Transnational Filipinos in the UAE: Actors and Strategies

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1 In her analysis of the reinvention of intimacy and identity of Filipino maids in Dubai, Julia Lausch points out that “their marginalized status makes them invisible!” This remark may apply to the whole Filipino community. So far, like in the other Gulf States, no scholar has been able to outline a profile of them — their similarities and their differences with other segments of the Philippines diaspora. Paradoxically, the Filipino media and sometimes the social media echo the difficult situation —sometimes the plight— of the young women ensnared in human trafficking. From the Emirati perspective, Filipinos have a good reputation yet some families, as well as the authorities, complain about runaway maids. Here is the paradox: these conflicting representations rely, at best, on experience or personal narratives, but most of the time they are based on stereotypes — not to say prejudices partially generated by the states.

2 While it seems that the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been the actors of their own migration, it remains to be seen how the states have exerted pressure in the process. In other words, to what extent has Philippine and Emirati migration policies influenced transnational Filipino migrants? This question has been relatively understudied despite numerous contributions on the role of the Filipino State and its diaspora politics, and the even more numerous contributions to the study of care work and gendered migration, a field in which the Philippines stand out as a foundational case study. Some authors like Robyn Magalit Rodriguez put emphasis on the context of neoliberalism that has lead to the export of migrants as commodities, or “low-wage, temporary, gendered, racialized laborers.” Unofficially, the Philippine state may encourage the deployment of its labour population for its own interests (such as its remittances) as president Marcos did in the early 1970s with the tacit complicity of the Emirati authorities. This black and white perspective, namely poor migrants vs. state exploitation, may reflect a certain reality in the Emirates. But global migrations, and what the term may encompass, are more complex and subjectively perceived by the different actors involved in the process, as James Tyner has shown for the Philippine.
Public opinion there, but also in the UAE, thinks all the Filipinos working in the Middle East, including the UAE, are “maids” or, in technocratic language, household service workers (HSWs).

Who or what designed the pattern of Filipino migration to the UAE? On the surface, the states seem to have been the main architects of this phenomenon. All the Filipino administrations since President Ferdinand Marcos have encouraged international labour migrations. The destinations itself did not matter until knowledge of violations of human rights generated a domestic and international outcry. The migration policies have subsequently been streamlined in order to protect the OFWs — but without jeopardizing the benefits of the migrations in terms of remittances, for instance. Over the decades, it seems that the Filipino administration has raised its voice to become the ethical partner. In contrast, the UAE federal government seems to have lost its grip on migrant control — except in cases where they have renounced their dominant position and started a fruitful dialogue with the sending country. However, if the two states design the backdrop, it remains to be seen how the Filipinos experience their migration. Crossing borders entails state mechanisms (protection and/or control). Although the Filipinos (do) form a transnational community, these members try, as much as they can, to avoid contact with the authorities —Filipino or Emirati. According to the discourses that emerged from Filipinos interviewees, by and large, it seems the experience went “well” for most the OFWs. Interestingly, the Filipino and Emirati media report on the problems that OFWs face, but never satisfying if not successful experiences, that are sometimes reflected in the social media or in casual conversations back in the Philippines.

These statements raise the issue of sources. There are no reliable statistics to give visibility to the diaspora. That said, confronting the different data sets reveals certain trends. Beyond the legal framework, these discourses and practices contrast with the context, the evolution of the migrations and how the various actors, the states and the OFWs, talk to each other. For the Emirati authorities, migration is a security issue. Their diplomats were certainly proactive in finding solutions whenever problem would occur a problem occurred, but not under the spotlight of the media.

A detailed approach of the “Pinoy” (Filipino) community is necessary in order to understand competing strategies of the states and the community itself, and how HSW questions have overshadowed other issues related to the Filipino diaspora.

Who are the (transnational) Filipinos in the UAE?

