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“Muhajirat”:
Muslim Filipina Workers in the Midst of Islamization and its Contradictions
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"Kasi excited ka pag-alis mo, pag ano nga sa plane, magtanong ka sa sarili mo para kang baliw, sabi ko sa sarili ko, kagustuhan mo ito, ano man ang mangyari sa iyo, ang Allah lang ang makakaalam, walang taong nag-utos, ikaw ang nag desisyon sa gawin mo. Kala ko nag-iisa ako nagluluha sa mata, pagtingin ko sa kaliwa at kanan, lahat pati lalaki, nag-iiyak."
(Because I am excited to leave, but when I got on the plane, I was asking myself what have I done. But it's my choice, and anything that will happen to me, it's only Allah who will know, no one told me to do this, it is I who decided. I thought that I was alone crying, but when I looked on my right and my left, everyone, even the men, were crying.)
-- Salaama (October 4, 2004, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte, Mindanao)

"Muhajirat":

Muslim Filipina Workers in the Midst of Islamization and its Contradictions

In March 2007, I went to Sandakan, a small port town in Sabah, Malaysia, to interview Muslim Filipino women working in the town as part of my research field work. I chose Sandakan because it has one of the largest populations of Filipino immigrants, mostly Muslims from the southern Philippines. My examination of Muslim Filipina migrants was a continuation of Fulbright-supported research I began in 2004 on Muslim Filipina domestic workers in the Middle East. I became interested in the plight of Muslim Filipina migrant workers when I returned to the Philippines, my native country, in 1997 after 14 years of living abroad. Ships from the southern Philippines heading for Malaysia make ports of call at several locations in the Philippines, ending at Zamboanga City in the southern island of Mindanao. On my trips to Mindanao, I witnessed women with *balik-bayan* ("back to homeland") boxes and young male soldiers likely returning to their posts. As I traveled often on the ship, I noticed that the majority of the passengers were women, and from my conversations with them, I found out that most were employed as domestic workers in the Middle East and that many were only in their late teens. I wondered what drove the women, who were probably bound by religious tenets, to seek employment in foreign lands at the same time that I became curious about which towns in Mindanao the soldiers were being deployed. My interest in the soldiers' postings was linked to my research – the civil war in southern Philippines, where the majority of the country's Muslims come from, has a significant effect on the employment and livelihoods of the residents.

Domestic workers and soldiers are representative of two pressing issues facing the Philippines – the continuing war in the south and the exportation of labor. In the Muslim community, in particular, there is a link between war, labor and migration. Based on my interviews in Mindanao, the conflict between the government and the separatists in southern Philippines is the major reason for women choosing to work overseas. The decisions of the women transcend the economic concept of the "push and pull" factor. The lack of jobs in the

Philippines and the demand for workers overseas are not the only reasons provided for migration for work. The war has badly hurt Mindanao's economy, forcing women – and men – to migrate. But several of the women interviewed stated that their desire to migrate for jobs was also related to their need to feel safe and of being tired of evacuations in the war-torn region. Based on my conversations with the women and men who participated in this study, the rise of militarization in Mindanao because of the perceived threat of Muslim nationalism and Islamic conservatism in the Philippines parallel the increase in the number of impoverished women migrating to work as servants in Muslim-majority countries, specifically in the Middle East. I find, however, that this migration trend is in contradiction to Islamic conservatism. Hence, the Muslim Filipina domestic worker situates herself in a position of contradictions. She is caught between the conflict of global economic development and Islamic traditions. The goal of this paper is to discuss and analyze this contradiction, focusing on Muslim Filipina migrant workers' construction of identity and relationships within the context of migration, war, labor and Islam in the Philippines.

While research on Filipino domestic workers is substantial, I have found little focus on the role of Islam, especially on how faith guides or makes allowances for Muslim migrant workers employed in Muslim majority countries, such as in the Middle East or Malaysia, usually by Muslim families. Because Filipinos are predominantly Christian, studies have mostly focused on the Catholic Church's involvement in the lives of overseas contract workers (OCW). Consequently, amid the marginalization of Muslim Filipino migrant workers, the women have been buried in the annals of official history even further. Islamic tenets that underscore the integration of religion and the state and the division between male and female spheres become problematic when applied to Muslim Filipina OCWs, who may have had little choice over their employment, but must make choices over their faith while bridging the contradictions inherent in their dislocation. Do these women have to remake themselves fully or do they adopt a fluid identity as they move back and forth from homeland to place of work? What is the role of their Muslim identity and faith in this process? What are their experiences working overseas for a Muslim household in a Muslim-majority country and how are these experiences affecting their Muslim identity? Answers to these questions are imperative because they will not only give these women a voice, but will force Muslims, especially community leaders and scholars, to take action and begin facing the current reality of Muslims.

Locating Muslim Narratives Within Filipino Migration Narratives

In 2003, Annelies Moors (Moors, 2003: 386-394) reviewed five important studies on migrant domestic workers that included the works of Rhacel Parreñas and Nicole Constable, who focused on Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. In her conclusion, Moors highlighted the missing pieces in the scholarship of migrant domestic workers, which included the role of religion and the lack of scholarship in certain regions, the Middle East in particular. The lack of research on migrant workers in the Middle East is connected to the “undertheorized dynamics of religion” (Moors, 2003: 387) in the study of migrant domestic workers. The Middle East is predominantly Muslim and the relationship of the state and the “mosque” cannot be easily categorized and/or ignored because of the power of the religious clerics. In addition, a pronounced division between the male and female spheres exists in the practice of Islam. Hence, such cultural characteristics have influenced the scholarship on Muslim migrant domestic workers because of the difficulty in “entering” these spheres that are also complicated by class and location. Interviewing a domestic worker from the Philippines at her employer’s home might not be the best place for the interview because she might be reluctant to discuss her work environment while her employer is in the vicinity or her mobility outside the home may be restricted by her employer. Also, employers might be unwilling for “outsiders” to interview their employees.

Travel and migration is not a recent trend among the Muslim population in the Philippines. Similar to other Filipinos, Muslim men and women have been migrating for work since the implementation of the Labor Export Policy of the Marcos’ administration back in the early 1970s. Thus, the migration of Muslim Filipinas for work overseas was an issue already being discussed by Muslim women in the Philippines but not fully researched or written about. In a 1994 conference hosted by De La Salle University of Manila, Amina Rasul presented a paper, “Lives of Migrant Women: Heaven or Hell,” which looked at Muslim Filipinas working overseas as nurses and domestic workers. She discussed the women’s psychological and emotional difficulties in adapting to their new economic role as migrant workers while adhering to Islamic tenets. Rasul elucidated the *ayat* (passage) from the Qur’an about the role of men as “protectors and maintainers of women,” and concluded that men and women have equal rights and that women have the right to work outside the home to improve the lives of their families (Rasul, 1995: 69-72). Conservative Muslim scholars will likely oppose Rasul’s advocating for

equal rights and a woman's right to work outside the home. As the Muslim community explores its place in today's world, the desire to modernize but simultaneously the urge to preserve Islamic traditions has been a struggle, especially with women's issues. In her seminal book, "Qur'an & Woman," Amina Wadud emphasizes the importance in reaching back from the past to support "new ideas" in today's Muslim world. Scholars must use the Qur'an and the Sunnah to find parallel with the "new ideas" to be accepted by Muslims (Wadud, 1999: xi). Rasul's argument in promoting women's right to work is compelling because she utilizes the Qur'an to support her opinion, but it is insufficient because the working environment of the women is unsafe and their rights as workers are ignored. Therefore, it is necessary for Muslim scholars to analyze the category of class, in addition to gender, while revisiting the past to find solutions to fully comprehend and find solutions to issues affecting the Muslim communities of today.

The insertion of the category of class in the analysis of the changing role of women in Muslim communities in the Philippines will organically lead to the discussion of migration. The absence of the migration experiences of non-Christian Filipinos, particularly Muslims, is apparent in the research on Filipino migrant workers. Although identity formation has been the focus of most of the studies, the role of religion seems to end at the discussion of its efforts in assisting workers; for example, the Catholic Church providing services for Filipino migrant workers. Moors suggests that there is a need to explore the influence of religion beyond its social organization activities (Moors, 2003: 386-394). While there are still missing discourses in the research involving migrant workers, research done by Parreñas, Chin and Constable provides the space for the workers to share their stories and the effects of working overseas to their families, the community and the whole society (Parreñas, 2001; Chin, 1998; Constable, 1997). My research builds on these studies and hopes to contribute to the perspective that religion is an important factor in the analysis of migration for work. The diversity in the practices and the conflicts that arise from these practices are important issues to examine to fully understand and find solutions to provide a safe working environment for migrant women. It is especially important to integrate religion in the discussion of migration in the Muslim communities because, as explained earlier, there is a need to reach from the past Islamic sources to legitimize practices and/or actions.

