

Empowering Migrant Women

KALAKASAN Migrant Women Center for Empowerment

KALAKASAN Migrant Women Center for Empowerment (KALAKASAN) serves migrant women and their bi-cultural children in their efforts to live meaningful lives as residents and citizens of Japan. It supports women who are struggling to resolve various difficulties such as being caught in abusive relationships, starting life again with their children after fleeing from such relationships, legalizing visa status and addressing problems related to child recognition, rearing and education while in Japan.

History of KALAKASAN

KALAKASAN was founded after the Yokohama Diocese of the Catholic Church closed its Solidarity Center for Migrants (SOL), which had a Philippine Desk. SOL was established in 1992 in Yokohama city, Kanagawa prefecture, and helped migrants with labor problems initially. Gradually, women also came with their marriage and divorce problems. When SOL closed in 2002, the staff, along with some abused women who had become volunteers, saw the need to continue the work for migrants and decided to put up its own non-governmental organization (NGO). This was the beginning of KALAKASAN Migrant Women Center for Empowerment (more known as KALAKASAN). When a labor union organized by a small group of Filipino workers became affiliated with a larger labor union organization, KALAKASAN decided to focus its efforts on migrant women survivors of domestic violence and their children. Though it was open to migrant women of any nationality, in reality, ninety-nine percent of the women who sought its help were Filipinos. For that reason, of the nine staff members who founded KALAKASAN, four were Filipinos; also, one Japanese staff member knew how to speak Tagalog (most commonly used Filipino language, also referred to as Filipino or Pilipino).

Program Objectives

Migrant women have been coming to Japan either as workers or as spouses of Japanese men since 1980. Countless women subsequently suffered pro-

found harm as victims of human trafficking and multiple forms of violence at home or at the workplace.

The word “kalakasan” means “strength” in the Filipino language. The activities of KALAKASAN aim to facilitate women, and their bi-cultural children, in reclaiming their inner strength with other migrant women residing in Japan, and forging collective optimism for beneficial changes in society.

When KALAKASAN started, it aimed to heal and empower the migrant women survivors of domestic violence and their children. The decade-long experience at SOL revealed the reality of the long period of time that it takes for victims of domestic violence to recuperate: it takes at least five years for those severely abused to return to their normal condition and at least three years for those with less severe abuse. The Japanese government provides financial support for the women and their children at a shelter as well as livelihood assistance after moving to a mother-child institution (*boshiryo*) or to an apartment. But the women need support even after settling in these places. Many of their problems and insecurities stem from the expectations of Japanese workers in the shelters, *boshiryo*, and the City Hall; namely, that Filipino women behave according to norms of Japanese society. This is perhaps a normal expectation as Japanese society expects the same from their own people; but this expectation has been restrictive and oppressive to the Filipino women. Thus, there is a need to continually support these women in their daily lives and maintain their dignity as women, Filipinos, and as human beings.

Programs

The KALAKASAN implements several programs that address various aspects of the problems facing migrant women and their children.

1. Crisis Intervention/Feminist Counseling Program

Responding to migrant women’s problems, KALAKASAN conducts telephone and face-to-face interviews and feminist counseling in Filipino, English and Japanese languages. The wide range of problems women face relate to domestic violence, divorce, visa status, child recognition, and rearing/education of bi-cultural children. KALAKASAN prepares and translates necessary documents as well as provides staff who can accompany the women in their meetings with lawyers and in going to the city/ward offices, courts, medical facilities and other agencies to seek assistance.

In a later development, KALAKASAN started to participate in a national free-dial hotline established in 2012 by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry called the *Yoriso* Hotline. Every Monday, KALAKASAN takes its turn to accept calls from all over Japan. The callers' concerns are generally about immigration residence status, medical issues, educational concerns and questions related to their work. With the *Yoriso* Hotline, KALAKASAN is able to serve migrants beyond Kanagawa prefecture.

