

PANEL II: LABOR AND MIGRATION

[PAPER 1]

Issues of Filipino Migrant Workers in South Korea

by **Krista Kyla Seachon**

I. Introduction

This research aims to shed light on the issues faced by Filipino migrant workers in South Korea. Currently, there are 24,000 documented Filipino E-9 workers in South Korea as of April 2015. Furthermore, according to the 2014 Foreigner Labor Force Survey, the Korean count for employed Filipino migrant workers was reported to have risen by 6,000 in 2014. Filipinos are the fourth largest group of EPS workers in South Korea. Primarily, they are engaged in the manufacturing sector.

II. Employment Permit System

Following the industrialization of South Korea, the unmet demand for labor in a number of small and medium enterprises in the country grew. As the increasing need for migrant laborers became a pressing concern for the South Korean government, policies regarding immigration of laborers were drafted as a response.

Initially, the government put in place the Industrial Trainee System. However, there were a number of problems

that led to its discontinuity in 2007, like runaway trainees seeking new employers and reports of abuses for trainees.¹

The Employment Permit System (EPS) was then established under the leadership of President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004. The major differences from its predecessor, the Industrial Trainee System include: “bonus allowances, retirement pay and the three basic labor rights of unionizing, collective bargaining and collective action; however, it restricted workers from being joined by their families”² In contrast to the Trainee system, wherein accredited private recruitment agencies are given the opportunity to select prospective workers to be sent to South Korea, the Employment Permit System utilizes a government-to-government approach to lessen illegal recruitment.

To date, the Employment Permit System requires potential Filipino EPS workers to pass Korean Language Training and a Medical Exam. From there, the applicants are then included in the roster of candidates to be considered by the HR Development Service Korea (HRD Korea). The roster is valid for a year only and does not guarantee successful placement. The rigorous process of recruitment also allows for abuses on the part of the employer and the employee. The employer may use the system against illegal migrants in order for the employer to gain maximum benefits from labor. Likewise,

¹ Andrew Eungi Kim. 2009. "Demography, Migration, and Multiculturalism in South Korea." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*.

² Sarah Dela Cruz, Mary Sol. 2013. "The Employment Permit System and the Filipino Migrant Workers in Korea." Accessed August 5, 2015.

illegal migrants may cite the tedious process of the EPS to justify their stay in the country. This goes against the reason for the establishment of the EPS, which is to curb the number of illegal migrants in the country.

Although the EPS has its noble and worthwhile intentions, the dilemmas that result from its signing and implementation prove otherwise. Instead of lessening the number of illegal migrant workers going to South Korea, the establishment of the EPS even led to their steady increase. Meanwhile, a growing number of Korean firms are willing to hire illegal workers since they can withhold proper compensation or benefits stipulated in the EPS, and thus reduce costs. There are also OFWs who would like to avoid the stringent EPS process by entering South Korea with their tourist visas to find work. In addition, illegal migrants can switch employers whenever they want, as opposed to remaining with to a single employer for three years under the EPS.

III. Issues faced by Filipinos who are in South Korea or who want to work in South Korea

Filipinos who would want to work in Korea encounter several stages of problems from pre-departure to deployment.

A. Language Issues

Communication plays a crucial role for an OFW as he tries to integrate himself into a new environment. However, language is more often than not a difficult barrier to break as communication is impeded due to a lack of proper understanding between two parties.

Primarily, learning the Korean language takes a lot of effort. Aspiring EPS workers would have to study the Korean

language for several months and then have to pass a specialized written exam (EPS Test of Proficiency in Korean/ EPS TOPIK). Upon arriving in South Korea, Filipino EPS workers also experience language barriers. Their knowledge of Korean language is put to the test when exposed to the work area, wherein they have to interact with locals who speak differently than textbook Korean grammar. As Voorham put it, "the greater the need for oral communication, the greater the communication problems."³ It is likewise said that proficiency in the Korean language is imperative for an individual to become a functioning member of the society.⁴

In some instances, the language barrier can even be a hindrance to obtaining proper health and social services. It becomes difficult to establish mutual trust between the health care provider and the patient, as well as to obtain a full medical record and history of the patient, to arrive at an accurate diagnosis, and to properly understand the psychosocial background of a patient. As a result of difficulties in communication, there may be instances of late and improper diagnosis, underreports of medical problems, faulty decisions, less equitable health care services, a strained social atmosphere, and increasing racism among others.

