

# Female Migrant Labor: Domestic Helpers In Singapore

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*It is undeniable that the country has been exporting a growing number of female overseas workers, majority of which serve as domestic help, mainly because of the economic crisis the country is facing. However, the "filipina" (spelled with a small "f" which is supposed to mean domestic help) in pursuit of a better future abroad, is confronted with various labor problems like underpayment and sexual abuse among others. The government recognizes its responsibility over the plight of female migrant workers particularly in Singapore. To fully implement the policies in order to protect the filipinas from unfair and abusive labor practices, two issues need to be resolved: (1) the dominance of market vs. welfare considerations; and (2) the absence of Bilateral Labor Agreement.*

## Introduction

Through time, the perception of the Filipino woman has changed. She used to be known as Maria Clara—respected, adored, put on a pedestal by Filipino men. Slowly she became liberated, accepted as the equal of her man. Now she is referred to abroad as either *Japayuki-san* or *filipina*. The latter, written with a small "f," is supposed to mean "domestic helper."

In the light of the oftentimes emotional debate involving Filipino womanhood and dignity, a study of the female temporary migrant is not only warranted; it is an absolute necessity. True, the country needs precious dollars and overseas work retards to a certain degree the geometric growth of the vast army of the unemployed. But are our overseas contract workers properly protected? How do our women fare in foreign lands?

While the basic policy for labor is three-pronged (i.e., employment generation, worker protection, and foreign exchange generation), only the protection aspect is looked into in this paper, in view of the vulnerability of the migrant worker in foreign lands. But this is not to denigrate however, the economic purposes of overseas contract work since these goals are undeniably valid considering the dire straits the country is in.

## Scope

This paper is an initial effort to compile information regarding the problems of domestic helpers particularly in Singapore. It is divided into three parts. The first discusses the institutions responsible in regulating outflow of women labor in the country and what they had accomplished for women domestics and other overseas contract workers.

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The second part covers basic statistical information on trends in foreign travel and overseas contract employment for the period 1980 to 1986. These trends are necessary to establish the validity of the current concern over female labor export. Comparative data on pay and placement fees are included to show how domestic helpers fare in relation to other outbound workers. Maids work on what is considered the most menial of jobs. Unlike the usual working environments, those of domestic helpers are atomistic and personalized. These workers are therefore utterly susceptible to abuse. It behooves us to find out how they are treated by their employers and in what ways the *government* has responded to their problems.

The third part focuses on the problems of female domestics in Singapore and identifies solutions which could improve the plight of domestic helpers.

### *Methodology*

For this paper, some people who either worked in Singapore as domestic helpers or have been involved in migrant labor as private agency researchers or government workers were interviewed, but the main source of information are secondary data based on statistics compiled by government institutions and private agencies.

Several constraints however, limited the author's capacity for depth of analysis since the literature on female migrant workers offers little data on Singapore. This can be attributed to the lack of linkages with Singapore, owing to its very restrictive policies. The time spent for research was also inadequate. Although there are studies made by concerned groups or individuals that the paper would have benefited from, had these been unearthed. Finally, government record-keeping leaves much to be desired. Adequate and reliable information are not also always available.

## **Institutional Context for Regulation: Policy and Organizations**

### *Protection Policy*

Even before 1974, protection of overseas contract workers was already a concern of the government. Act 2486 was enacted in 1915, as a reaction to the exploitative nature of employment in the plantations of Hawaii. Filipino laborers worked under, and lived in, poor conditions; were paid low wages; and were victimized by illegal recruiters. Some of the provisions of the Act were (1) prohibition on the hiring of minors under 15 years of age, and of minors of 18 years without parental (or guardian's) consent; (2) prohibition on recruitment of non-Christian tribesmen for exhibition abroad; (3) payment by recruiters of annual license fee of P6,000 and of annual tax of P500, the latter payable to each of the provinces where laborers are recruited; and (4) guarantee that employers provide return transportation for workers upon termination of contract or upon becoming physically unfit for work (Sto. Tomas 1984:105-106). Act 2486 continued to be in force up to the early 1970s, when the mass exodus of Filipino workers really began. The growth of the overseas labor market necessitated more

and better governmental measures to safeguard the welfare of overseas contract workers, particularly the right to fair and equitable employment practices throughout the recruitment process, from the pre-employment stage to the post-employment stage.

Presidential Decree (PD) No. 442 (Labor Code) was signed into law on May 1, 1974. The country was then reeling under the effects of both internal (e.g., the devastating Central Luzon floods) and external (e.g., the oil crisis) problems. Unemployment rate stood at an average of 6.84% for the period 1968-1973 (Statistical Yearbook 1982; Tidalgo 1976). The labor market abroad offered an alternative to domestic employment. The outflow of Filipino temporary migrants in big numbers implied greater governmental intervention if these workers were to be protected properly.

Article 3 of the Labor Code declares, among others, that the State shall afford protection to labor and assure the right of workers to just and humane conditions of work. This is echoed in the protection policy of the Overseas Employment Program (OEP), which is two-fold: (1) to ensure protection of citizens leaving to work overseas by securing for them the best possible terms and conditions of employment; and (2) to monitor the careful selection of Filipinos for overseas jobs. The latter is considered necessary in order to protect the good name of the Philippines abroad.

The Labor Code created new structures to implement the policy. Since then, subsequent PDs, Executive Orders (EOs), Letters of Instructions (LOIs), and reorganizations have been added to, streamlined, and/or renamed these structures. At present, two organizations are in the forefront with regards to worker protection. These are the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration.

*Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA).* The POEA was established in 1982 by EO 797, and is a consolidation of the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB), the National Seamen Board, and the overseas employment functions of the Bureau of Employment Services. The POEA undertakes a systematic program for the overseas employment of Filipino workers in excess of domestic needs. It is also mandated to protect the rights of these workers to fair and equitable employment practices, and to promote their welfare.

To implement this mandate, the POEA sets minimum wages and working conditions for overseas contract workers. All newly-hired and rehired workers are required to have their employment contracts processed at the POEA. This is a safeguard against very low wages and poor working conditions that may result from direct hiring. Staff of the Labor Assistance Center are stationed at the international airport to make sure that all outgoing contract workers have passed through the POEA. Contract workers who do not have travel exit forms issued by the Contract Processing Group are not permitted to leave the country.