For those who live in the UAE, be they Emiratis, Gulf states residents, white-collar contract workers, impoverished labourers from the Indian subcontinent or south-east Asia, or tourists who come for a short stay in this country, the Filipinos form a very visible minority. They are present in the “hosting industry”, from the marhaba (welcome) service at Dubai’s international airport to all customer service key positions at hotel desks, restaurants, retail shops, etc. They are the fourth largest Asian nationality in the country’s labour force after the Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis; however, they make up only 3% of the total workforce in the Emirates.
Tracing the OFWs in the UAE

Statistics on the Filipino population in the UAE are somewhat unclear. The Filipino authorities supervise the migration (flow) through two main agencies. First, the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (COS) aims at improving the interests and the wellbeing of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Second, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) is a valuable source of information that records the migrants’ information before leaving their home country. Last but not least, the Philippine diplomatic representation abroad, (its) consulates and embassies, keep their own records of/ on their nationals in their countries of expatriation. The Emirati authorities are reluctant to provide regular data on migration. Statistics exist but are not made public. There is no breakdown of the different communities in the official statistics from the federal or local governments (e.g., the emirates of Dubai or Abu Dhabi). The Emirati perspective is that these data are sensitive because they might alter the public image of the country or of one of its emirates. Yet, when the federal government needs to use them to sanction or qualify actions or policies, such as controlling the influx of illegal workers, it releases the data to the media.

The population count of the Filipinos in the UAE therefore varies depending on the source. The POEA, for instance, only takes into account legal migrants who left the archipelago with a labour contract. By contrast, the consulates in Abu Dhabi and Dubai register the whole community regardless of status: the legal migrants and their dependants (spouse and children) as well as those who overstay their visitor visa or are simply illegal. All in all, available data on Filipino migration remain a mere estimate giving only an indication of the trend(s). What is visible, however, is that the UAE has become a top destination for OFWs since the beginning of the 1990s. According to the Philippine consulates, right after the first Gulf war in 1991, there were 15,000-16,000 Filipinos in the Emirates; at the peak of Dubai’s growth in the mid-2000s, there were 200,000. For the POEA, in December 2009, 600,704 Filipinos lived in the UAE and there were likely to be 650,000 by 2014.

Thus, over the last three decades, the UAE’s Filipinos have become a major part of the Filipino diaspora, and the fourth largest community abroad after the United States, Canada and Saudi Arabia. Since the beginning of 2010, the Emirates are the second destination in the world for Filipino job-seekers (after Saudi Arabia). Table 1 shows that migrations towards the UAE represent almost one fifth of total migrations recorded by the governmental agency. The overall percentage of yearly emigrants has been stable. But since the economic depression of 2008 the UAE seems less attractive.
Table 1: Number of Filipino emigrants leaving the Philippines for the UAE (land-based*, rehired and newly hired) from 2009 to 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To all destinations</td>
<td>1,092,162</td>
<td>1,123,676</td>
<td>1,398,727</td>
<td>1,435,166</td>
<td>1,469,179</td>
<td>1,430,842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% year + 1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>- 2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the UAE</td>
<td>196,815</td>
<td>201,214</td>
<td>235,775</td>
<td>259,546</td>
<td>261,119</td>
<td>246,231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% year + 1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>- 5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* I.E. NOT IN THE NAVY

SOURCES: POEA

The breakdown of emigration from 2009 to 2014 confirms that, regardless of economic fluxes, networks to the UAE are an important component of Filipino migrations. Back in the archipelago, Filipinos are well aware of the opportunities of the job-market there and of the overall attractiveness of this Gulf state. Newspapers, books and social media networks have enhanced the reputation of the UAE in the Philippines. There are no readily available statistics but it seems that Filipinos tend to extend their stay in the federation, if one interprets correctly the POEA entries that distinguish between “new hired” and “rehired” in a somewhat depressed market between 2008 and 2010 (see Tables 2 and 3). In addition, their reputation (see below) in the different industries has stimulated demand and consequently increased the number of new migrants. Despite the lack of statistics or a comprehensive study on immigration in the UAE, some observers suggest indeed that recruiters prefer to rely on this national segment of the Asian workforce.

Table 2: Number of Filipino emigrants, land-based and new hired, and yearly variations from 2009 to 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All destination</td>
<td>349,755</td>
<td>346,966</td>
<td>437,720</td>
<td>558,575</td>
<td>464,868</td>
<td>487,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% year + 1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>- 0.79</td>
<td>26.16</td>
<td>27.61</td>
<td>- 16.77</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the UAE</td>
<td>51,805</td>
<td>47,171</td>
<td>73,019</td>
<td>82,085</td>
<td>81,926</td>
<td>56,589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% year + 1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>- 9.08</td>
<td>54.81</td>
<td>12.41</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>- 30.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCES: POEA