2. Follow-up Care/Women's Program

Migrant women victims of domestic violence, exploitation and other abuse need healing. When women are well, their children also tend to be well. KALAKASAN supports their recovery and return to self-reliance through its Women's Program. A number of activities are done under this program including home visits, self-help group formation, seminars, workshops, and gatherings that promote mutual sharing and create new consciousness among abused women about their self-worth and dignity as human beings.

With a different culture, it is important for migrant Filipino mothers to understand their heritage and love themselves as Filipinos. In our research, we noted that the Filipino woman's abusive Japanese spouses/partners looked down on them because they had come from a poor country; they did not know how to behave like a Japanese wife; and they did not speak Japanese well. Moreover, their spouses prohibited them from cooking Filipino food, speaking in their native language, and seeing their Filipino friends. To many of the women, their Catholic faith plays a central role in their everyday life. KALAKASAN seeks ways unique to the women's Filipino culture to help them heal and retain their dignity as Filipino women. Some of the ways KALAKASAN helps these women include; providing opportunities for them to meet and talk in their native language and cook Filipino meals, scheduling gatherings to allow them to share their personal stories, providing healing massages, coordinating collective prayer, and organizing meetings to learn about women in the Bible.

3. Advocacy/Networking Program

By networking with NGOs supporting migrants, other women's organizations, and like-minded specialized agencies, KALAKASAN promotes necessary changes in the legal system to improve human rights protection for mi-

grant women and their children. KALAKASAN is a member of national NGO networks such as the Solidarity Network with Migrants (SMJ) and works closely with other nationwide groups like National Women's Shelter Net, Anti-Poverty Network, Single Mothers' Forum, Japanese-Filipino Children (JFC), and the Catholic Church's Commission for Migrants, Refugees, and People on the Move (JCARM). KALAKASAN advocated for changes and revisions to laws affecting migrant women and their children at both the national and local levels, like the revision on the Japanese Nationality Law and the Law on Domestic Violence.

At the local and prefectural levels, KALAKASAN works with institutions like the welfare (*Seikatsu Hougo* - 生活保護), children and family support (*Kodomo Katei Shien* - 子供家庭支援), and child consultation center (*Jidou Soudanjo* - 児童相談所) as well as with professional groups like the Minatomachi Clinic, Kanagawa City Union and the Kalabaw-no-Kai. It works with lawyers who specialize in women migrant issues. Participation in local activities enhance KALAKASAN's relationships with other institutions in the area. It participates in the Sakura Festival in nearby *Hiyoshi Shiminkan*, the Scrum 21 Festival sponsored by the Kawasaki Gender Equality Center, the Kawasaki Nature Festival, and the activities of the Yokohama Association for International Communications and Exchanges (YOKE).

4. Children's Program

Within the increasing numbers of international marriages, many more bi-cultural children are being born and brought up in Japan than ever before. Many of these children have experienced bullying in school and in the community, resulting in their isolation. Unable to develop their self-dignity, they suffer in many ways. These children come from complex family environments where they might have witnessed their mothers being battered and abused by their fathers, or suffered abuse themselves. Inevitably, they carry enormous psychological wounds.

KALAKASAN helps these children regain their original inner strength and sense of self-worth through the Children's Program, which has various multicultural activities such as English lessons, Filipino cooking classes and Filipino dance classes. In the end, these children learn to love and respect themselves as children of two cultures - Japanese and Filipino.

Activities

1. Summer Camps

At various summer camps, KALAKASAN gathers sixty to ninety mothers, children, staff, and volunteers to summer spots at the beach or by a mountain river. Some of the highlights of KALAKASAN summer camps include swimming in the river and the beach, sitting next to campfires, watching fireworks, and cooking together. It is a time when KALAKASAN children get to know one another, play together, and do activities together. For the mothers this is the time to bond with each other by cooking, relaxing in the river or beach, simply being together, and by dancing together. For both mothers and their children, summer camp is one of the most enjoyable and memorable times of the year.



Christmas party program.