The POEA also accredits foreign employers. Accreditation is a prerequisite to recruitment by these foreign employers through local agents. Like centralized contract

processing, centralized accreditation ensures compliance with minimum standards set by the government. In addition, it assures that only legitimate foreign employers operate in the country.

Further worker protection is offered by the POEA's adjudication system. Through this system, POEA settles all disputes arising from employer-employee relationships or from the interpretation of employment contracts. Sanctions are imposed on the local agents if the foreign employers are found guilty.

*Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA).* The distressed conditions of many overseas contract workers led to the issuance of LOI No. 537 on May 1, 1977. The LOI created in the Ministry of Labor a Welfare and Training Fund for Overseas Workers. PD 1694 of May 1, 1980 formalized the operations of the Fund into a comprehensive Welfare Fund for Overseas Workers (Welfund). It also provided for the appointment of an administrator in addition to the Board of Trustees provided for in LOI 537. PD 1694 was amended by PD 1809 issued on May 1, 1981 which provided for the creation of a Secretariat through which the Board of Trustees would administer the Welfund. It also designated the administrator as the Chief Executive of the Welfund. The Welfund was renamed Overseas Workers Welfare Administration by EO No. 126 issued on January 30, 1987.

LOI 537 envisioned that the Welfund would facilitate implementation of the Labor Code provision concerning the responsibility of the government to promote the well-being of overseas workers. Its services include insurance, social work and legal assistance, cultural services, remittance services, and other social and welfare services. It also provides skills development services and undertakes studies and researches for the enhancement of their social, economic, and cultural well-being. The Welfund was funded by contributions from employers of overseas workers; charging of these contributions to the workers was expressly prohibited. At present, however, workers are made to contribute to the Welfund.

OWWA Centers have been established in several priority areas abroad. These Centers are designed to serve the social, cultural, and recreational needs of overseas workers. They are also utilized for the effective delivery of OWWA's services and benefits to workers at their jobsites. The Centers are under the jurisdiction of the Philippine mission and are managed by Labor Attachés, assisted by OWWA Overseas Welfare Officers and Center Coordinators.

The services offered by POEA and OWWA are complementary. POEA enforces the terms and conditions of employment contracts, while OWWA services are over and above those stipulated in the contract. POEA assists the overseas contract workers on problems arising from employment contracts while OWWA assists these workers in their welfare, social, and related needs (*Primer on OWWA* n.d.:9).

In addition to POEA and OWWA, the foreign service is also mandated by the Labor Code to provide ample protection to Filipino workers abroad. Labor attachés, labor officers, and diplomatic or consular officials are to insure that Filipino workers within their

jurisdiction are not exploited or discriminated against, and to provide assistance to these workers on all matters arising out of their employment.

### Background on Migration Patterns

#### *Foreign Travel*

In a study by Abrera-Mangahas (1987) of Philippine migration trends for the 1980-1986 period, employment emerged as the dominant reason for travel. It accounted for 31.01% of all travel in 1980, reached its peak of 36.97% in 1982, and started to decline in 1983, until it reached 29.54% in 1986. On the other hand, the number of tourists consistently increased during the same period. Holiday (tourist) travel accounted for 21.16% in 1980 and 27.45% in 1986. The increase in tourists during the period, which coincided with the economic crisis and with the decreasing share of employment as a purpose of foreign travel, may be an indication that tourist travel is a disguise for other purposes of foreign travel, especially employment. The outflow of Filipinos for the period 1980 to 1986 is shown in Graph 1. The graph shows the number of travellers according to selected purposes of foreign travel for this period.

Another finding of the study was the decreasing share of male travellers and concomitantly, the increasing share of female travellers. Male travellers constituted 63.47% of outbound Filipinos in 1980. It reached its highest level of 67.46% in 1981, and was down to 53.30% in 1986. Female travellers accounted for 35.82% in 1980; by 1986, this was already 46.08%. These data indicate that there is some basis for the concern over the foreign employment of female Filipinos, especially illegal domestic helpers and entertainers. Graph 2 presents the distribution of outbound Filipinos by sex.

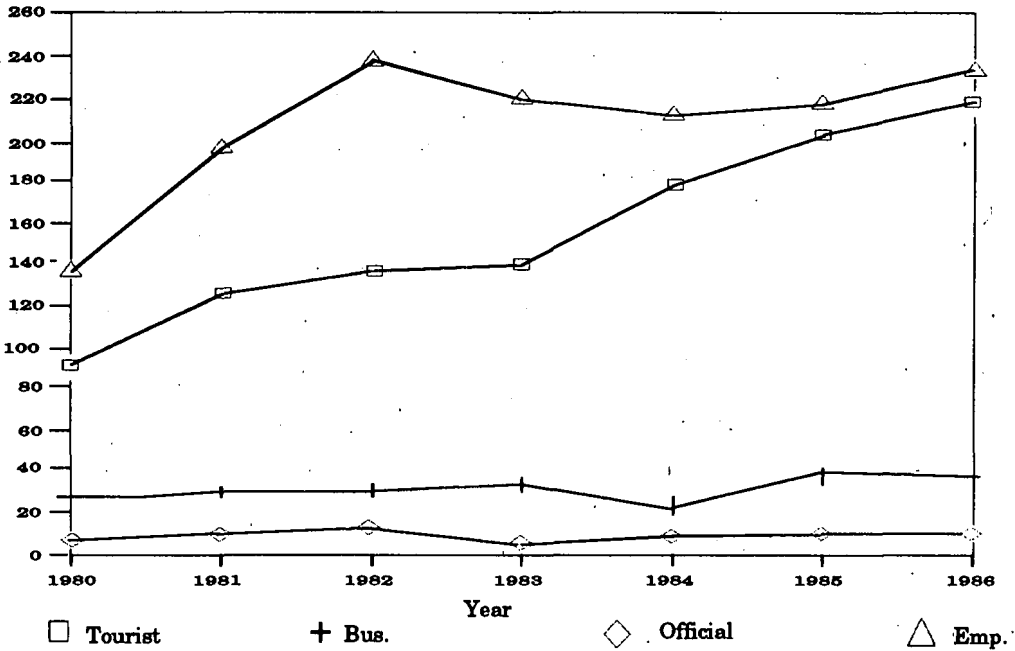
#### *Overseas Contract Employment*

The composition of temporary migrant labor has been changing through the years. This section discusses the distribution of overseas contract workers by occupation, by age and sex, and by birthplace. Monthly pay and placement fees of these workers are also presented.