It was also reported that the obstacles of immigrant women in finding a job includes finding suitable work, as well as their lack of proficiency in the Korean language.⁵

³A. J. J. Voorham. 1988. "Communication Problems with Migrants: An Empirical Research of Felt Communication Problems of Turkish and Moroccan Clients of the Juvenile Health Care System in Rotterdam."

⁴ Choong Soon Kim. 2011. "Voices of Foreign Brides: The Roots and Development of Multiculturalism in Korea"

⁵ Dong-HoonSeol. 2006. "Women Marriage Immigrants in Korea: Immigration Process and Adaptation." Statistics Korea

The process of communication is influenced by both parties involved. While Ugalde and Cardenas contextualized the factors in the area of health services, these are still applicable to other instances of communication. The quality of communication involves one's understanding and knowledge of the other party's language and culture, as well as their attitudes towards each other. Communication skills and language proficiency are also factors and likewise, expectations of parties.⁶

B. Discrimination

One respondent said that he felt being segregated because of the treatment of EPS workers upon arrival at the airport. EPS workers were separated from tourists and guests and then their bags were disinfected. At the onset, according to this respondent, he felt that he was treated lower than other people going to South Korea.

Several Filipino EPS workers indicated that they were discriminated against in the workplace directly or indirectly. They were given heavier workloads, some were not given the same bonuses as locals, and others were not given the appropriate accommodations.

Even working married immigrants are reported to have experienced discrimination and prejudice, which is one of the difficulties that they have experienced in the work area.

⁶ Antonio Ugalde, Gilberto Cardenas. 1997. "Health and Social Sciences among International Labor Migrants: A Comparative Perspective."

C. Undocumented workers

Undocumented workers remain to be a problem for South Korea's immigration. Some of the reasons include working beyond the 38 years old age limit and could not work under the EPS scheme anymore, EPS workers who were unable to find new employers within three months become undocumented, workers who become undocumented due to problems of release from their employers.

Though these workers can freely move from one employer to another without going through due process, protection afforded to EPS workers are not extended to them. As such, interviewed Filipino EPS workers still believe that going through the process is still better than working as undocumented workers ("artista").

IV. Conclusion

Despite the issues, Filipino EPS workers in South Korea still consider EPS as beneficial. As compared to the status of undocumented workers, the gains from the Employment Permit scheme outweigh its costs.

In response to the issues confronting EPS workers, the conduct of widespread financial literacy seminars for EPS workers was recommended to eliminate the need to go back to South Korea. In the long run, this will benefit even the domestic economy, as it will spur investment in the Philippines.

Anti-racial discrimination education and cultural education for employers were also raised in order to benefit EPS workers. As the lack of understanding of migrant workers was raised as an issue, information dissemination to current

and potential employers would not only help Filipino EPS workers, but also EPS workers of other nationalities.

In the end, synergy between and among the concerned parties will make the conduct of the Employment Permit System better.

* * *

Ms. Krista Kyla Seachon was formerly a Foreign Affairs Research Specialist at the Center of International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Foreign Service Institute, Department of Foreign Affairs. She was part of the Philippine delegation to the ASEAN-ROK Next Generation Opinion Leaders Program in May 2015 held in Seoul, South Korea. She also contributed for CIRSS Commentaries, the regular publication of the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Foreign Service Institute. Her commentaries on the EPS and OFWs in South Korea, South Korean ODA to the Philippines, and the role of the Philippines in ASEAN-South Korea relations also appear in Eurasia Review. Her research interests include the politics and economics in North Korea, South Korea as a middle power, and South Korean popular culture. She graduated with a degree in Political Economy from the University of Asia and the Pacific and is pursuing a Master's degree in Asian Studies, Korea major, from the University of the Philippines.