

A LIFE FULL OF STRUGGLES

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I was born in Panay Island in 1939 as the eldest daughter of ten children. My parents separated when I was 11 years old. My mother took the four youngest children and went to work in a sugar plantation in Cadiz. The rest of us stayed with my father. Although my mother worked for 12 hours in this hacienda, her income was not enough to feed my four youngest sisters and brothers. One day she called me, saying one of my brothers was very ill and was denied admittance to a hospital because of her inability to pay. One brother and myself went to the bus station. Since we couldn't pay for our fare, we hid behind boxes of chicken and goats and vegetables. However, when we reached our mother, my brother had died. He died of undernourishment.

Since that time, I swore to myself that none of my family should ever die of hunger. I dropped out of school. I boarded a ship as a stowaway and went to Manila.

I worked as a bus conductress for the next 15 years. My working hours were from 6:00 a.m. to midnight, 7 days a week. My job was not easy. Many times there were fights inside the bus or we were held up by robbers. Yet, this was work for me! I worked very hard until I could send for my brothers and sisters to follow me to Manila. There was no time for romantic interests.

In 1972, I signed up with an agency to work for 5 years as a domestic helper in Madrid. We were promised a salary of \$50/month. This seemed to me a lot of money. Later on I found out that the agent took the other half.

This family in Madrid was very rich but we, the domestic helpers were not treated well. We worked for 16 hours a day. After several months, we heard of openings in Switzerland. I ran away from this family in Madrid and travelled to Switzerland with my little savings. For two days I just drank coffee. I didn't want to spend my money because I did not know what lay ahead of me.

I found a job with an ambassador in Bern. This was my most lucky break. I worked very hard. I wanted to make a good impression so I could get good recommendations. I knew that ambassadors and consuls come and go, so my job was never permanent. My hard work paid off in such a way that it was easy for me to find new employers. I have been blessed in my work. I know that many domestic helpers have it hard. Some experience violence, others receive very low pay for long working hours, many run away, etc.

A domestic helper working with diplomats lives from day to day. Although there are guidelines as to working conditions, it seems these are only good on paper. We can lose our jobs any time, depending on the whim of our employers. If we don't find another employment within a month, we have to leave the country. This is the reason others decide to work 'underground', thus become undocumented. Working as a domestic helper with diplomats is an invisible job. In Switzerland we are not included in any of the working permit categories. We do not have social security benefits, nor enjoy any of the social services and retirement plans. I pay my own medical insurance. I try to save for my retirement, but as usual many things crop up with family needs. I take much vitamins. What happens if I get sick?

The Filipina domestic helpers ought to have their own organization. I was very impressed in Beijing, seeing the strong and dedicated women's organizations. I also learned of a

domestic help organization in the Carribean which has a membership of 50,000. That would be something for the Filipinas. Domestic work should be integrated in the work force as a legitimate job, with due benefits and due recognition. Filipinas leaving for abroad to work should be intensively oriented and prepared for their employment. They should know their rights and have in their hands addresses of organizations and centers where they can acquire local information or take shelter when necessary. The Filipina should be given workshops in self-confidence and self-assertiveness. It is important that they leave our country prepared for what is ahead of them.