*Distribution by Occupation.* The distribution of overseas contract workers by occupation for the period 1975 to 1986<sup>1</sup> confirms the increasing share of female workers abroad (See Graph 3). Production workers, who are mostly male, reached the highest level in 1977 at 71.13%, from 20.81% in 1975 and 41.57% in 1976. In 1978, the share of production workers dropped to 58.40%, recovered slightly the next year and continued to rise slowly until it reached 68.73% in 1981. From 1982, this group has been on the downtrend, and accounted for only 36.71% of all contract workers in 1986.

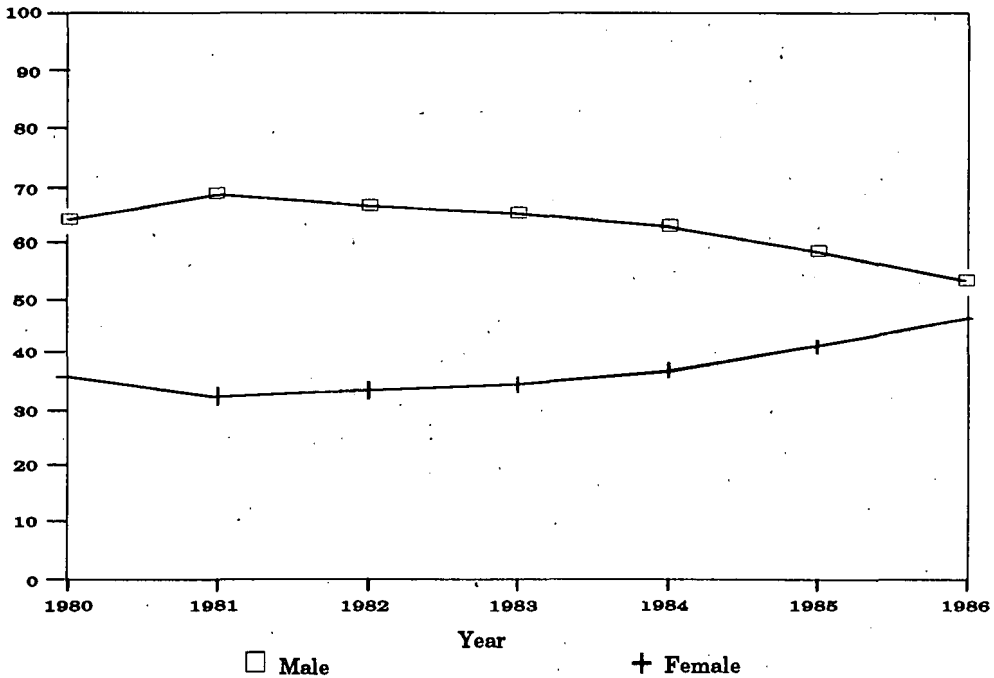
Service workers, who are mainly female, accounted for 21.97% of all overseas contract workers in 1975. The share of service workers decreased slightly to 20.25% in 1976, and from 1977 to 1983 was less than 20% of the total. However, this group has been on the

**Graph 1. Outflow of Filipinos**



Source: Abrera-Mangahas, *Filipino Overseas Migration: Focus on 1975 to 1986, 1987.*

**Graph 2. Outbound Filipinos by Sex 1980-1986**



Source: Abrera-Mangahas, *Filipino Overseas Migration: Focus on 1975 to 1986, 1987.*

uptrend since 1984. In 1986, 32.75% of temporary migrant labor was composed of service workers.

As the graph vividly shows, the downward curve for production workers is practically matched by the upward curve of service workers. If the steep slope of the latter continues, the country may well lose many of its women in the next decade to households abroad.

*Distribution by Age and Sex.* A survey undertaken by the Institute of Labor and Manpower Studies (ILMS 1984) noted that more than half of female overseas contract workers are in the 25-29 age bracket. (See Graph 4.) Young and vulnerable, they are easy prey to illegal recruiters and abusive employers. Male workers, on the contrary, are more evenly distributed among the various age brackets. Most of them are 30 years old and above. They are therefore generally more mature than their female counterparts.

*Distribution by Birthplace.* The same survey found that most temporary migrants were born in the National Capital Region. Table 1 presents the distribution of overseas contract workers by birthplace.

**Table 1. Distribution by Birthplace**

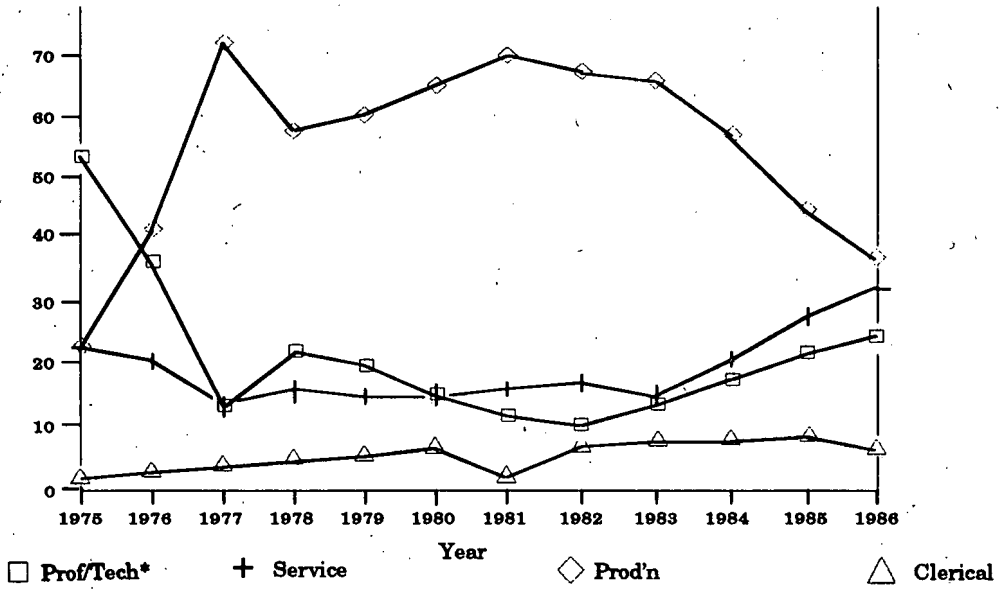
<i>Birthplace</i>	<i>Land-based</i>	<i>Sea-based</i>	<i>All Workers</i>
Ilocos-Cagayan	11.8%	5.6%	10.4%
Central Luzon	22.8%	14.1%	20.8%
Southern Luzon-Bicol	24.6%	23.0%	24.2%
Visayas	10.5%	30.3%	15.0%
Mindanao	2.4%	6.2%	3.3%
National Capital Region	27.9%	20.8%	26.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: ILMS, *Working Abroad*, 1984.