Islam and the Diversity of its Practices

Islam is not homogeneously practiced; its followers across the globe have different ways of expressing their faith and devotion. Muslims are divided into Sunni and Shia, and within these two groups, *madhab* (school of Islamic thought), furthers the diversity in practice. Shafi, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali are the four acceptable schools of Islamic thought among Sunnis, while Shias follow different *ayatollahs* (highest ranking religious authority) and/or *mujtahids* (religious scholar). The interpretation of Islam's laws and practices could differ significantly or not at all, thus influencing the opinions on the treatment and protection of female migrant workers. In Southeast Asia, the majority of Muslims are Sunni who follow the Shafi school of thought, while their employers in the Middle East could be following any of the four schools of thought. Furthermore, culture could also shape opinions and practices concerning women, work, and migration. A female worker traveling alone in Saudi Arabia, where the majority follows the Salafi/Wahabi (a branch of Hanafi) school of thought¹, is looked down upon and discouraged. A woman being alone with a man who is not *mahram*² is also unacceptable, but Muslim women from the Philippines who work as servants in the Middle East have no choice about coming in contact with non-*mahram* males because of their work environment. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia, the most conservative Islamic nation, is the popular destination³ of Muslim women from the Philippines who will take up jobs as domestic workers and who will be in contact with non-*mahram* males in the private sphere. Hence, domestic workers, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, in my opinion, are in a predicament where a possible physical and sexual assault can occur and they could be blamed for the violence because they "are not supposed to be there," according to some Islamic scholars who follow the conservative interpretation of the Qur'an.⁴

¹ The Salafi/Wahabi school of thought has been known to restrict women's movement in comparison to others.

² *Mahram* refers to individuals whom a Muslim woman is forbidden to marry because of blood and in-law relationships.

³ By 1974, the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship owed the United States \$3.75 billion, and the export of Filipino labor became the solution to the problem. Coincidentally, the economy in the Middle East was at its peak due to the decrease of oil prices. The lucrative economy of the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia and its construction projects in 1970s, led to the crafting of migration policies by the Filipino government that promoted overseas employment. Marcos' Labor Export Program (LEP) was meant to be a temporary solution to the deteriorating economy.

⁴ In 1994, Sarah Balabagan, then a 16-year-old Filipina Muslim domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates, killed her 85-year-old employer, alleging that he had raped her. She was convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison and a hefty fine, but was released in 1996 after an international outcry. At an Islamic conference in San Jose, California, that I attended, I asked one of the speakers, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, now with Zaytuna Institute and Academy in Oakland, California, his opinion on the Balabagan case. His response: "She shouldn't have been there." His answer reflects the conservative interpretation of Islam.

According to the current census of the Philippines, Muslims make up 5percent⁵ of the total population; the majority of them live in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, concentrated in the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato, Sulu, Maguindanao, Tawi-tawi, and Sultan Kudarat. Islam came to the Philippines at the height of Malay expansion in Southeast Asia in the early 11th century. There are thirteen Muslim ethnolinguistic groups – Maranao, Maguindanao, Tausug, Yakan, Samal, Sangil, Jama Mapun, Palawani, Molbog, Ilanun, Kalagan, Kolibugan, and Badjao (Majul 1985:10-13). The different Muslim groups in the Philippines also practice Islam distinctly, and according to CESAR ADIB? Majul, groups that have earlier contact with Islam perceived themselves as more authentically Islamic compared with groups with a later history of contact. Furthermore, observance of Islamic practices and traditions also differs in the urban and rural areas of the Muslim communities in the country (Majul, 1985: 13-14).

Islam and Migration

Hijrah (migration) in Islam has always been part of Muslim history. The Islamic calendar begins during the migration of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina to seek safety from persecution. The first groups of Muslim migrants were called “*muhajir*” and the residents of Medina who assisted the migrants were called “*ansari*.” Prior to the *hijrah* of the Prophet, a group of Muslims migrated to Abyssinia and were protected by the Abyssinian king from prosecution for practicing Islam. Migration to practice Islam safely has been part of the Muslim narrative early on. Two passages from the Qur’an: “Those who believed and left their homes (*hajar*) and strove (*jahadu*) with their wealth and their lives for the cause of Allah, and those who them in and helped them (*nasaru*), these are protecting friends of one another” (Qur’an, 8:72) and on Surah 4 Ayat 97-100 stated, “Lo! As for those whom the angels take in death while they wrong (*zalimi*) themselves, the angels will ask: ‘In what were ye engaged?’

⁵ Scholarships on the Filipino Muslims written in the 1970s states that the Muslim population in the Philippines is 10 percent. Today, according to the government census, the Muslim population has decreased to 5percent. I am disinclined to accept the new numbers because the majority of my Muslim women informants revealed that their births were not registered as their families do not trust the government. It was common among the informants to have 6 to 12 children in a family. And sometimes in one family there were four wives with several children. Muslims who evacuated from their communities are not included in the numbers. According to a source from Kauswagan who conducted the census in his area, one *barangay* (town) from Kauswagan was not part of the 2000 census because the whole community evacuated due to the military skirmishes in the area in that year. Muslims who work outside the country, or who became political or economic refugees in Sabah, were also not included, along with the *balik-Islam* or Filipino Muslim converts/reverts. In Pampanga alone there are Muslim communities in Lubao, Guagua, and Angeles City.

They will say: ‘We were oppressed (*mustad’afin*) in the land.’ The angels will say: ‘Was not Allah’s earth spacious that you could have migrated therein?’ – also encourage *hijrah* as an obligation for Muslim (Masud, 1990: 32). These passages, according to Masud, not only make *hijrah* an obligation, but also link *hijrah* with *jihad*⁶ and the establishment of relationships between Muslims. *Hajj*, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, is one of the five pillars of Islam. Muslims are obligated to perform *hajj* at least once in their lifetime. Every year, thousands of Muslims globally travel to Mecca to fulfill their obligation. In addition, Muslims, especially Shias and Sufis, travel for *ziyarat* (visits) to certain holy sites, such as the tomb of the Prophet in Mecca, the tomb of Imam Ali, the tomb of Imam Hussain in Karbala, and even tombs of Muslim scholars. There are also accounts of journeys of Muslims who migrated to “seek knowledge.” Sayings of the Prophet that encourage migration or travel include “seek knowledge even as far as China” or “he who leaves his home in order to seek knowledge; he is in Allah’s path until he returns [to his home].” Hence, Muslim men have gone on quests to centers of knowledge in Egypt, Iran, southern Spain, and of course Mecca throughout Islamic history. Because travel is encouraged, Islam came to Southeast Asia through trading and Sufis. As a result, *hijrah* is a major component of Muslim history and also of societies in Southeast Asia, in particular the island societies.

The inclusion of the Muslim population of the Philippines within the narratives of migration studies in the Philippines is a recent development, although Muslims are participants of this migration. Migration scholars began questioning and focusing on communities that were once ignored or overlooked. Kathryn Meissner’s article, “Imagined Identities in Transnational Communities? Women dealing with migration in Muslim communities in Mindanao, Philippines,” discusses Maguindanaoan⁷ women’s construction of their identity and “transnational spaces” as migrant workers (Meissner, 2002: 1-42). Meissner affirmed several of my findings, such as Maguindanaoan women seeing themselves as Filipinas first and Muslim second. According to Meissner, migrating for work in an “exclusive society” hinders

⁶ Muslim scholars from different *madhab* have argued and written about when *hijrah* is an obligation to Muslims – arguments include the obligation to migrate from a *dar-al-kufr* (place of non-belief) to a *dar-al-islam* (place of belief/Islam). For the followers of Maliki, it is only during the declaration of *jihad* that *hijrah* becomes an obligation and for the followers of Shafi, it is not an obligation for Muslims to migrate if they are allowed to practice Islam in a non-Muslim place/country.

⁷ Maguindanaons are one of the 13 ethnolinguistic Muslim groups in the Philippines. Maguindanaons mostly live in Central Mindanao and are the second-largest Muslim group.

