

## **Organizing Returned Women Migrants from Japan and their Japanese – Filipino Children: The Batis Experience**

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### Introduction

Three decades of Filipino women migration to Japan as entertainers has etched a migration route between the Philippines and Japan that is characterized by women's vulnerabilities to institutionalized labor and sexual abuse and exploitation in Japan's adult entertainment industry and the consequent issues and concerns emerging out of this phenomenon. These include the expansion of the roles of Filipino women from labor migrants to marriage migrants and the emergence of Japanese – Filipino children (JFC) resulting from the relationships between thousands of Japanese men and Filipino women. While lives have been changed – economically, culturally, and socially at the individual, family and community levels - many for the better, quite a number found themselves confronting daunting challenges, roadblocks, and experiences of violence in the course of their work as entertainers in Japan, and later on as wives or partners of Japanese men.

From a sea of despair in their experiences as labor and/or marriage migrants in Japan, Batis Center for Women was established in 1989 to provide a stream of hope to the women and their children. Their life paths intersect with Batis Center for Women's institutional path because of the former's negative migration experiences that extends to their children and Batis' mission to "respond to the needs of distressed women migrant workers and their families including JFCs to enable them to rebuild/regain their sense of dignity and self-worth."

From an institution that initially provided direct welfare assistance to returned distressed women migrant workers and their children in order to help them in the process of rebuilding their lives, the scope of work of Batis Center for Women has evolved and expanded to include working with the women migrants and their children to achieve empowerment.

A testament to this is the formation of the Batis AWARE Women's Association (the self-help organization of Filipino women returnees from Japan) in 1996 and Batis – YOGHI (composed of children of the women returnees) in 2000 through the effort of Batis in organizing the women and children, to provide

them with a means to extend support to one another as well as to address the issues confronting them as migrant workers and as children of migrant workers.

### Batis' Experience in Organizing Women Migrants from Japan and Japanese – Filipino Children for Empowerment: Individual Interventions to Collective Action

Through the years, the services and interventions undertaken by the Batis Center in addressing the plight of returned women migrant workers from Japan and their Japanese – Filipino children evolved such that by the early-1990s, the institution began to engage in the work of facilitating the empowerment of returned women migrants and other members of their families.

It was during the latter part of 1992 that organizing women clients was identified in the Batis Center Strategic Plan. The plan is premised on the need for awareness- raising, skills- and capability-building as necessary ingredients to empower the women. Batis also ventured into alternative livelihood projects to facilitate the earlier generation clients' continuing involvement and engagement in the activities of the institution towards the rebuilding of their lives.

Batis steered the second phase of the journey of the women towards transformation and empowerment through the building of a collective identity as survivors, coming together to become involved in the advocacy of their issues, and working together in developing alternative livelihood projects.

In 1995, Batis established the Women Empowerment Program (WEP), to continue the interventions of the Social Case Management program (SCM), albeit beyond the personal and individual levels, to working with the women collectively, and later on their children through the Children and Youth Development Program (CYDP). WEP “considers women clients as partners for the promotion of human welfare and development instead of just recipients of programs and services. They are the ones affected, therefore, they are in the best position to advance their rights, and to improve or change their situation”.

Batis then initiated the organizing of a core group of women. Alongside continuing individual interventions, Batis provided opportunities for the women to develop their capabilities as peer counselors, public speakers, writers, advocates, project managers, among others. This paved the way for the establishment of Batis – AWARE in 1996. Having their own organization apart from Batis Center for

Women served as their venue to help & support each other.

The year 1996 was a watershed year for Batis as it marked a shift in the thrust of the institution's service delivery. It redefined its role "beyond merely providing welfare services to the women to being an active facilitator of genuine women's empowerment through its framework, using a holistic and sustainable strategy and approach."

The years after saw Batis focusing its efforts on helping Batis-AWARE women to gradually run their organization by themselves through knowledge enhancement, skills and capability-building activities, and provision of support to their livelihood pursuits.

This form of institutional helping relationship continued until eventually in 2004, Batis – AWARE reached a level of existence that allowed them to become an independent organization, thus transforming the institutional relations between Batis Center for Women and Batis – AWARE to that of a partnership relations.

Another facet of women returnees' empowerment that Batis Center for Women focused its attention to is their expressed need for economic empowerment.

Batis Center for Women in the mid-1990s ventured into various alternative livelihood projects as part of its strategy to facilitate women's healing and recovery (with their involvement in the economic activity serving as therapy) and rebuilding of their lives through the income they earned from the livelihood projects. From the sewing shop which was initiated by Batis Center to the vigil candle shop established in 1998 also with the help of Batis Center for Women, the experience of Batis – AWARE in managing livelihood projects emboldened them to set their sights on other social enterprises which resulted in the establishment of the burger shop in 2005, a small restaurant in Makati in 2007, and the laundry shop in 2009.

### **Organizing the Japanese – Filipino children**

Running parallel with the services extended to the women, Batis also began to address the needs of their children with their Japanese husbands and or partners. With the massive migration of Filipino women to work in Japan, thousands had relationships with Japanese men, mostly their customers, and a significant number of these relationships resulted in the birth of Japanese – Filipino children. Due to

the difficult dynamics in their parents' relationships and unfamiliarity with Japanese culture and laws that would have secured JFCs right to their nationality and cultural heritage, a significant number of JFCs ended up being raised mostly by their Filipina mothers, in conditions of economic hardship and discrimination.