As Table 1 shows, 26.3% of all overseas contract workers were born in Metro Manila, 24.2% in the Southern Tagalog-Bicol area, and 20.8% in Central Luzon. The entire Mindanao area represents only 3.3% of the total. These figures show that recruitment for overseas jobs "tends to favor those near the center of economic activities, ... [and] that the workers who seek and tend to win overseas employment are the cream of the workforce" (Abrera-Mangahas 1987:9-10). Their nearness to the center results in their being educated and well-trained, traits that employers abroad desire in migrant workers.

As for the provincial origins of landbased contract workers, data available are for the period July 1, 1975 to June 30, 1977.<sup>2</sup> The Overseas Employment Program was just installed, and the export of manpower was not yet of the magnitude that it is today. Nevertheless, the data tend to support the finding that the program is more accessible to people at or near the center. The topnotcher was still Metro Manila with 6,267 overseas contract workers, followed by Pampanga with 2,243. Third placer was Rizal with 1,683,

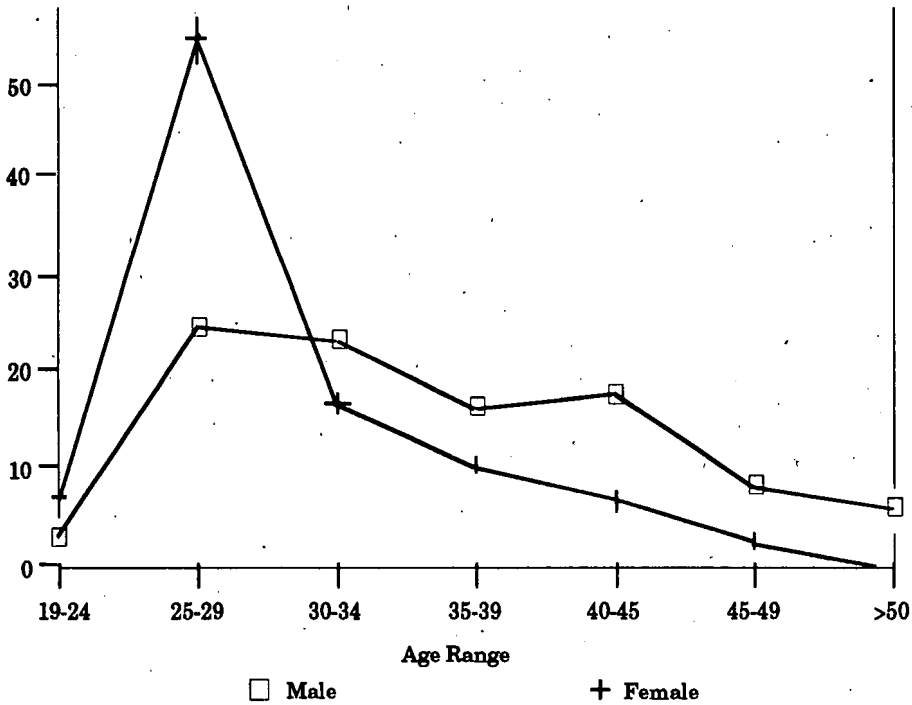
**Graph 3. Overseas Contract Workers by Occupation: 1975-1986**



\*Includes entertainers

Source: NEDA, *Philippine Statistical Yearbook*, 1987.

**Graph 4. Overseas Contract Workers by Age and Sex**



Source: ILMS, *Working Abroad*, 1984



and fourth placer was Cavite with 1,655. No other province contributed a four-figure number to the overseas employment program for that period.

The regional dispersal scheme of the then OEDB was only marginally successful in changing the picture. In 1980, Metro Manila constituted the highest overseas placement of the OEDB, followed by Pampanga, Bulacan, and Pangasinan<sup>3</sup> (Agustin, et al. 1983:34-37). With the possible exception of Pangasinan, the source of overseas contract workers were still those areas at or near the center of economic activities.

*Monthly Pay and Placement Fee.* In a survey of overseas workers and agents, Abrera-Mangahas (1988:3, 7) computed the ratio of placement expenses to monthly pay of various occupational groupings. Table 2 presents her findings.

**Table 2. Placement Expenses (PE), Monthly Pay (MP), and Ratio of PE/MP, 1987**

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Placement Expenses</i>	<i>Monthly Pay</i>	<i>E / MP</i>
Professional	P9,788	P17,680	0.55
Seaman	2,717	10,060	0.27
Entertainer	9,604	9,000	1.07
Skilled worker	7,603	8,620	0.88
Office staff	6,075	8,340	0.73
Laborer	10,550	5,220	2.02
Domestic helper	9,990	4,100	2.44

Source: Abrera-Mangahas, *What Workers Pay for Overseas Jobs: October 1987 Survey of Overseas Workers and Agents*, 1988.

As Table 2 shows, domestic helpers are, on the average, paid the lowest among all overseas contract workers. Yet they incur a very high placement expense, second only to laborers. The ratio of placement expense to monthly pay is the highest for domestic helpers at 2.44. This means that the amount a domestic helper pays in order to work abroad is almost 2.5 times her monthly pay.

In the case of domestic helpers bound for Singapore, actual placement expenses are higher than the average. The usual total expense shouldered by the worker is P12,610. Table 3 shows the breakdown of this amount.

Documentation expense and cost of airticket "are supposed to be borne by the prospective employer, but more often than not, these amounts are passed on to the worker. Placement fees may also vary depending on the local recruiter's requirements. The amounts, however, are regular fees as far as worker costs are concerned" (POEA 1988:3).