2. Christmas Parties

Christmas is widely celebrated in the Philippines, a country where 86 percent of the population is Christian. Apart from Church traditions, Christmas is a time for families to get together for family bonding, for enjoying festive and special Christmas food, and for the giving and sharing of

gifts. At KALAKASAN, Christmas Parties are a way for Filipino mothers and their children to learn about the cultural significance Christmas plays in the Philippines. For the mothers, it is a means of experiencing a fun and loving Christmas similar to what they had experienced in the Philippines.

3. General Assembly

The annual General Assembly of KALAKASAN always includes a forum or symposium to discuss issues and problems pertinent to migrant women and their bi-cultural children. Some of the topics in the past years included: “Going Beyond Violence and Poverty to Promote and Anxiety-free Environment for Migrant Women;” “Living in the Aftermath of the Triple Disasters” (right after the 11 March 2011 Tohoku earthquake); and the most recent one being, “Let us consider the killing of the junior high student in Kawasaki to better understand bi-cultural children.”

General Assemblies have also been occasions for free consultation with lawyers on issues like separation or divorce, child custody, child recognition, or visa problems. They have also been times of gathering for exercises for healing of the body and the spirit as well as occasions for cooking of Filipino food to be shared with everyone.



General assembly session.

4. Semi-Monthly Outdoor Activity

A bi-monthly activity gathers mothers and children through outings like rice-pounding in January, making Valentine chocolates in February, strawberry-picking in May, dragnet fishing in July, orange-picking in November. These outings are meant to increase communication between mothers and children and to foster bonding not only within the family but among all mothers and children of KALAKASAN.

5. Monthly Women's Gathering

The migrant women being served by KALAKASAN chose to gather one Saturday every month. They recognize the need for their mutual support, encouragement, growth and empowerment. On these monthly gatherings, the women continue their life sharing stories, share food with one another, plan various activities, and celebrate with each other on their birthdays. These activities deepen their relationships with one another.

Another aspect of the monthly gathering is the endeavor to propagate KALAKASAN to other migrant women. Somehow by word of mouth or through public institutions, women learn of KALAKASAN and manage to get help.

KALAKASAN has leadership training and social justice activity for Filipino women. Its "River of Life" activity gathers women to tell their sto-



Filipino women's monthly gathering.

ries and share their experiences in workshops, to gain strength from one another.

As reported in one newspaper article, the Filipino women participating in this project reclaim their creativity ¹

by acting out the realities of our lives in paint, song, dance and theater. Our one-day experience of gender-sensitivity was like a gentle brush stroking our skin. We need gentleness. It helps us feel strong again.

Now these women who have received help from KALAKASAN see the value of widening the circle of empowered migrant women, not only to those who have been victims of Domestic Violence, but to all women in society. There is a need to continue deepening the women's consciousness of women's equality and dignity in society.

Pertinent Research Projects

KALAKASAN women have participated in many research projects including two research projects and three surveys done by KALAKASAN staff themselves.

1. Feminist Participative Action Research (FPAR)

In 2004, one staff member of KALAKASAN organized a research together with five migrant women who had experienced abuse from their Japanese partners. The research focused on stories of the five women and their process of empowerment, from the moment of escape till the time that the women felt that they had recovered their old strengths and their lives became a little more manageable without the stresses of violent partners nearby. The study covered the women's stories and related how their individual efforts and how organizational intervention - that of KALAKASAN - helped them to move towards a space where they felt they were more in control of their lives and were more contented and at peace. The research was significant for KALAKASAN in many ways:

a. The use of the Feminist Participatory Action Research process

When the Philippine Desk was still operating at SOL, many organizations would send staff to ask the migrant women to participate in surveys and/or researches. Generally, these researches neither allow the migrant

women the chance to see the research results nor the suggested actions emerging from the research. The migrant women were frustrated and also felt being exploited by this situation. The process of FPAR allowed the women to own the research and direct the suggested actions coming out of the study because of the following factors:

- Feminist. The study has feminist orientation because it aims at the empowerment of women. It is feminist because it uses women's stories, their stories, as the principal resource of the study. The study aims to look at these experiences as well as analyze their contexts from the perspective of the women coming from an economically poor country;
- Participatory. The study is a participatory activity because various women share their experiences, understanding and analysis of their life experiences and the steps they take in their lives. All participants in the study determine and decide on the results as well as the concomitant actions arising from their findings;
- Action. The study is not only about analysis of the situation of migrant women but also on taking action towards changing the situation of women, those who participate in the study and also other women;
- Research. Five to seven women do the study as a focused group. They not only learn from each other but also from the many resources made available by the assigned research facilitator.

b. The identification of racism as one of the three main causes of oppression experienced by Filipino domestic violence survivors in Japan

The research clearly shows that in addition to issues regarding class and gender, abused Filipino migrant women suffered oppression because of their race. Class, gender and race defined their situation as poor women who are forced to look for jobs or marriage opportunities in Japan; and as wives to Japanese men, to whom they are financially dependent.

As poor women in the Philippines, the opportunities available to them are jobs as entertainers in "snack bars" and as wives of Japanese men. In both the Philippines and Japan, discrimination of women exists in varying degrees and manifestations. In Japan, they experience sexual exploitation in their work as entertainers; they suffer abuse not only from husbands but sometimes from mothers-in-law also. Oftentimes, in the household, the culture of the Filipino wives is looked down upon. The women likewise experi-

ence this racial discrimination in their relationship with the employees of shelters and public institutions.

c. Identification of anger as the impetus to the women's emancipation

In the research, the women pinpointed anger as the impetus that propelled them towards healing. Their anger was generated by the abuse and violations of their human rights. Something deep within themselves told them that what they were experiencing was neither right nor just. Though they felt that anger could be destructive, they also saw that anger could be holy as God's anger against injustices. The women saw God as the life force that constantly guided them to refocus into constructive endeavors.

d. Recognition of the cultural needs of Filipino domestic violence survivors within the process of healing

The women who participated in the research and KALAKASAN provided many recommendations such as policy changes for both governments of the Philippines and Japan, and suggestions to Japanese public and private institutions in the research report. Having confirmed the role of racism in the abuse of the migrant women, the research is significant in challenging the Japanese society, institutions and government workers to recognize that migrant women are not Japanese and therefore need understanding of their cultural needs and behavior. One recommendation is about the need for Japanese social workers to be conscious of the differences among people instead of maintaining the belief that all people are the same and have the same needs. This recognition is a challenge and a call for us Filipinos to dig deep into our cultural heritage and to learn what is empowering and lifegiving in our cultural norms, beliefs and practices. It calls us to be creative and find our own cultural ways for healing and empowerment.

The research report was published in 2006 as a book entitled *Transforming Lives: Abused Migrant Women in Japan Blaze a Trail Towards Empowerment* with the researcher, Leny Tolentino, as author and jointly published by KALAKASAN and The International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism - Japan Committee (IMADR-JC).

2. Spiritual Resources of KALAKASAN Women

The second research project dealt with the recovery of the women's inherent strength by delving into their spiritual resources.

This research identified and explored spiritual resources for healing and empowerment of Filipino migrant women in Japan who have experienced domestic violence from their Japanese partners. Being women with a different culture, they could not fully avail of the services for spiritual and mental care offered by public institutions because of the language barrier and cultural differences.

This study was faithful to the process of Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) by using explicit methods to facilitate ordinary people's reflections and analysis of their day-to-day realities. The women gathered as a small focused group to share and analyze their own life stories as well as learn and analyze history, culture and religiosity of their two contexts, the Philippines and Japan.

The research project took into consideration the cultural character of the Philippines. A strong influence in the Philippine culture is the Catholic religion brought by the Spanish colonizers in the 16th century. Using force and coercion, the Spanish Catholic missionaries succeeded in making Catholicism the face of the Filipino people's religiosity, covering up their indigenous beliefs on ancestor worship and animism. As a resource for reflection, the women used the story of Jesus' encounter of the Samaritan woman at the well in the 4th chapter of the Gospel of John. Particular aspects of this



Sharing life stories.

story aided the women's reflection on the action of the Divine in their lives, the most important one being Jesus' description of the "living water."