Maguindanaoan women from identifying as Muslim; they prefer to see themselves as Filipinas. Meissner asserts that the women she interviewed “did not express the wish to be able to live their lives more religiously,” which is interesting and telling for she had already stated in the beginning of her paper that Maguindanaoans are “more liberal” than Maranaos⁸. Maguindanao, which is perceived as the land of moderate Muslims in the Philippines, is the center of the current civil conflict in Mindanao because the Muslim Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is based in the province (Vitug & Gloria, 2000: 12-131; McKenna, 1998: 209-211). The late Hashim Salamat, a Maguindanaoan, was the founder and leader of MILF, an organization whose goal reportedly is to create an Islamic Mindanao and one that is more “Islamic” compared with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a nationalist Moro organization (ibid 2000; ibid 1998).⁹ The conflict between the Philippines’ military and the MNLF, the MILF, and the Abu

⁸ Maranaos are one of the 13 ethnolinguistic Muslim groups in the Philippines and make up the largest Muslim group in the Philippines.

⁹ On March 18, 1968, a group of young Muslim men recruited by the army for Operation Merdeka, an attempt to wrest Sabah from Malaysia, was massacred in Corregidor after the youths discovered that they would be fighting fellow Muslims or even their own relatives. The tragedy gave rise to a Muslim rebellion in the south and the establishment of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari. The war in Mindanao and the adjoining Sulu archipelago began. In 1972, President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law using the Muslim rebellion and Communist insurgency as the reason. The schism between Muslims and Christians deepened and the marginalization of Muslims intensified. About 120,000 people were killed and 200,000 were displaced from Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago before the Tripoli Agreement signed by the Marcos administration and the MNLF in 1976 gave full autonomy to the 13 Muslim majority provinces in Mindanao. (The move eventually resulted in the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) under the Aquino administration.) The Marcos administration pacified the Muslim elites by providing kickbacks. Marcos’ wife, Imelda, initiated the building of the Globo de Oro Mosque in Quiapo and the Maharlika Village in Taguig, both in Manila, to prove the administration’s peace plans to the MNLF’s foreign supporters – the OIC (the Organization of the Islamic Conference, an international group with a permanent delegation to the United Nations) and the Libyan government. But the truce was seen as a failure because the killings of Muslims by the Philippines’ military continued in Mindanao.

After twenty years, the Ramos administration in 1996 persuaded Misuari to sign another peace agreement, and the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCD) was implemented to integrate the MNLF within the Philippines police and military. (Vitug & Gloria, 2000) On September 1996, Misuari was elected governor of ARMM. In 2000, he was detained under rebellion charges and was released only recently. Today, the military conflict between the MNLF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has resumed in particular in the province of Sulu. In early 2007, several military skirmishes between MNLF and the AFP occurred in the island of Jolo displacing several thousands of people. According to the MNLF, the AFP’s conflict with another Muslim group, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), affects the MNLF because the AFP cannot distinguish between the two groups during a conflict. In 2000, President Joseph Estrada declared an “all-out war” against the Muslim Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which was formed by the now-deceased Hashim Salamat as an alternative to the MNLF in 1977, after the signing of the Tripoli Agreement. The MILF established 46 military camps in the Maguindanao, Cotabato, and Lanao del Sur areas. The camps were destroyed by the war waged by the Estrada administration and almost one million civilians were displaced. Similar to the MNLF, the Philippines’ government is brokering a peace agreement with the MILF but has been unsuccessful because of the lack of trust with the government. The conflict in Mindanao continues until today with three separate and distinct Muslim factions (the MNLF, the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf) fighting the Philippines’ government.

Sayyaf Group (ASG) has displaced thousands of communities in the region, resulting in the further impoverishment of the Muslim communities and in Muslim women migrating for work.

Mindanao Conflict and Migration

Religion is essentially the visible root of civil strife in the Philippines. The war has been the major reason for women choosing to work outside the country or migrate to Sabah, Malaysia, for refuge from the conflicts. Parallel to the vast research and writing on Filipino migration are studies on the Mindanao conflict. The displacement of Muslims because of the conflict has been widely researched, but studies on the labor migration of Muslims, specifically women from the Philippines, is inadequate. Furthermore, the historical examination of the struggle for self-determination for the Muslim communities in southern Philippines is limited to the story of male fighters and/or the negotiations for peace. Narratives about seeking refuge in Sabah of women and their families at the height of the civil war in the 1970s are missing. The discontinuities in the migration narratives could be seen as a reflection of the nation's official narrative. As a former colony, the need of the Philippines to unify as one nation resulted in making invisible the history of minorities, thus marginalizing these communities. Nationalism translated to nation-building in practice has silenced voices that could be construed as a threat to the unity of the nation. And these threats are not limited to minority ethnic groups but also to women advocating for gender equality.

According to the 2006 Philippines National Statistical Coordination Board, 32.9% of Filipinos are poor and the four of the poorest areas are the Muslim-majority provinces of Tawi-tawi, Zamboanga del Norte, Maguindano, and Lanao del Sur. The experience of Muslim Filipinos as a minority and the "other" exacerbates their impoverished condition. The Muslim community in the Philippines has been in continuous struggle for independence since the arrival of the Spanish in the 15th century (Majul, 1985). The ongoing civil conflict in Mindanao is a hindrance to the island's economic and social development as men and women are forced to find work in the Manila region or overseas. The Philippines is not the only country in Southeast Asia sending workers to the Middle East. Indonesia, with the largest Muslim population globally also has a large number of women leaving for the Middle East¹⁰ as domestic workers (Anggraeni, 2006). The role of Islam in the identity of the workers has been analyzed by different scholars,

¹⁰ Indonesia is also sending workers to Malaysia, Hong Kong, Korea, and others parts of Asia.

policy makers, and religious leaders in Indonesia. Kathryn Robinson's analysis in "Gender, Islam, and Nationality: Indonesian Domestic Servants in the Middle East" on the "nation's debates about Indonesian women working overseas" provided me the foundation in including the discourse on the issue of Muslim women migrant workers. Robinson states that there is an assumption that working for Muslim households will ensure the safety of the women employed as domestic workers in the Middle East, especially in the "devoutly atmosphere of Saudi Arabia" (Robinson, 2000: 255). The Muslim identity of the women in Indonesia also attracts potential Muslim employers to hire the women as domestic workers. The religious identity had unified both employer and employee but became controversial after stories of abuse experienced by Indonesian women came to light, troubling the Indonesian government and public. The reactions of the different Muslim organizations to such cases were as diverse as the practices in Islam. Organizations with ties to Saudi Arabia reaffirmed the strict adherence to Islamic laws and practices, claiming that these abuses couldn't have happened and placing the blame on the victims themselves. Domestic workers who reported rape by their employer were held responsible for their own victimization. But local Indonesian Muslim organizations had a different take on the abuse. The Indonesian-based Islamic organization, Muhammadiyah, for example, declared that the strictness of Saudi Arabia "created problems for those women who were abused by their employers" (Robinson, 2000: 256). Lukman Harun, then the leader of Muhammadiyah, suggested that the Indonesian government create strict regulations in the recruitment of women working overseas and that women be educated about the situation in Saudi Arabia.

The diverse and sometimes conflicting practice of Islam is articulated in the experiences of Filipino Muslim domestic workers. For instance, *purdah* (separation of women from men) is not practiced in the Philippines in comparison to its prevalence in some areas of the Middle East or in the Indian subcontinent. The majority of Muslim women in the Philippines have freedom of movement compared with Muslim women from the Middle East. Although their parents, especially the fathers, try to forbid them from working overseas, the women very often have persisted in applying for jobs and getting their way, without the father's permission or protection.

The assumption that being a Muslim woman working in a Muslim household in a Muslim-majority country will protect her from abuses is prevalent among Muslims, although

stories of abuses of women working as domestic workers are rampant.¹¹ Arabs employers, according to a Muslim scholar from the Philippines, perceive domestic workers as “already paid for.” Before the acquisition of the domestic worker, the potential employer pays a large amount of money employment agencies, eventually sparking the notion that the Filipina domestic worker is owned and is now property. The employer pays approximately \$2,000 or 100,000 pesos¹² to the employment agency¹³ for each domestic worker. The hiring of a servant in households in the Philippines or Indonesia is also practiced differently from that in the Middle East. The individuals I interviewed in the Philippines suggested that domestic workers should be treated as one’s kin, similar to the Indonesian concept of an ideal relationship between employer and domestic worker. The Filipino or Indonesian concept of employer-employee relationship is often transferred to the anticipated relationship in the Middle East. In the Middle East, domestic workers are holders of a *qadama* visa.¹⁴ Being identified as “*qadama*” (slave or servant) influences how women working as domestic workers will be treated, although they are Muslims. Naming workers as “slaves” has resulted in the abuse and inhumane treatment that domestic workers have experienced, based on their stories. The method that can protect the rights of women working as domestic workers is not only through secular laws, but also through protection from Qur’anic foundations, Islamic traditions and sayings, and history.