**Table 3. Actual Placement expenses Payable to Philippine Recruitment Agency by Singapore-Bound Domestic Helper**

Placement fee	₱5,000
Passport	1,500
Welfund	430
Documentation	750
Air Ticket	4,500
Insurance	80
Medical	250
Others (Miscellaneous)	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>₱12,610</b>

Source: POEA, "The Domestic Helper Issue," March 1988.

#### *Deployment of Domestic Helpers: 1987*

Based on official statistics available from the POEA, almost one-fourth of all landbased overseas contract workers deployed in 1987 consisted of domestic helpers. As far as Asia was concerned, however, more than half of all overseas contract workers deployed were domestic helpers. And for Singapore, almost all overseas contract workers were domestic helpers. Table 4 compares domestic helpers deployed to total deployed landbased workers.

**Table 4. Domestic Helpers Deployed Compared to Total Deployed (Landbased) (1987)**

Area	Total Deployed	Domestic Helpers No.	Deployed % to Total
Singapore	17,601	16,638	94.5%
Asia	90,434	51,414	56.8%
Worldwide	382,229	82,338	21.5%

Source: POEA Statistical Compendium.

The primary destination of domestic helpers is Asia. The Middle East is a far second. If we consider the Middle East as West Asia, which it really is in relation to the Philippines, then "Asia" would represent 93.54% of the host countries of domestic helpers. Table 5 presents the deployment of domestic helpers worldwide.

There were also male domestics deployed in 1987. Their percentage share of the total was, however, insignificant. Worldwide, they represented only 1.58% of the total number deployed for the year. In Singapore, there were only 26 men out of 16,638 domestics deployed. Table 6 shows the distribution of domestic helpers by sex.

**Table 5. Domestic Helpers Deployed Worldwide (1987)**

Area	No. of Domestics	% to Total
Asia	51,414	62.44%
Middle East	24,777	30.10%
Europe	4,132	5.01%
Americas	1,538	1.87%
Trust Territories	452	0.55%
Oceania	17	0.02%
Africa	8	0.01%
<b>Total</b>	<b>82,338</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Source: POEA, 1988 Statistics.

**Table 6. Domestic Helpers by Sex (1987)**

Sex	Singapore		Asia		Worldwide	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Female	16,612	99.84	51,004	99.20%	81,041	98.42%
Male	26	0.16%	410	0.80%	1,297	1.58%
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,638</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>51,414</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>82,338</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Source: POEA, 1988 Statistics.

### Female Domestics in Singapore

#### *Conditions Under Which a Domestic Helper Works in Singapore*

Thousands of young, productive, and hopeful Filipinas fly to Singapore in an effort to improve their lot in life. Many find, to their consternation, that working conditions for them in this newly-industrializing country are no better, and at times even worse, than those in the Philippines. The circumstances of the domestic helper in Singapore are discussed below.

(1) There is no bilateral labor agreement between the Philippines and Singapore. What governs the export of labor to Singapore is the Standard Employment Contract (SEC) of the POEA (Interview with an official of the Office of International Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, March 1, 1990). The SEC is an agreement between the employer and the employee through the facilities and representation of the Singaporean and Philippine employment agencies (APMMF 1988:77). The SEC provides, among others, that the

Filipino domestic helper should be paid a minimum salary of S\$300 a month payable in cash at the end of the calendar month. However, a survey conducted by the POEA in 1987 to determine the prevailing rate in Singapore found that out of 142 respondents, 52.18% received salaries between S\$225-298. The computed average rate was S\$282 which is below the minimum wage stipulated in the SEC. The maximum rate recorded from the survey was S\$428 while the minimum rate was S\$144 (POEA 1988). Agents have publicly stated that employers can and will pay only S\$250 (APMMF 1988:77).

The SEC also provides that the employer should shoulder the cost of a two-way ticket. In practice, however, the domestic helper pays back this particular expense, including, in some cases, the cancellation fee for the unused return ticket. For at least two months, the domestic helper does not receive any remuneration, because her pay is used to refund the cost of the plane ticket (Interview with Nieves S., a former domestic helper in Singapore).

The SEC further provides that the domestic helper is entitled to two days-off per month. Employers, however, have not been implementing this. Many domestic helpers are not allowed any day-off. The domestic is lucky if she can have one day-off a month. Thus, the domestic helper in Singapore has a very limited social life.

(2) Domestic helpers are not covered by the Employment Act of Singapore. Part IV of this Act regulates the conditions of work for workers earning below \$1,250 a month. The Act covers such items as number of hours work per week, overtime pay, retirement, sick and annual leaves, and access to the Ministry of Labor if the worker feels he has been wrongfully dismissed (SGV 1982; SICC 1980). Because domestic helpers are not protected by this Act, they often work long hours without overtime pay, and are not entitled to any of the benefits usually granted to workers.

(3) There is no minimum wage policy in Singapore. Wages are set by the private sector through the market (POEA 1988). Low wages are unavoidable because there are so many women raring to go to Singapore as domestic helpers, not only from the Philippines, but also from Thailand, Sri Lanka, and other Asian countries. Competition from Sri Lanka may be an aggravating factor, considering that these nationals already constitute the second largest group of foreign domestic helpers in Singapore. The asking price of Sri Lankans is much less than that of Filipinas, at times advertised to be only S\$150 as against S\$230 for the Filipinas (APMMF 1988:78). Employers thus consider Filipino domestic helpers as more expensive than their counterparts from other countries, despite the fact that the prevailing pay for Filipino domestic helpers is still below the minimum set by the POEA (1988).

(4) The employer can terminate the services of the domestic helper anytime. The employer can also hire a new maid less than three months after terminating the work permit of the first maid. The terminated domestic helper is, on the other hand, prohibited from seeking another employer during the first three months. However, if the terminated maid is returned to the Singapore agency, the latter usually places her with other

employers, which Singapore law does not allow, and therefore constitutes illegal employment (POEA 1988).

(5) Employers are required to post a bond and to pay a monthly tax for each domestic helper. These expenses lead to a salary deduction scheme whereby the employers recoup their financial losses by deducting the expenses they incur, plus interest at usurious rates, from the salary of the domestic helper (POEA 1988). The poor domestic helper may end up with only a few Singapore dollars for several months after all the deductions are made from her salary.