This study identified the "living water" promised by Jesus to the Samaritan Woman as the Filipino's gift of faith in Divine Spirits. The Filipino's gift of faith is the "living water" that has been alive in the Filipino since pre-colonial times. This is the "living water" that gushes forth to eternal life as Filipinos keep and nurture their faith in the Divine. This is the women's main source of empowerment.

Spiritual empowerment also came from the women's own inner resources, and the small group process itself. Giving voice to their stories brought healing to the women; new knowledge raised their consciousness; and faith reflections deepened and strengthened their faith in a God who is active in their lives.

The women experienced significant change through this study when they began to accept their own selves, first as women who had unfortunate experiences with their Japanese partners and who managed to rise again, and as women whose faith beliefs and cultural habits are rooted in their own Filipino culture.

3. Care for children exposed to domestic and other types of violence

Many of our KALAKASAN children have something in common with other foreign children: they experienced alienation in society and at school. They have either witnessed their fathers beating up and abusing their mothers or suffering physical and/or sexual abuse from them. The burdens they carry are complex and profound. Besides suffering from physical ailments and psychological disorders, these children are maladjusted in school and would often drop out of school. KALAKASAN undertook a survey to track down such children and their mothers and determine their need for support. Through interview of children and their mothers (and also staff of support agencies), KALAKASAN concluded that these children carry deep-rooted burdens. Their recovery and long-term healthy growth required the support of public agencies as well as private NGOs. KALAKASAN also became aware of the need for the different institutions providing support to such children and their mothers to collaborate and cooperate with each other, in addition to performing their own separate responsibilities.

The survey report, entitled *Research on Actual Conditions of Children of Migrant (Foreign) Single Mother Families and Support for Them - Care for*



KALAKASAN children.

Children Exposed to Domestic Violence and/or Abuses at Home (移住 (外国人) 母子家庭の子どもの 実態と支援に関する調査——DV や虐待などの暴力にさらされた子どものケア), came out in March 2010. It describes concrete situations of the mothers/children who have such difficulties, and offers proposals on the type of assistance they need, namely:

- a. Develop a strategy for early detection of child abuse and domestic violence;
- b. Create a support system appropriate to the child's level of protection;
- c. Consider the mother's need for support;
- d. Consider the way to provide care for the child; and
- e. Streamline the collaborative and cooperative system among various support agencies.

4. Filipino Single Mothers' Capacity to Work and Receive Support

Many Filipino single mothers connected with KALAKASAN, while in different stages of psychological recovery from domestic violence experience, face the problem of becoming financially independent. KALAKASAN undertook a survey on the difficulties faced by households of Filipino single

mothers around Kawasaki city in Kanagawa prefecture, particularly on the availability of jobs they are capable of doing. The survey involved the interview of Filipino single mothers and staff of agencies serving single mothers. The survey revealed that respondent Filipino single mothers could only find the worst jobs available. Their employers saw them as needed only to secure workers. The employers would say, “We have to hire even foreigners to get enough workers.” With low wages and short working hours due to their need to care for young children, migrant women were forced to receive livelihood assistance from the government to support their families. This was the image of the migrant women that would surface whenever the words “migrant women” were mentioned in the interviews. The survey report entitled *Research on Work Conditions of Filipino Single Mothers and Support for Them* (フィリピン人シングルマザーの就労実態と支援にかんする調査報告書) came out in March 2013. The survey concludes that in order to change the situation, the following measures should be done by the Japanese government:

- a. Improvement among public agencies that introduce available jobs, such as Hello Work;
- b. Provide different types of jobs that migrant single mothers can choose from;
- c. Provide Japanese language learning opportunities; and
- d. Institute better system of coordination between social welfare agencies and institutions.