Islam and Labor Rights

Although Muslims are also workers, labor is an issue that Muslim scholars tend to ignore. Eggi Sudjana, a Muslim scholar from Indonesia, criticized Indonesian Muslim scholars who focused on Islamic dress instead of ensuring the rights of workers. Sudjana’s book, “Pay the Labor Salary before their Perspiration Dries,”¹⁵ discusses the Indonesian labor experience and provided an Islamic perspective on labor issues in addition to providing the Islamic position on

¹¹ The Indonesian government is using the same reason to promote Saudi Arabia as a destination for domestic workers instead of Malaysia or Singapore. (Silvey, 2005: 134-137)

¹² In 2004, one dollar is the equivalent of 50 pesos.

¹³ Potential employers in the Middle East approach a local employment agency, which will have a connection or an office in the Philippines that is responsible for recruiting potential employees, obtaining visas and other necessary travel documents to get to the Middle East country. The \$2,000 payment to the employment agency is for the process of recruitment and obtaining documents. Potential employees are also required to pay placement fees of 6,000 to 8,000 pesos or \$120 to \$160. The employees pay for their own passport and other required fees by the Philippines’ government.

¹⁴ In 2007, the Department of Labor and Employment of the Philippines reported that Saudi Arabia agreed to the reforms presented by the Philippines to raise the salary of domestic workers from \$200 to \$400 per month and to modify the “*qadama*” classification to household service worker (HSW).

¹⁵ *Hadith* or Prophet Muhammad’s saying that has been used to ensure labor rights.

the protection of workers in the urban and rural areas and also of migrant workers. Sudjana uses the Qur'an and the Sunnah as his theoretical foundation in understanding employer-employee relationships. He states that Islam has given a "very clear guidance" about work, compensation, and the treatment of workers, so Islam should be the "paradigm" that Muslims should apply in providing rights and protection for workers. Instead of using ideas adapted from the West that are "secular and socialistic in nature," Sudjana proposes adapting and locating labor and human rights within Islamic traditions and perspectives (Sudjana, 2001: 37-69). The critique by Muslim scholars of socialism and Marxism is not new. Since these two paradigm systems have influenced Muslim society, scholars have written and discussed socialism and Marxism either to denounce them or to find parallels. The late Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, a Shia scholar from Iraq, had denounced Marxism in his writings on Islamic economics as had Ali Shari'ati, the late Iranian sociologist. Meanwhile, Syed Hussein Alatas, a Malaysian Muslim scholar, finds a connection between Islam and socialism/Marxism, as he "advocates an autonomous social science tradition" that is founded in the "Third World context." Islam as practiced in Indonesia and Malaysia is one of Alatas' "Third World context." Alatas also departed from the "Orientalist-Occidental divide," and therefore was successful in locating the parallel between Islam and socialism/Marxism (Alatas, 2006: 161-179).

Scholars such as Sudjana and Alatas are missing in the Philippines. There are no known Filipino scholars who have written or discussed Islamic opinions about labor rights. However, Muslim scholars in the country will be pragmatic, as I discovered in my interviews in Mindanao. According to Marawi State University scholars, Muslim women are not permitted to live with non-*mahram* men; however, their protection should continue at any destination. The scholars' solutions were founded on Islam and the current political and economic situation in the Philippines, and their responses indicated that they knew that they could not influence the situation in the country nor the decisions of women going overseas to work. For example, they said it is not only important to educate the domestic worker of her rights and what to do in an emergency but also to educate employers about the rights of the employee and the consequences if they are violated. Filipino organizations should partner with organizations in the site of migration to protect the migrant worker from abuse and maltreatment, the scholars said. One scholar suggested that the role of the Philippines' Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) should be broadened. The OWWA is responsible for monitoring the safety of migrant

workers by maintaining constant communication with them. There is a need to add a separate agreement in the contract that states both employer and employee rights and responsibilities, according to the scholar, who also recommended adding a Qur'anic quote in the document to remind the employer of his/her responsibility as a Muslim. Other suggestions included a photograph of the employer and a map of his/her residence in the contract in order to locate the worker in case of an emergency. While the scholars' responses mirror that of Lukman Harun of Muhammadiyah, the issue of women from Muslim communities in the Philippines leaving for work overseas failed to spur debate among Muslim scholars compared with Indonesia, where Muslim scholars have already established a space for discussion and policy advocacy protecting domestic workers from their country.

Filipino Muslim scholars' disregard of labor issues appears to be rooted in the fear of being labeled "Marxist" or "Communist," ideologies that are tied to the West and thus affecting the scholarship that is desperately needed in Muslim communities globally. Although Malaysian and Indonesian scholars may face the same accusations, Muslims in the Philippines are a minority population that is marginalized and in need of a unified identity. Muslim leaders who have even hinted of an attraction to Leftist ideals have been immediately tied to communism and faced an end to their political ambitions. The Philippines in the late 1960s to early 1980s was not only fighting against Muslim separatists but also against the Communist/Leftist movement. On the international arena, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan through the 1980s sustained the anti-Communism stance of Muslims in the Philippines. The hostility against Western ideas, especially by conservative Muslims, has influenced and restricted Muslim discourse on issues such as dress and prayer. In addition, the class question complicates the already contentious relationships between the 13 ethnolinguistic Muslim groups in the Philippines. Thomas McKenna divides Moro intellectuals into two types of counter élites during the early years of the establishment of the Muslim separatist movement in the Philippines (McKenna, 1998: 138-149). McKenna cites two "education projects" that define the divisions: secular and Islamic. The secular education was part of the Philippines' government Muslim integration project called Commission on National Integration (CNI). CNI provided scholarships to young Moro men and women to pursue higher education in the capital region. On the other hand, Islamic education was provided by the Egyptian government under Gamel Abdul Nasser between 1955 and 1978 for "more than two hundred" young Moro men to study in Islamic

institutions in the Middle East, particularly Al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt (McKenna, 1998: 139-144). The main leaders of the two prominent Moro organizations, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), were products of one of the two educational projects. Nur Misuari, the leader and one of the founders of MNLF, was a CNI scholar who received his Ph.D. from the University of the Philippines (UP), Diliman, while Hashim Salamat, the founder of MILF, was an al-Azhar graduate (ibid, 1998). During the beginnings of the establishment of the MNLF, Misuari's affiliation with UP Diliman was used by his opponents from the traditional Muslim elites to call him a Communist or Marxist because UP Diliman in the 1960s and early 1970s was known for its Leftist students and professors. Misuari severed his ties with the UP student organizations in order to dispel the Communist label and to strengthen his chance in leading the Muslim separatist movement in the 1970s.

Although Muslim scholars from the Philippines have not been active in advocating for better working environments or stricter laws in the recruitment of domestic workers, the labor movement in the country under the leadership of leftist organizations such as Migrante and Kilusan Mayo Uno (KMU – “May 1st Movement”) has been successful in fighting for stricter laws on the recruitment of migrant workers. Several incidents of human rights abuses that led to deaths of migrant workers have also forced the Philippines government to implement laws and to create governmental organizations for migrant workers. Indonesia had adapted the Philippines' migrant labor policies but it is imperative for the Philippines to also be cognizant of labor migration analysis of Muslim scholars from Indonesia in order to protect Filipina domestic workers in the Middle East because both Muslim women from Indonesia and the Philippines are members of the *ummah* (Muslim diaspora).

Experiences of Migration and the Creation of the Self and the “Ummah¹⁶”: Islamic Conservatism & Movement: “Ummah” of Men and Exclusion of Women

Ummah is the Islamic concept of community – a community of Muslim believers of different nationalities, races, ethnicities, class and gender. There is an assumption that the concept of *ummah* guarantees a sense of brotherhood or a sisterhood among Muslims. Migration reinforces *ummah*; therefore, it is believed that a Muslim Filipina domestic worker will be treated better than their non-Muslim counterparts and that her identity as Muslim will be strengthened by her interactions with fellow Muslims. But *ummah* appears to be more applicable

¹⁶ *Ummah* means community of believers – or the entire Muslim world.

to the experiences of male Muslim migrant workers, who have been inspired to lead or join religious groups or movements. The experiences of Muslim women working in the private sphere differ greatly, making their community a Filipino one rather than an *ummah*. Based on my interviews with the FILIPINO MUSLIM DOMESTIC WORKERS? women, it seemed that their experiences are similar to women who share the same class status and not to Muslim women who are their employers. Ka Salaama, a Maranao woman, said:

“Wala akong mga kaibigan na Pilipino sa trabaho. Pero pag may nakita akong Filipino, magtitinginan at ngingiti at sabihin ‘kabayan.’ Lahat ng mga kasama ko sa trabaho ay mga Muslim pero hindi sila Arabo kaya ay angtrato ay parang katulad sa mga Pilipino (I don’t have any friends who are Filipino at work. But when I see other Filipinos, we look and smile at each other and will say ‘kabayan.’ All of my co-workers are Muslims but not Arab so they are treated like Filipinos).”