It is clear that the Filipino domestic helpers are so disadvantageously circumstanced. This situation stems from the fact that the Singaporean government views foreign domestic helpers in a purely economic and utilitarian way.

### Singapore's Policy on Foreign Domestic Helpers

When Singapore became independent in 1965, it was faced with serious unemployment and rapid population growth. Through massive governmental efforts, the economy was transformed from one that was strongly dependent on entrepot trade to one that was more service and manufacturing based (SGV 1981: passim). Manufactured exports grew at an average of 15% between 1965 and 1975. By the end of 1977, the country's manufactured exports were 44% of total exports (Sicat 1983:674-675). By 1978, Singapore had the highest level of industrialization among the ASEAN countries. Manufacturing constituted 26% of the country's gross domestic product for that year (Sicat 1983:509-510). The phenomenal economic growth resulted in a per capita income of \$8,232 in 1979, second only to Japan in South and Southeast Asia (SGV 1981:119).

Hand-in-hand with governmental intervention in economic activities, a family planning program was launched. This program successfully limited the demographic growth rate to around 1.2% a year in the late 60s and early 70s. Thus, as the economic structure was being altered, there was a concurrent change in the labor situation. Singapore by the 1970s was experiencing a growing tightness in manpower. By the end of 1971, the country had achieved full employment. Its capital development program was oriented towards a rapid absorption of labor while its family planning program aimed to retard its rapid population growth. These two programs were absolute necessities because Singapore has limited indigenous natural resources. So successful was the government that the demand for labor in the 1970s was growing faster than the population in the 15-64 age group (SGV 1981:121).

Because of the tight labor situation, housewives have been encouraged to enter the labor force. Towards this end, several measures were passed by the government. These measures include the location of factories near residential areas, the provision of transport to and from work, the establishment of day-care centers for the children, the introduction of part-time and shift work, the granting of enhanced tax reliefs for dependent children of working female professionals with higher qualifications, and the giving of work permits to domestic servants from non-traditional sources (Swee-Hoc 1984:7). "Non-traditional" sources include the Philippines.

### *Foreign Domestic Servant Scheme*

In 1978, the Singapore Ministry of Labor implemented a Foreign Domestic Servant Scheme. The Scheme is an incentive for Singaporean women to seek gainful employment. The foreign domestics would take care of the household chores while the Singaporean women work outside the home and contribute to economic development. It also makes life convenient for foreign investors and professionals by allowing them to avail of the services of foreign domestics. Under the Scheme, foreign domestics are prohibited from settling permanently in Singapore (SICC 1980).

A security bond of S\$5,000.00 to ensure the good behavior of the foreign domestic servant is deposited with the Controller of Immigration before an employer's request for a domestic helper is approved. The bond may either be in cash or in a banker's guarantee, and is refunded to the employer upon termination of the domestic helper's service and her departure from Singapore. If the domestic helper marries, gets pregnant, or is illegally employed in a job other than domestic help, the S\$5,000.00 is forfeited. As a result, employers tend to disallow any day off, controlling all activities of the domestic helper in order to protect their S\$5,000.00 security bond.

In November 1984, the Singaporean government imposed a monthly levy of S\$120<sup>8</sup> on all employers of foreign domestic helpers. This levy imposition was designed to check the sudden increase in the number of foreign domestic helpers entering Singapore (Rodriguez 1985:22). One offshoot of this tax has been the overworking of the domestic helper.

Foreign domestic helpers are strictly monitored by the Singaporean government. They are not permitted to marry Singaporeans. The work permit is issued on the condition that the domestic helper will not marry a Singaporean. The government's immigration policy states that "marriage is allowed only to foreigners having skills and qualifications whose adoption in the permanent workforce will be of value to the nation" (Kaibigan 1987:6). Since domestic helpers are classified as unskilled, and therefore of minimal or no value to the economy, they are not allowed to take roots in Singapore. Instead, they are required to undergo a venereal disease examination and a pregnancy test every six months. A positive result in either one of these examinations means immediate deportation and forfeiture of the security bond.

Singapore laws give no right whatsoever to foreign domestic helpers. Their fate is determined by employers. Release letters or transfer letters can be withheld by employers at their discretion. Employers can also cancel the domestic helpers' work permits anytime. Domestic helpers are treated just like any commodity that may be purchased when needed and discarded when no longer useful (APMMF 1988:78).

The overbearing attitude of the Singaporean government was reflected in its reaction to the ban on deployment of Filipino domestic workers abroad. The ban was announced in January 1988, took effect on March 1, 1988, and was lifted in the case of Singapore on

September 30, 1988. Singapore Labor Minister Lee Yock Suan was quoted as saying that "if the ban were maintained, Singaporeans may look for Malaysian, Thai, Sri Lankan, and other foreign domestic help," and that the (Singapore) government will never set a minimum wage for domestic helpers (*New Straight Times* 1988). Singaporeans are said to have managed without Filipino domestic helpers in the past and there would be no reason why they couldn't manage again if the ban became permanent.

The Singaporean government has refused to cooperate in legislating laws for the protection of domestic helpers. It has likewise continued to grant work permits to domestic helpers holding tourist passports (POEA 1989).

Foreign labor is considered temporary and will be phased out in 1991. However, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has assured the Philippine government that Filipino workers are not affected by this particular state policy. This means that Filipinos will continue beyond 1991 to work on menial jobs which Singapore's own citizens refuse to do (Kaibigan 1987:7).

### Problems and Issues

That problems bog down the implementation of the protection policy is beyond doubt. Despite governmental attempts to protect the female temporary migrant in Singapore, tales of woe reach the Philippines. This apparent helplessness also raises several policy issues. This section discusses the problems of both the domestic helpers and the government, as well as the issues that demand immediate review and resolution.