5. Support for Self-reliance of Non-Japanese Women who Suffered Violence from their Japanese Spouses (March, 2013)

Healing the wounds of migrant women suffered from domestic violence requires empowerment towards self-reliance. KALAKASAN promotes the oppressed women’s recovery towards self-reliance. It launched a research project in 2013 to clarify the needs and situations of women of different nationalities (Chinese, Thais, Colombians and those from other Latin American countries, and Filipinas) who also suffered from domestic violence and other oppressive situations related to being foreigners in Japan. The results of the research were shared with NGOs dedicated to helping women in need.

Representatives of these NGOs based in different parts of Japan provided the following comments on the results of the research:

- It is not unreasonable to insist on substantial multiple language services as well as multi-cultural social work arrangements from



Anti-poverty forum.

social welfare agencies. With the limitations of local governments, it is valid to expect the national government to establish specialized agencies for this purpose. It is essential that support services for long-suffering single-mothers be provided. Because physical injuries can remain latent, migrant women should be provided with information in their own language to help them become aware of opportunities for physical examination in the future and child-care services of the city/ward offices when the need arises. As a preventive measure, the brokers of international marriages should be regulated (Chinese Women Support Group);

- It would be beneficial to have City/Ward offices and related agencies provide assistance such as a) Accompaniment and translation support to migrant women; b) Employment search; 3) Child-care information and help; d) Home visits to single-mother households (Thai Women Support Group);
- Consultation system that provides information in multiple languages is needed. As part of the local government services, it would be beneficial to provide multiple language explanation on services that are available to migrant women (such as those who moved in

into the area). The explanation on services for temporary protection (from abusive/violent partners) in different languages should be improved. Improvement of psychological support for women-victims of domestic violence, including process towards independence, is needed. For this purpose, coordination between government support agencies and NGOs is necessary (Korean Women Support Group);

- Aside from shelters that protect women-victims of domestic violence, alternate housing arrangement for women living separately from their estranged husbands, and help with divorce proceedings can be provided. Also, psychological support from experts who understand the psyche and psychology of Latin American women is needed (Latin American Women Support Group);
- There should be lesser disparity among different areas regarding type and quality of services on consultation, temporary protection and assistance for the self-reliance for migrant women. Particularly for domestic violence victims, it is essential that consultation services were provided by government agencies rather than NGOs, and use the migrant women's mother tongue for psychological recovery, counseling, self-help groups, and home visits (Filipina Women Support Group).

From this consultation process, it became clear that while victims of domestic violence shared many common characteristics the situation of migrant women victims differed from the Japanese victims due to the former's diverse national, cultural, social and financial backgrounds. The migrant women victims have extreme difficulty in escaping from their domestic violence situation. And there were also many differences in the situations of the migrant women. Furthermore, the use of national language and other effective approaches commonly used to support migrant women may not consider their unique cultural and social backgrounds. Therefore, techniques of interpersonal relationships and networking must necessarily differ, appropriate to the individual who is being supported. In order to support the move of migrant women domestic violence victims towards self-reliance, it is crucial to review the complete background of the individual woman in facilitating her healing towards wholeness.

An Ongoing Commitment

The process of healing and empowerment does not happen in one cycle. It continues as the women's and children's lives unfold and as they gain new experiences and learning. Helping agencies like KALAKASAN also continue to learn how to aid migrant women and their children in their healing processes as they continue to serve new migrant women and their children and accompany them through an ever-deepening process of consciousness-raising to strengthen the migrant women's and their bi-cultural children's empowerment.

KALAKASAN is now in its fourteenth year of existence. The migration situation of Japan has changed so much since its establishment. Japan has a new need for migrant workers; caregivers for nursing homes, English teachers for the primary schools, and most recently domestic helpers for the Japanese households are being recruited. Also, more Japanese-Filipino children who have been raised in the Philippines are being brought to Japan in their late primary school years or early teens accompanied by mothers who are recruited to fill needed jobs in the country (such as caregiving). These are new challenges that KALAKASAN is looking at in its commitment to empower migrants in Japan.

Endnote

1 Angela Jeffs, "Helping to give back the power that is theirs," *The Japan Times*, www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2007/03/31/general/helping-to-give-back-the-power-that-is-theirs/#.VtklYPl94dV.