In the Philippines, the identity of these workers as Muslim is predominant because of the shared experiences with other Muslims who are victims of war and discrimination. They are not seen as full Filipinos in the Philippines because they are not Christians. Hence, their identity as Filipino is in frequent adjustment based on their location, but their ethnolinguistic identity as Tausug, Maranao or Maguindanao and their class status are constant.

The work of James Siegel on Acehnese men migrating for work and/or to attend *madrasahs* (schools) outside their home villages informs my discussion on the identity-building of Muslim Filipina women as workers overseas. *Hijrah*, as stated earlier, has been a major component of Muslim history¹⁷ and also of societies in Southeast Asia, in particular the island societies. Siegel’s book, “Rope of God,” discusses the Acehnese concept of migration and its impact on the men who left their homes for work and/or for education. Meeting with Muslims from other parts of the world connected them to the bigger Muslim community and helped binding¹⁸ with *ummah* (Siegel, 1969: 283). The transformation of the men outside of their familiar space caused them to return home with new ideas. Using Siegel’s analysis to understand the identity construction of Filipino overseas contract workers, I find that the fluidity of identity

¹⁷ The Islamic calendar begins with the *hijrah*, the migration of Prophet Muhammad to Medina from Mecca for safety.

¹⁸ I specifically use the word “binding” because it reminds me of the symbol of a rope.

– the shift from Muslim or Moro to Filipino – is based on similar experiences the workers shared with Filipinos who are non-Muslims. The women also empathized with other domestic workers from Indonesia, Sri Lanka or East Africa. It appears that their class, and not religion, connects them. Both Muslim and non-Muslim women reported physical, sexual and verbal abuse, isolation, withholding of their salaries and their passports, and separation from their families and children. Thus the concept of *ummah* was definitely denied to Muslim women working as domestic workers as established in the treatment they received from their Muslim employers. In comparison with the experiences of Muslim men from the Philippines, women are seemingly less likely to become politicized on their return as exemplified by Abdurajak Janjalani who worked in Libya and came back to the Philippines to set up the Muslim separatist group, Abu Sayyaf. Or Christian Filipino men who converted to Islam while working in the Middle East and returned to the Philippines to establish the Rajah Soliman Movement (International Crisis Group, 2005: 2). Currently, there are no accounts of women returning to establish or join Muslim separatist organizations.

According to several policy makers, poverty breeds militant and conservative Islam. Based on evidence from other parts of the Muslim world, Islamic conservatism has the tendency to hinder women's freedom of education, work, and movement but the Muslim Filipino experience differs. The Filipino government's fears of the rise of Islamic insurgency in Muslim areas in Mindanao has resulted in greater military concentration in the region, increasing the number of civilian evacuees. The conflict has decimated the livelihood of civilians, who are forced to leave the area for work, and in the case of several women and girls I interviewed, apply for domestic work overseas, thus furthering the marginalization and poverty of the Muslim community. This marginalization and impoverishment, according to Amir Sulaiman, a Filipino Muslim scholar, has made it difficult for Muslims to fulfill their religious duties, such as a Muslim man, the traditional breadwinner of the family, being unable to be a provider because of unemployment. Muslim men and women are also encouraged to marry young, but if the man cannot afford to pay for the dowry, he would have to put off his marriage. The discrimination and hardships experienced by Muslim men seems to have led them to re-evaluate their religious identity, consequently pushing them to join Islamic movements in the Philippines. While men are compelled to join the movements, Muslim women, especially young Muslim women, are likely to take on the mantle of being providers for the family, looking for jobs outside the

country. This work and travel overseas without a male relative is depicted by conservative Muslim scholars as the inability of Muslim women to practice Islam. The perceived lack of “male protection” makes women vulnerable to abuse, often by fellow Muslims in the Middle East, discouraging them from joining the Islamic movements in the Philippines although not from abandoning their Muslim identity.

Locating Muslim Identity as a Domestic Worker Within the Practice of “Hijab,” “Hajj,” “Ramadan,” and “Polygamy”

The migrant experiences of Muslim Filipino women working in the Middle East differ from that of Muslim Filipino men. Muslim men mostly are recruited as construction workers, waiters, or drivers. For Muslim women, domestic work is widely available as well as any other caregiver job such as nursing.¹⁹ Based on my conversations with the women, I discovered that their experiences working closely with other Muslims, such as their employers, did not increase their knowledge about Islam nor did it strengthen their Muslim identity. The majority of them faced long working hours, especially during Ramadan; were given rare days off; were expected to wear the *hijab* (head covering); were forced to give up their passport to their employers; had no freedom of movement; and were physically and sexually abused. While they did not reject Islam because they still regarded themselves as *Moro*,²⁰ meaning they are Muslims and members of one of the 13 ethnolinguistic Muslim groups from the Philippines, they reported finding commonality in experiences with other domestic workers, such as Christian Filipinas, Indonesians, Sri Lankans, Somalis, and Ethiopians. But they also did not turn their back from Islam.

Practice of “Hijab”

The Muslim community in the Philippines is hardly monolithic, divided as it is in ethnolinguistic categories and schools of thought. One topic of debate is the *hijab*, which becomes a tool in assessing one’s “Muslimness.” The Tausug are seen by other Muslim groups as the “most Islamic” because Tausug women wear the *hijab* “properly” – meaning, no hair,

¹⁹ I have spoken to Filipino men, Muslim and non-Muslims, about their work experiences. It is interesting to note that sexual assault/rape is one of their fears but not at their work; rather it is with being alone with Arab men in the desert.

²⁰ The Spaniards upon arrival in what is now the Philippines named the native inhabitants of the islands “Moro,” after recognizing them as Muslims. The Spaniards were familiar with Muslims because of Andalusia, the area in southern Spain that was under Moorish rule. The Moors were defeated by Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella and were pushed back to Northern Africa.

neck and ears are left bare. In comparison, the Maguindanao and Maranao (who are generally more educated) are regarded as not staunchly Islamic because those women tend to wear the *hijab* loosely – meaning, strands of hair and parts of the neck and ears are exposed. Stereotypes about each group were expressed by my interview respondents.²¹ Tausug women are seen as less likely to leave the Philippines as domestic workers and Maguindanaon women, who are called “less Islamic,” are deemed more likely to take up jobs abroad as domestic workers. On the other hand, Maranao women, who also are generally more educated and tended to be the most fashion-forward among all my respondents, leave the Philippines as nurses or other medical professionals and will not work as domestic workers, according to the women I interviewed. Similar to Meissner’s observation, my respondents perceived Maguindanaoans as “liberal” (Meissner, 2002). The women I interviewed had few comments about some of their ethnolinguistic counterparts, such as the Kalagan or Badjao, whom I also interviewed and who are themselves marginalized among Muslims. The Kalagan and the Badjao were regarded as “less Islamic” and backward because of the pre-Islamic traditions practiced by the groups; for example, Kalagan women are allowed to be “*pandita*” (religious leader).²²

The majority of the women who participated in my research were Maguindanao. The women wore the *hijab* loosely, but according to them, when working in the Middle East they dress in strict Muslim wear as instructed by their employers. Based on some of the accounts, the women wore the proper *hijab* at their employers’ home; they were not allowed to go to the men’s area or outside the home; and they had a separate room.²³ Those working in Saudi Arabia had to wear a black *abaya* (long loose robe/overall) and *niqab* (veil covering the lower part of the face) when, if allowed, out in public – a drastic change for several of the women. According to Safiya:

“Meron mga regulasyon sa bahay, katulad ng hindi mo puwedeng kausapin ang mga lalaki at kailangan magsuot ng hijab pag may mga lalaki.” (There were regulations in the house. For example, you cannot

²¹ I interviewed a Maguindanaoan woman who wears the “proper” *hijab*, or the Malaysian-style *hijab*, and she said she was always mistaken for a Tausug. She told me that when she corrects people about their error, they seem surprised.

²² Historically, the Kalagan and the Badjao have been subjugated by the Tausug and Maguindanao sultanates.