*Problems of Domestic Helpers.* A long list of problems was documented by the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrant Filipinos (Kaibigan 1987:7). These are:

- (1) Work contracts are arbitrarily designed in favor of the employer. Domestic helpers are not consulted on the provisions of the contract. Even with the institution of the SEC, what is usually followed is the contract entered into by the Singapore agency and the employer;
- (2) The domestic helper is not given a copy of the contract;
- (3) The domestic helper's passport is forcibly held by the employer during the employment period;
- (4) The contract is arbitrarily terminated by the employer and the domestic helper is immediately turned over to Immigration for immediate repatriation;
- (5) The domestic helper works long hours without overtime pay or day-off;
- (6) There is non-payment, underpayment, or delay in payment of wages;
- (7) Domestic helpers are forced to work illegally (e.g., working in hawker centers or shopping centers);

- (8) Domestic helpers are subject to physical and sexual harrassment (e.g., being locked up inside the house whenever the employer leaves the house, being asked to massage or bathe male employers);
- (9) Poor medical attention is given the domestic helper. She is forced to work even when sick. Medical expense, if any, is deducted from her pay;
- (10) The helper is not properly fed;
- (11) There is loss of privacy (e.g., prying into the domestic helper's affairs);
- (12) The domestic helper usually becomes homesick; and
- (13) The domestic helper is subjected to racial discrimination.

Singapore hosts less Filipino domestic helpers than Hongkong. However, the number of welfare complaints reported to POEA are more than those reported from Hongkong. These complaints are mostly on reduction in or unpaid salaries, excessive workloads, physical abuse, and non-observance of holidays/days-off (POEA 1988).

In view of all these problems, several organizations decided to help the Filipino domestic helpers. A voluntary group of young and concerned Singaporeans worked with domestic helpers on Sundays. Both the Catholic and Protestant Churches organized the workers in fellowships with the purpose of providing them a home-away-from-home. Several of these organizations were under Filipino nuns. The first Filipino group was organized by the Singapore Pastoral Institute in 1981. This group met on Sunday mornings. Later on, a social worker helped the members on labor-related problems. One organization worth mentioning is the Geylang Center which started a project for Filipino workers in March 1984. The Center functioned as a crisis center for domestic helpers (Documentation for Action Groups in Asia [DAGA]1986:76). The director of the Center was Father Guillaume Arotcarena, a French priest.

In March 1987, Father Arotcarena co-authored and published the first book on maid abuse in Singapore. The book, entitled "The Maid Tangle," carried documented stories of some 500 troubled maids who have, within a period of less than two years, sought help in the Geylang Center. The largest number of callers at the Center were Filipinas. The book concluded that while the majority of Singaporeans treat their maids decently, the minority who do otherwise "behave in a way that suggests they see their maids as less than human" (Maglipon 1987:10).

Within the same year, the Lee Kuan Yew government arrested 16 people in Singapore, most of whom were church workers, under the Internal Security Act. Among the 16 were four who at one time or another had helped Filipina domestic helpers. One was a fulltime worker at the Center. The Singaporean government charged that the 16, later increased to 22, were involved in a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the government. The Geylang Center was closed down by the Catholic Church in view of the possible tension it might



cause between the Church and the Government (APMMF 1988). Father Arotcarena was expelled from Singapore, and now the Catholic Church is "actively inactive" there (Interview with Father Anthony Paganoni, March 8, 1990).

It is not easy to organize in Singapore. Past efforts to organize migrant workers into power groups have met with official disapproval. The only activities approved are those relating to recreation, counselling, and fellowships within religious boundaries (DAGA 1986:73).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) find difficulty operating openly in that country. The government has a suspicious attitude towards these kinds of organizations. This restricts efforts at networking. The APMMF, for example, could not establish an office there (APMMF 1988:75). It had earlier planned to reach Filipina domestics through a joint endeavor with the group of volunteer Singaporeans. The crackdown on social workers and Church activists in 1987, however, aborted this plan. KAIBIGAN, another NGO dedicated to Filipino migrants, has no linkages in Singapore.

The Filipino Workers Social Center, or OWWA Center, is now the only organization attending to Filipinas in Singapore. Set up on November 30, 1986, the Center, in its first ten months of existence, attended to more than 400 complaints of Filipino workers (*Manila Bulletin* 1987:10). The latest data the OWWA received from that Center is for the period January to June 1989. During this period, the estimated number of Filipino domestic helpers in Singapore was 33,000. The average number of service availments at the Center was 35<sup>4</sup> daily, the highest among all countries where OWWA Centers have been established and Welfare Officers deployed.

Two other programs are closely monitored by the OWWA. These are the public assistance and the repatriation programs. The public assistance program helps overseas contract workers and their families in various problems, such as non-remittance, whereabouts cases, insurance claims, and other related welfare cases. The repatriation program is undertaken in cooperation with the POEA, the Department of Foreign Affairs, and foreign employers. Workers in emergency situations and in meritorious cases are returned to the country, with OWWA advancing repatriation costs under repayment guarantees from the employer, the recruitment agency, or the worker concerned. The cases handled in 1989 under these programs are as follows:

Public assistance	
Unpaid salaries	1
Non-remittance	1
Repatriation Program	
Maltreatment	1
Stranded	6
Mentally ill	4
Human remains	2
	15
Total	15

*Problems of the Philippine Government.* Maybe beggars cannot really choose. The Standard Employment Contract being imposed by the Philippine government is not really followed by Singaporean employers. As already mentioned, the Singaporean government is not keen on helping the Philippine government protect the latter's nationals during their stay in Singapore. Even prior to leaving the Philippines, these workers are already subject to illegal recruitment, i.e., they pay either to Philippine recruitment agencies or to Singaporeans who are here, leave as tourists, and are issued work permits upon reaching Singapore. Six out of ten Filipino maids in Singapore or 60% of the estimated stock of Filipina domestics were estimated to be illegal in 1985 (*Daily Express* 1985 as cited in Smart and Habana 1986:3). When the ban was imposed in 1988, the number of domestic helper contracts processed at the POEA suddenly plunged, but about 1,000 Filipinas who entered Singapore as tourists every month ended as domestic helpers (Carlos 1989:7). Since they are illegally deployed, they are not covered by employment contracts; their situation may be even worse than those legally deployed.

Services of the OWWA Center are limited by financial constraints. Because of the big number of maids who seek refuge there, POEA Administrator Tomas Achacoso issued a memorandum on September 21, 1987, limiting the use of the Center to distressed domestic helpers awaiting settlement of their cases only when the distressed condition is due to molestation, physical maltreatment, illegal employment, or deliberate non-payment of salaries (APMMF 1988:76).