The women came to Batis Center to ask for assistance in looking for the Japanese fathers of their children to seek for legal recognition and child support. Thus, in 1992, Batis has formally started its JAPINO Program to focus on the increasing incidence of returning women who bring their children with them – with most of these children born without seeing their fathers. Having come from their failed labor and marriage migration experiences, most of the women were economically hard-up and were looking at very limited employment options upon their return and the children suffering from malnutrition and other sickness.

### From JAPINO Program to CYDP and the birth of Batis-YOGHI

The JAPINO Program of Batis Center for Women then evolved to become the Children and Youth Development Program in the mid-1990s. The CYDP aims to promote the development of total self and human rights, strengthen self-awareness, self-confidence and sense of responsibility of the children and youth through workshops on migration and other socio-economic-cultural issues both in the Philippines and Japan, summer camps, exposure trips, sports festivals, youth meetings, and scholarship and educational assistance.

While the cases for legal recognition and child support from their Japanese fathers were ongoing, the CYDP provided venues and opportunities for the JFC to discuss and come to terms with the issues they face as children of migrant workers, learn about their rights, and involve themselves in self-development activities. More importantly, the program organized the children to provide support to one another and address the issues confronting them as JFC and youth in general.

In 2000, with the support and encouragement of the CYDP, the children and youth then formed Batis-YOGHI or Youth Organization that Gives Hope and Inspiration. The name sums up what the organization desires to do – to give hope and inspiration to fellow JFC. That same year, they elected their own set of officers, drafted their constitution and by laws and designed their organization's logo.

## From Children to Young Adults

The establishment of Batis-YOGHI came at a very opportune time when majority of the JFC clients were transitioning from kids to young adults and their needs and issues are changing. By supporting them in their decision to form an organization, Batis Center helped them create a collective identity and sense of unity. Opportunities for individual and collective development were provided by Batis Center in the form of workshops, trainings, educational discussions, interactions and the like.

From the art workshops and mother and child session which were given to them when they were small children, Batis Center saw the need to develop a more mature and age-appropriate educational sessions with the JFC because of the need to foster their social, psychological, physical and intellectual well-being.

As with Batis Center's journey with Batis – AWARE, opportunities to further strengthen Batis – YOGHI was also developed. Batis Center initiatives towards this end were consolidated in a project grant from the Embassy of Japan in 2008 that allowed Batis – YOGHI members not in the National Capital Region but also in Davao to undergo capacity-building trainings to prepare them in running and managing their own organization. Renewed interest in the plight of JFCs as a result of the Japan Supreme Court decision in 2008 provided opportunities to Batis – YOGHI and other JFCs to articulate their opinions and analysis on the matter. Batis – YOGHI also became actively involved in other projects addressing JFC issues and concerns in the Philippines and in Japan.

In 2009, Batis-YOGHI was awarded as one of the ten accomplished youth organizations in the Philippines. This was a reason for celebration among all JFC not just the members of Batis-YOGHI. It was through the ideas and creativity of these young people that their issues are now becoming known to JFC who are non-members of Batis-YOGHI, the general public and other stakeholders.

Instead of just being a target group or beneficiaries, Batis-YOGHI played an important role in finding solutions to their own concerns. Instead of being passive recipients who rely on adults to make things happen for them, they become active participants and own the issues and find ways to work towards their empowerment. Provide them with opportunities to articulate their needs, a process that is participatory, allow them to make decisions and play important roles in their own organization and they become genuine partners in our work. These JFC bring with

them optimism and dynamism which they easily pass on to fellow JFC and even to adults like us.

### Culling Insights and Lessons from the experience

1. the direct services extended by Batis early on provided a lifeline of care and support to returning distressed women migrant workers and their children.
  - this is the starting point for the shared journey between Batis and the women and the children
  - from a sea of despair due to their unsuccessful labor and/or marriage migration experience, to a stream of hope in rebuilding their lives back in the Philippines
  - while Batis tried to address their welfare needs to a very limited extent, the engagement and interaction with the women allowed Batis to challenge prevailing notions and mindset of improving the quality of their lives (self-reliance through individual and collective efforts over dependency with their husbands or Batis Center)
  - Batis services and alternative functional community of care provided opportunities for the women and their children to turn things around in their lives
  
2. Vulnerabilities of the women resulting from their failed labor and/or marriage migration experiences extended to their children (intergenerational vulnerability or insecurity)
  - while women's negative labor and/or marriage migration experiences has not resulted in economically improved quality of their lives, the impact of this extends to their children
  - in some cases even, the burden is carried on by the children because they are seen as a means to economic security (either through child support from the fathers, and later on as the next generation vulnerable migrants to Japan)
  
3. Organizing for empowerment
  - addresses vulnerabilities in the women and children's continuing struggle to build better lives for themselves
  - expands options beyond labor migration
  - enables the women and children to give expression to their own issues, and

to fight for their rights (women – right to work, right to organize, right to genuine development; JFCs – right to nationality, right to cultural heritage, freedom from discrimination)

**Social reproduction:** The processes which sustain or perpetuate characteristics of a given social structure or tradition over a period of time.

Social reproduction is the work involved in biological reproduction, the reproduction of human labor, including education and training, and the reproduction of provisioning and care needs.