²³ But there are also women whose employers are might not be as well-off as others – where it will be harder to avoid the men’s area or there is no men’s area.

talk to men and you have to wear the *hijab* when men are around.)
(Interview Safiya [pseudo.]

Nurkisa, when asked about her experience wearing the *hijab* while working in Saudi Arabia, stated:

“Maganda naman ang trato sa mga babae. Pag kailangan na lumabas ka sa bahay, kailangan mag suot ka ng itim na abaya at ang mata lang makikita.” (I observed that women were treated well. When you leave the house, the black abaya and your eyes are the only part of your body that should be seen.) (Interview Nurkisa [pseudo.]

The *abaya* and the *niqab* kept them safe in public because they were overtly seen as following the country’s laws and culture. The movement of the women is controlled in addition to what they can wear in their place of work and in public. Whereas in the Philippines, Muslim women are allowed and encouraged to attend Friday prayers, the Filipino Muslim workers in the Middle East were not allowed to attend Friday prayers. During my interview, Safiya claimed that many workers were tested about being Muslim:

“Alam mo, tinetest kami kung talagang Muslim kami, pinapa-recite ng surah galing ng Koran. Tapos padasalin ka pa at titignan. Kung hindi ka marunong mag-dasal, ibig sabihin hindi ka Muslim. Alam nila na kung ikaw ay nagsusungaling na ikaw ay isang Muslim.” (They also test if you are a true Muslim by asking you to recite a *surah* (chapter) from the Qur’an. They also ask you to pray and they watch you. If you do not know how to pray, then they can tell whether you are Muslim. They will know if you are lying about being Muslim.) (Interview Safiya [pseudo.]

Interestingly, the majority of the women did not return to the Philippines wearing the proper *hijab*. Does that reflect in any way their religious knowledge or piety? The discussion about *hajj* will illustrate how the pilgrimage to Mecca seemed to have transformed some of the women interviewed.

The “Hajj”

Many of my Muslim Filipina respondents mentioned that the attraction of performing the *hajj* is the reason for choosing Saudi Arabia as their employment destination, especially among the educated women I interviewed. Rakiya, who was applying for a job in Saudi Arabia as a “medtech,”²⁴ expressed this wish similar to Nurkisa’s decision to work in Saudi Arabia AS WHAT? Rakiya has a medical technology degree and Nurkisa has a nursing degree. Both women are Maranao and from the Lanao del Norte area.

“Ang importanteng na purpose ko doon ay mag-Hajj. Kasi iyong mga Muslim ang importante iyong mga hajj dito sa Pilipinas kung hindi natin kaya na makapunta doon hindi tayo makapunta doon, kaya napakalaki. Kaya iyan ang importante na pinuntahan ko sa Saudi.” (The most important is to do the *hajj*. If I am in the Philippines, it will be difficult for me to do the *hajj* because it will be expensive. That is the most important reason I went to Saudi [Arabia].) (Interview Rakiya [pseudo.]

Some of the women I interviewed were nurses or midwives and went on the *hajj* at their own expense. On the other hand, women who worked as domestic workers were ordered to accompany their employers who were going to Mecca for the pilgrimage. The women were proud to call themselves *hajja*.²⁵ One woman, in particular, asserted that fulfilling her Islamic obligation to perform the *hajj* made her a better Muslim. She said she left the Philippines without wearing the *hijab* and came back as a *hajja* and a *hijabi*.²⁶ Ani said:

“Gusto kung pumunta sa Saudi Arabia para sa hajj. Bago ako umalis, hindi ako ‘practicing’ Muslim. Hindi ako nag susuot ng hijab at marami akong salat na nakalimutan. Pero noon nandoon ako, na ka pag hajj ako pati yong mga magulang ko. Dahil sa karanasan ko doon, nag-iba ako. Noon, hindi ako nakikinig sa aking ama na mag-suot ng hijab. Sabi pa nga nya sa akin na huwag akong babalik na din naka-hijab. Pero ang karanasan ko sa Saudi ay talagang iniba ako.” (I wanted to go to Saudi Arabia because of *hajj*. Before I left, I was not a practicing Muslim. I was not wearing the *hijab* and missed a lot of prayers. But when I was

²⁴ Medtech means Medical Technology – a person who tests blood, urine, etc.

²⁵ *Hajja* is a Muslim female who has performed the pilgrimage (*hajji* is the equivalent term for Muslim males).

²⁶ *Hijabi* is a Muslim female who wears the *hijab*.

there, I was able to perform *hajj*, and even my parents. My experience changed my spiritual outlook. I had defied my father by not wearing the *hijab*. I was told by my father not to come home if I don't wear the *hijab*. But my Saudi experience transformed me.) (Interview Ani [pseudo.]

None of the domestic workers I spoke to who did the *hajj* with their employer said that their experience had transformed them quite like that of Ani, who was working as a nurse in Saudi Arabia. Ani's *hajj* experience appears to have reinforced her religious convictions.

“Sawm” (Fasting) During the Month of Ramadan

Fasting during Islam's holiest month of Ramadan is compulsory to practicing Muslims. All of my respondents discussed working nonstop even as they fasted. They objected to their long work hours but could not complain to their employers. Nura who worked in Dubai stated that her employer's family ate late into the night instead of sleeping:

Buong pamilya hindi sila natutulog and kain ng kain. Hindi ako puwedeng matulog dahil nasa kusina ako para mag luto, mag linis ng mga pinggan. Yung kamay ku laging basa. (The whole family did not sleep and they kept on eating. I am not allowed to sleep because I was in the kitchen to cook and to clean the dishes. My hands were never dry.) (Interview Nura [pseudo.]

Other domestic workers shared similar experiences. Their work began at 3 p.m. to prepare for the daily Ramadan “party,” cooking for the *iftar* (meal to break the fast) AT SUNDOWN? They would then have to get ready for their employers' families eating again at midnight and cleaning up BATHING? at 5a.m., before beginning to cook again for the *suhoor* (meal before beginning the fast). According to the women, the holy month is the busiest and tiring:

“Sa Saudi Arabia, kailangan kang magtrabaho buong araw. At ang maraming trabaho ay sa Ramadan. Ang daming pagkain na dapat lutuin.” (In Saudi Arabia, you have to work all day. And the Ramadan is the month with a lot of work. There are so many foods to cook.) (Interview Nura [pseudo.]

Polygamy

In addition to the discussion of their obligations as Muslims, the women also discussed controversial issues such as polygamy. Polygamy seemed to have affected all of the women, especially the married ones. In Islam, Muslim men are allowed to marry one to four women but only if the man is able to treat all of the women equitably.²⁷ Women who had left behind their husbands in the Philippines to work overseas were worried about their husbands taking another wife. Nuralisa from Kauswagan was one of the women who discussed this fear:

“Ayaw ng asawa ko na umalis ako. Pero ayaw ko na ring umalis ulit dahil natatakot ako na mag-asawa ng iba ang aking asawa pag umalis ulit ako. Noong umalis ako para magtrabaho sa abroad, ang aking ina ang nag-alaga sa aming mga anak. Ang asawa ko ay isang teacher sa Marawi at binibisita nya ang mga bata sa nanay ko. Natatakot ako na mag-asawa sya ng iba dahil narinig ko sa mga ibang tao na malapit sya sa mga estudyante nya. May nakilala akong estudyante nya sa hospital noong sinamahan ko ang matanda. Nakausap ko yung estudyante at tinanong ko kung taga saan sya, sabi nya ‘Mapaindi.’ Tapos marami akong tanong para malaman ko kung ano ang ginagawa ng asawa ko.” (My husband did not want me to go abroad. I did not go work abroad again because I am afraid that my husband will marry someone else if I leave for the second time. My mother took care of our children. My husband was working as a teacher in Marawi and visited the children at my mother’s house. I am afraid that he will take another wife because I heard that his students are very close to him. I met a student of his in the hospital when I was with my employer. I talked to the student and asked her where she is from and she answered, “Mapaindi.” And then I gathered information about what my husband was up to.) (Interview Nuralisa [pseudo.]

While the Filipino domestic worker worries about her husband taking a second wife while she is away, her female employer overseas appears to be threatened by her presence in the household; the worker, especially if she is “good looking,” is seen as competition for the male employer’s attention and could potentially be a second, third, or fourth wife, according to my respondents.

²⁷ According to some Muslim scholars, monogamy is preferred.