The POEA has transferred to the Singaporean agents the responsibility to settle employer-employee disputes. In spite of this SEC provision, the Labor Attaché still finds his hands full attending to complaints filed at the OWWA Center by domestic helpers against their employers. Embassy officials, however, are still reportedly viewed by the domestic helpers as uncaring or lukewarm because the latter are only maids.<sup>5</sup>

The profile of domestic helpers in Singapore, based on cases handled by the OWWA Center for the period February to June, 1987, shows that the average Filipina domestic helper is between 20 and 29 years old, single, a high school graduate and mostly from Northern Luzon, particularly Pangasinan. Majority (82%) are agency hired, and the average placement fee paid to Manila agencies is ₱14,000 (APMMF 1988:76-77). This profile indicates that domestic helpers are extremely vulnerable. The preference of employers is for young, provincial lasses who are submissive and will work just for the money (unlike Manila girls who may go to Singapore mostly for the experience). Abuses and harassment are difficult to monitor because of the peculiarities of the working environment. How does the Philippine government monitor thousands of domestic helpers in thousands of residences in the host country?

*Issues.* Two interrelated issues need to be resolved by the Philippine government if our female workers in Singapore are to be protected properly.

One concerns *Market Development vs. Welfare Considerations*. It is the government's policy to preserve the country's basic labor standards such as wages. Experience with the SEC, however, proves that minimum standards set by the POEA are being disregarded by Singaporean employers. More recently, the re-setting of minimum wages<sup>6</sup> as a condition

for lifting the ban on deployment of domestic helpers to Singapore has met with indifference on the part of Singaporean officials. If the government insists on this policy, it might well lose the Singapore market to the Sri Lankans, whose government does not impose a minimum wage for any of its workers at home and abroad. On the other hand, export of manpower cannot be discontinued because the economy is not able to absorb many of its productive citizens. The Singapore market for domestic helpers may still be developed because of the government's policy to push more and more of its women into the ranks of the employed in response to the labor shortage in their country. The need for domestic helpers will continue to be felt by Singaporean households. This is a need that can be filled by our women. Is the Philippines willing to engage in a price war with fellow Asians having high unemployment rates, or is the government willing to relinquish the country's share of the market if welfare requirements are not met?

The second is the *absence of Bilateral Labor Agreement*. It is obvious that only a government-to-government agreement can make the host government protect Filipino domestic helpers. If the Singaporean government refuses to enter into such an agreement, thereby ensuring the continued humiliation of our women, is it ethical to continue sending them to that country?

### Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

Ever since the Overseas Employment Program has been instituted, more and more Filipino females have joined the exodus. These women are usually young and therefore very vulnerable. In Asia, they are usually employed as domestic helpers, which makes them even more susceptible to abuse, both verbal and physical. Singapore, which is one of the primary markets for domestic helpers, has a foreign domestic servant scheme which considers foreign domestic helpers in an entirely economic and utilitarian manner. It also excludes these workers from the protection of its labor laws. Its migration policies are anti-domestic helpers and are considered one of the most exploitative in the world.

The Overseas Employment Program's protection policy aims to ensure protection of these Filipino citizens by securing for them the best possible terms and conditions for employment. The POEA, the OWWA, and the DFA are primarily responsible for protecting the interests of the overseas contract worker.

The policy is laudable. It shows that the state acknowledges its responsibility to its citizens working abroad. It assures overseas contract workers of a government that cares. In Singapore, however, the implementation gap stares one in the face.

The government tries to secure wages that would ensure for our workers a fair return on their investments, as well as working conditions that would enable them to maintain their self-respect during their stint abroad. Most domestic helpers, however, receive less than the stipulated minimum wage, and many work under degrading, even frightening, conditions. The government institutes pre-departure control measures. Singapore's practice, however, is to issue work permits to Filipina tourists. The government sets up a welfare system. Yet horror stories about oppressive employers abound, sometimes only made

known when workers lucky enough to have a Sunday-off congregate at the Lucky Plaza. Despite public knowledge of the hazards of working abroad, the number of female migrant workers is continuously increasing. Majority of these female workers are not aware of the structural factors in host countries that led to their deployment to those countries. They only know that foreign employment may be a chance to improve their lot.

The export of domestic helpers alone has developed into a multi-million dollar industry which constitutes a primary component of the country's overseas employment program (*Daily Express* as cited in Smart and Habana 1986:1). It seems, however, that the government has not been successful in stemming the exploitation of these "lowly" workers. If it is the government's policy to continue to deploy these women to Singapore, then it must give teeth to its protection policy.

The plight of the female migrant worker in Singapore is the confluence of three major factors. Firstly, the domestic helper is supposed to make life comfortable for the employer and all members of the household. "Comfort" may mean sexual gratification to a disturbed male employer. Or it may mean slavery to a tyrannical female employer. Secondly, Singaporean life is controlled by a government that refuses to let anything stand in the way of economic growth. Thirdly, the economic orientation of Singapore is echoed in the policy of the Philippine government. The Overseas Employment Program flows from the economic needs of the country.

This paper therefore recommends that the Philippine government propose a bilateral labor agreement with Singapore and then relentlessly pursue the conclusion thereof. The agreement should contain as many specific provisions as possible. Coverage should include such matters as nonconfiscation of employee passport by the employer, rights and obligations of both employer and employee, and minimum welfare standards. The government could also consider working within the concept of an ASEAN economic community in order to internalize the problem within the ASEAN countries.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Based on the number of processed landbased contract workers, as published in the 1987 Statistical Yearbook.

<sup>2</sup> See Abella 1979:89, Table A of Appendix I. The data were taken from the then Bureau of Employment Services (BES) and represent, according to the author, close to 68% of total placements. Record-keeping problems at the BES were given as reasons for the incompleteness of data.

<sup>3</sup> This was later increased to S\$160; again increased to S\$200 effective July 1989. (See Carlos 1989.)

<sup>4</sup> The average for Hongkong, which is the primary market for Filipino maids is only 5 daily.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Manila Bulletin, October 9, 1987; Bello 1988; and Mangalindan 1987. The ex-Singapore domestic helper the author interviewed, however, had only good words for the Philippine Embassy there. Even if she was a tourist-domestic, the Embassy officials helped her throughout her dispute with her employer.

<sup>a</sup>According to Felixberto C. Capucion, Labor Attaché to Singapore, the new rates are S\$300 a month for contracts signed before July 1989; S\$350 for those signed by July 1989; and S\$400 for those signed by January 1990. Cited in Carlos 1989. See also POEA 1989.

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