witness Vietnamese, whom we once used to shoot and kill, still willing to work in poor conditions, we have to seriously reflect on ourselves.

Is passing on to the Southeast Asians what we learned from Japan and the United States a hallmark of our having 'arrived'? Withholding support and fair payment to people living in hardship is no less than denying our own past. We have to think whether it is right that just because we suffered grief and misfortune in the days of hardship we should consider it natural for Southeast Asian workers in South Korea to go through the same experience. Improving the quality of our life by generating anger and disappointment in others, rather than providing them bread and a bright future, is not the way of a king.

#### NOTES

1. This discussion of the training schemes under which Filipino worker-trainees enter South Korea was obtained from an unpublished briefing paper on the Philippine labour presence in South Korea by the POEA and an interview with Ric Casco, Korean Desk Officer and Head of the Planning Branch, POEA, on 9 October 1995.
2. This discussion on the problems associated with the implementation of the trainee mobilization scheme was obtained from an unpublished briefing paper on the Philippine labour presence in South Korea by the POEA and an interview with Ric Casco, Korean Desk Officer and Head of the Planning Branch, POEA, on 9 October 1995.

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