Consequently, several of the women stated that their male employers are nicer than their female ones. They reported that the female employers physically and verbally abused them often, while they were targeted for sexual advances by their male employers. Some employers could not afford separate spaces for male and female occupants of the house, so the domestic worker was constantly in contact with her male employer. Maryam stayed with her employers for just seven days because she did not feel comfortable being around her male employer:

“Hindi ako komportable doon sa amo ko na lalaki. Noong una kung gabi doon, gusto kong i-lock yung pinto pero yung kasamahan ko sa trabaho na taga Ethiopia, huwag daw kasi yung amo naming ay kakatuk at bubuksan ang pinto para gisingin kami. Tapos yung banyu ay naka-konnect sa aming kuwarta at hindi ako komportable. Yung amo kong lalake tinaanong ako kung bakit hindi ko siya tinitignan. Sinabi ko sa kanya na lalaki sya at hindi ako puwedeng tumingin sa kanya. Tapos, hinawakan pa nya ang aking baba para tignan ko sya. Gusto pa nyang dalhin ako sa mall para bumili ng aking mga gamit pero hindi pumayag ang asawa nya. (I felt very uncomfortable with my male employer. Our sleeping quarters, at my first night, I wanted to lock the door, but the Ethiopians did not want to lock the door because the employer would knock and open the door for us to wake up. Also, the bathroom was connected to the bedroom and I felt very uncomfortable. The male employer asked me why I never looked at him. I told him that he is a man and I am not allowed to look at him. And he also would touch my chin to make the point. Then, he was supposed to buy me stuff. Then, he wanted to take me to the mall, but the wife said no.) (Interview Maryam [pseudo.]

Maryam ran away from her employers and ended in jail where she met women from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Morocco, and India. She told me that based on the conversations she had with the women, they were in the same predicament as Filipina domestic workers. She said she met a Moroccan woman who escaped from her employers because her employer’s wife was jealous of the attention given to the Moroccan by the employer and made the worker’s life miserable. In addition to Maryam, Layla also told stories of the abuses she suffered from her female employer.

Layla praised her male employer; she said that the only *kontrabida* (villain) was the man's wife, especially when she threw a tantrum:

“Gusto lahat ng atensyon sa kanya especially pag wala sya sa mood. Tapos hindi nya gusto pag kasama ko yung matandang babae. At yun naman talaga ang trabaho ko – mag alaga ng matanda.” (She wanted all the attention whenever she was in a bad mood. She did not like the fact that I was with the older woman. But my job was to take care of the older woman.) (Interview Layla [pseudo.]

The fear of their husbands taking a second, third or fourth wife is exemplified in other ways, too. In Salaam Compound,²⁸ young Muslim women waiting to leave for the Middle East for work meet Muslim men who are married to women who are already working in the Middle East and sometimes will end up as second wives. Muslim women applying for work overseas migrate to the Manila region while waiting for their passports, visas and other documents. The women usually stay with their recruiter if they do not have any relatives in the town. The wait could last from one month to six months, resulting in women ending up married instead of leaving the country. According to one of the young men I interviewed, dowries in the urban areas are lower compared to dowries in Mindanao. Dowries in Mindanao would include a carabao or water buffalo, land, and a house – those who could afford this are older, rich men who already have wives. But in Salaam Compound, young married Muslim men, whose wives are working abroad as domestic workers, have several opportunities to meet Muslim women who are waiting to leave overseas for work. Sakina, one of the women I interviewed, found out that her husband had taken a second wife when she returned to the Philippines after a stint of working in the Middle East. Salaambai said she felt betrayed when she discovered that her husband had married again because she had been sending money to him and her son while she was working in the Middle East. She decided to stay in the Philippines after she came back because she became pregnant with her second child and because she wanted to be with the father of her children. Several of the women talked about the injustice of Muslim men marrying another woman while

²⁸ Salaam Compound is located in Culiati, Quezon City. The land was given to the Muslim community by Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. There are certain areas in metropolitan Manila where Muslims migrants from the South live – Salaam Compound in Culiati; Maharlika Village in the Taguig area; and in the Quiapo area close to the Globo de Oro Mosque.

their first wife was working overseas – but the women stated that they stayed in the marriage for the sake of their children and the stigma attached to being a divorcee.

“Bakwit”(Evacuees): Lack of Islamic and Secular Education

Filipina women’s desperate need to work overseas often leads to illegal recruitment, falsification of documents, and acceptance of dubious employment contracts with a drastic salary reduction. The educational levels of women I interviewed were low, whether secular or Islamic. About 24 percent had elementary education and 16 percent had less than 6th grade education. Poverty and the constant evacuations due to military clashes affected the education of the women. The other reasons were cultural traditions, such as not supporting female literacy and the fear of Christian influence. One woman said she was stopped from going to school after elementary school because her father was afraid she would be around non-Muslim individuals if she attended school and that she would marry a non-Muslim. Several of my respondents mentioned teachers ridiculing Muslim customs and perpetuating stereotypes. The trend among the women corresponds to the statistic that only 60 percent of Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) residents are functionally literate (Bagayaua, 2004: 22-23). In Mindanao/ARMM, only 54.25 percent attend high school compared with Visayas (59.62 percent) and Luzon (74.33 percent). According to several studies, a large number of Filipinas working as domestic workers overseas were college graduates, but this is definitely not the case in the Muslim community (Bagayaua, 2004: 22-23). Forty-six percent of the women I interviewed did not attend *madrassahs*; the rest had one to four years of education in the Islamic schools. According to them, the curriculum for the first four years in a *madrassah* is the reading and writing of the Qur’anic and classical Arabic and basic information about Islam. All of the women I interviewed said Islam is important to them. Being Muslim is an integral part of their identity – they are Moros, hence Muslims, they claimed – but their knowledge of Islam was limited. If they had any concerns regarding their rights as Muslim women or about religious contradictions in their life, they do not have the “Islamic language” to express themselves. Having “Islamic language” is crucial to asserting their rights as Muslim women and/or workers. If the women had knowledge of the *hadith* (the sayings of Prophet Muhammad) or the Qur’an, they would be able to use them to get their salary on time, or to get time off during the Ramadan. Sayings of the Prophet, such as “Pay the worker while the sweat is still on the brow,” will remind their employers about their responsibilities.

Fifty-three percent of the women I interviewed were in their mid-teens (14 to 18 years old) when they first applied to work overseas. Using false birth certificates in order to qualify to work overseas is a common practice.²⁹ The result of the lack of education, whether secular or Islamic, of young Muslim women is exemplified by Zaynab, a young woman whom I interviewed. Her lack of education provided her one option – to work overseas as a domestic worker. Zaynab wears the *hijab* but in the Maguindano style (or as what strict Muslims will call the “Mickey Mouse³⁰ *hijab*.”) Zaynab also never attended a *madrasah*, so she has no knowledge of Arabic. But she lives in a Muslim community in Cotabato, an area that has been affected by the civil war from the 1970s. Zaynab’s Muslim identity appears to be deeply interwoven in being an evacuee because of the war:

Oo. Oo, nag evacuate kami. Pag makakita ka ng helicopter, magbomba yan. Hindi ako magi iyak. Yung iba pero ako hindi ako mag iyak. Dahil sa palaging evacuation, hindi ako makatapos tapos ng pag-aaral. Palaging may guerra. Pag nag evacuate kami, pumupunta kami malayo sa guerra. Pero ang pinakadelikado talaga ay iyong helicopter. Kahit saan ka magpunta, magbomba yan. Nagtatago kami sa malaking kahoy doon para hindi magkita. Pagkatapos ng bomba, babalik kamin ng mga bahay naming, pero mag guerra yan, mga tatlong araw yan puwede ka nang bumalik. Iyong mga iba, hindi na makauwi sa probinsya nila pero yong iba sa hapon, puwede na silang bumalik. (Yes. Yes, we have evacuated. When we see helicopters, we leave because it will drop bombs. I do not cry during evacuations, not like the others. Because of constant evacuations, I did not finish school. There is always a war. When we evacuate, we go far from the war/bombings. But the most dangerous is the helicopter. Anywhere you go, it bombs. We hide behind big trees so they don’t see us. After the bombing, we go back home, but if there is a war, it will take three days before we can go back home. But the others, they can never go back to their province; although others, they can at the end of the day.) (Interview Zaynab [pseudo.]

²⁹ The legal age to apply for a job overseas is 21 years.

³⁰ The *hijab* is tucked behind the ears, displaying them like the cartoon character’s ears.

Zaynab's desire to help her siblings go to school and have a better life prompted her to apply for work overseas. She never questioned how it would affect her Muslim identity. To Zaynab, the Philippine government's action against the Muslim Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is an action against all Muslims in the country. Her Muslim identity seems to be more connected with her experiences as an evacuee and job discrimination. When asked why she was wearing the *hijab*, she replied that it was because it is a Muslim cultural tradition.

Sisterhood: Relationships with Fellow Domestic Workers

As established earlier, Filipinas are not the only domestic workers in the Middle East. Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Somalian, and Eritrean women work with Filipinas in the same household. Several of the women interviewed stated that Indonesian women were less likely to fight back and were treated the worst by their employers. Bahia said she worked with a 17-year-old Indonesian girl, who would be slapped by her female employer when she made mistakes. Bahia said: "*Mga Arabo gusto nila yung mga taong lumalaban*" (Arabs like people who fight back). Layla also mentioned that she always told women whom she met in the SWA (Social Work Administration) in Saudi Arabia to fight back:

"Sa SWA, naging 'interpreter' ako doon sa mga domestic na tumakas sa amo nila. Binibigyan ko ng mga payo na lumaban sila. Kailangan mung lumaban para magkaroon ng respeto. Sinabi sa akin na pag may problema, pumunta sa embassy. Pero sa SWA, may mga hokum sa SWA, pag yung employer ay kukunin yung helper, kailangan nilang kausapin yung hukum na hindi marunong mag-English. Ako ang ginawa nilang interpreter, kasi marunong akong mag-English. Minsan yung hukum walang pakialam kung sabunutan yung helper sa harap nya. Kailangan lumaban sila. Maraming Indian at Sri Lankan na ayaw lumaban. Yung mga Pilipina, lumalaban. (At SWA, I became an interpreter for domestic workers who were mistreated. I gave them advice to fight back. I told them they have to fight back to gain respect. I was told that if there is a problem, I have to go to the embassy. I observed that there were judges at SWA, and for example, the employer was bringing in a helper, and they have to talk to the judge who did not know how to speak English. I was asked to be the interpreter. The judge did not care if the employer

pulled the helper's hair or beat the helper in front of him. The helper needed to fight back. There were a lot of Indians and Sri Lankans who did not fight back. The Filipinas fought back a lot)." (Interview Layla [pseudo.]

Norfaiza from Marawi also had similar experiences of abuse. She was verbally abused by her female employer and when she complained to her male employer, she was transferred to his in-laws' home.

Filipina domestic workers empathized with their counterparts from other parts of the world who were in the same predicament. But they seem to have bonded best with women from their home country, whether they were Muslims or not. This "sisterhood" could be the result of speaking the same language; the majority of the women provided several accounts of camaraderie, sharing their common experiences of leaving their families and the Philippines for the first time. Salaama, a Maranao who worked as a seamstress and domestic worker in the Middle East, stated that a fellow Filipina is a *kababayan* (fellow countryman).

Nurkiya, a Maguindanao, revealed that as soon as she meets other Filipinos at parties attended by her employers, there is an immediate bond. Being Muslim does not hinder her from connecting with a non-Muslim Filipina, she said. Her ties to another Filipina do not extend to domestic workers from other parts of the world who might be Muslim. Hence their Muslim identity is not the foundation of building a sisterhood. Instead, their identity as Filipino seems to be the category that creates a connection and eventually a sisterhood. Lack of a unifying language could have prevented the women in building sisterhood. The Filipina domestic workers spoke English and Arabic with their co-workers and employers³¹. But the majority of them learned Arabic on the job. According to Layla:

"Pag nagkakausap kami ng employer ko Arabic at English. Yung Indonesian na kasama ko na marunong mag-Arabic, sya yung mag-translate ng Arabic sa Bahasa Indonesian sa akin. Naiintindihan ko ang Indonesian. Pag hindi ko naiintindihan ang Arabic, yung Indonesian ang mag-translate. Yung Indonesian hindi marunong mag English pero ang

³¹ But sometimes it is Bahasa Indonesia, as in the case of Layla who speaks Bahasa Indonesia and had an Indonesian co-worker who was fluent in Arabic.

galing nyang mag-Arabic. Tinutulungan nya lahat kami na hindi marunong mag-Arabic kung hindi magagalit yung amo namin (I speak Arabic and English to my employers. My Indonesian co-worker translated Arabic to Bahasa Indonesia to me. I know a little Bahasa Indonesia. If I do not understand my employer, I will ask my co-worker to translate. The Indonesian did not know how to speak or understand English but was fluent in Arabic and she helped the others in the household because the female employer would get mad at her.)” (Interview Layla [pseudo.]

Similar to Layla and the other respondents, Norfaiza from Marawi communicated with her employers in Arabic that she picked up while employed. Nuralisa from Kauswagan learned basic Arabic after working for three months. She said:

“Lahat ng mga katulong sa bahay ay mga Filipino. Pero ang lengwahe sa bahay ay Arabic. Pagkatapos ng tatlong buwan, marunong na ako mag Arabo. Natutuhan ko ang Arabo para sa mga gamit sa kusina at mga pagkain. (All the helpers in the house were all Filipinos. The language spoken was Arabic. After three months, I learned the language. I learned basic Arabic for kitchen stuff and food).”

The lack of a common language may have hampered the potential to build a support network among the workers but it did not stop them from assisting each other in developing their selfhood. Based on their accounts, Filipinas and non-Filipinas appeared to have helped each other greatly despite a lack of communication tools.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to discuss and analyze domestic workers who are Muslim Filipinas and the construction of their identity and relationships within the context of Islam, migration, and labor. Islam is an important aspect in the lives of the women. Their Muslim identity in addition to their ethnolinguistic group (e.g., Tausug, Maranao, Maguindanao, Badjao) precedes their identity as Filipinos while in the Philippines. In the Middle East, working for a Muslim household, their Filipino identity takes a precedent before their Muslim identity. The domestic workers are seen as Filipino and not as a member of the *ummah* by their Muslim employers. My research revealed that the labor migration experiences of Muslim women from the Philippines differ from the migration experiences of Muslim men from the Philippines. Their

experiences working and living in a Muslim household as servants were unsuccessful in integrating the women in the *ummah*; instead, they made their connections with other Filipinos and domestic workers stronger.

The women also challenged my assumption that they would have received better treatment by their Muslim employers because they share the same faith. Islamic tradition and practices were followed by the women – wearing the *hijab*, performing the *hajj*, observing the holy month of Ramadan and praying. Wearing the *hijab* was mandated for the women workers, with the intention of protected them from non-*mahram* men; instead, several of the women reported being victims of sexual harassment. Ramadan became the busiest time for all the women, who were also fasting as they worked all day and night as exemplified by Nura, who revealed that her hands were never dry that month and that she had to sneak a nap under a table while a co-worker covered for her. One of the appeals of working in the Middle East and specifically Saudi Arabia is the opportunity to perform the *hajj*. But only two domestic workers I interviewed had such opportunity and only because their employers took them along to continue serving them in Mecca.

The practice of polygamy has made a major impact on the lives of the worker and employer. Many of the husbands of the women I interviewed married again while their wives were employed as domestic workers overseas. The women often ended up supporting the husband, their children, and the second wife. Female employers, on the other hand, seemed to be threatened by the presence of another woman in her household who could potentially be a co-wife. Accounts of physical and verbal abuse from the female employers because of jealousy were shared by all of the respondents. The experiences of the women living in the Muslim household were neither successful in fostering a strong Muslim identity nor did they improve the Islamic knowledge of the women.

Based on my interviews with the women, their experiences appear similar to women with whom they share the same class status and not to Muslim women who are their employers. In the Philippines, because of their experiences as war victims and because of religious discrimination, their identity as a Muslim is paramount. Their identity as Filipino is in constant adjustment based on their location; hence, their ethnolinguistic identity as Tausug, Maranao or Maguindanao and their class status seem to be constant. In comparison with Filipino Muslim

women's migration narratives, Muslim men's narratives are underscored by a deeper commitment to Islam – stories abound of men returning to the Philippines as leaders or members of the Islamic movement. Filipino Muslim men also migrate for work that is male-specific, for example, construction, chauffeuring, restaurant wait staff.³² The men have freedom of movement compared with the women, so they can go to the mosque unaccompanied, perform *hajj* on their own, and also face fewer problems in escaping horrible work conditions. The confinement of Filipino workers overseas does not allow them such privileges.

The men's experience outside of their familiar space appears to have transformed them personally, and upon returning to their homes, given rise to new ideas. Working overseas has exposed the men to the influence of the Muslim concept of *ummah* as they meet and connect with fellow Muslims from other parts of the world. In contrast, the women had different experiences because of the limitation imposed not only by their location of employment (the home/the "private sphere") and their class as "servants" but also of the Muslim tradition of gender separation.

³² Men pay higher placement fees compared with the women and this can deter Muslim men from applying for jobs overseas.

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