Table 3: Number of Philippine emigrants (land-based, rehired) from 2009 to 2014 and yearly variation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To all destinations</td>
<td>742,447</td>
<td>781,710</td>
<td>881,007</td>
<td>976,591</td>
<td>1,004,291</td>
<td>943,666</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From a statistical perspective, it seems that the employment structure has not changed in the span of twenty years. After the first Gulf war, the OFWs were mainly confined to unskilled or semi-skilled positions. In 1993, there were 14,958 Filipinos in the UAE, 10,561 of which worked in the services industry. Of this sector, 8,882 worked as domestic helpers, i.e. more than half of the Filipino workforce. Although this represents half of all maids working in Saudi Arabia at the time, it shows that the UAE was already an attractive destination for gendered migrants. In 2010, statistics on the breakdown of new Filipino hires per country revealed that the Filipinas (term usually used to emphasise the gender) were still in demand. Indeed, out of 46,779 Filipino emigrants who left the archipelago, half of them got a contract in the service sector (26,586), including 13,184 household service workers.

However, if public opinion still associates the Filipino community with household service workers, the reality has become more complex. According to the Philippine authorities (consulates in the UAE and officials of the POEA), domestic helpers represent only ten percent of the total workforce in the UAE — still a high number compared to other immigration countries. Thus, why do the maids overshadow the other 90% of the OFWs?

Facts and representations

The visibility of the maids comes from the combination of objective facts and stereotypes. The authorities, Philippine and Emirati alike, have strictly monitored the influx of unskilled or semi-skilled migrants. It is easier to track HSWs such as maids, nannies, gardeners, drivers, and tutors, who must apply through a Filipino employment agency and its counterpart in the Emirates prior to signing a contract in the federation. Skilled workers, especially the highly-qualified Filipinos who find jobs by themselves, cannot be traced and become invisible in the official statistics; those with dual citizenship (the second generation of migrants from the US, Canada or Australia for instance) easily go undisclosed. A second reason may relate to the fact that, stereotype or not, in the UAE as in many other countries in the world, Filipinas are considered as the best professional nannies. In addition, Filipinos, regardless of their gender, are known for quietly accepting or submitting to difficult work environments, for instance, keeping a low profile when faced with textbook forms of racism. Last but not least, they have a better command of English than the other foreign domestic helpers, and more often than not, they hold a university degree. As a result, “most” Emirati households have a Filipino maid. Additionally, the reputation of Filipino household workers has increased the demand for such service across nationalities (having a maid is a social status marker and demand is high) and sustained the good reputation of Filipinos in other sectors of migrant work. Nevertheless, those facts and representations do not explain why Filipino maids became a bone of contention between the UAE and the Philippines. On the
contrary, all factors should have contributed to friendly relations between the two countries.

**States interests vs. the variety of individual journeys**

On the one hand, the Philippine and the Emirati authorities determine the framework of the migrations between the two countries, but their strategies often diverge. If channelling back the remittances was a priority during the first decades of migration in the 1970s, the protection of nationals is now one of the firm guidelines of the state, in Manila and in the diplomatic missions abroad. In the Emirates, policy is aimed at the regulation of migration and the selection of the most qualified migrants. However, the practices of Filipino migrants have modified this framework — by trying to circumvent it, for instance. The role of individuals in the migration process is sometimes underestimated because it is difficult to assess, but the literature has certainly started to pay more attention to migrants’ agency, individual brokerage and network power, particularly in the study of Asian migration.

**Narratives, counternarratives, networks**

Why do OFWs work in the UAE? The push factors for migration, such as the lack of prospects at home, are similar for Filipinos as for people from other nationalities. Although the Aquino administration (2001–2010) has restored confidence in the business community since 2010, economic growth in the Philippines is not enough to initiate reverse trends in migration. The UAE has its own set of pull factors: high employment rates and better salaries. These are combined with “branding” campaigns of Dubai in the Philippines. A modern and glamorous city, the emirate has the reputation of being a land of opportunity for those willing to venture there. No other city, not even Hong Kong or Singapore, has elicited such interest, as reflected by the numbers of books for jobseekers that have been published: *Dubai: My Personal Guide for the Jobseekers* (in 2008) opened the way to many e-books of similar content, making the job hunt easier for prospective migrants. The Internet amplifies success stories of Filipino employees there. For poor families in the archipelago, a job in Dubai is an opportunity worth taking the risk of unscrupulous recruiters. The life of the Pinoy community in the UAE and its language is indeed familiar to the population in the archipelago thanks to the internet. Although some *balikbayans* elaborate counternarratives warning that the dream may turn into a nightmare, the narratives eventually substantiate Dubai as the modern El Dorado for people unhappy with their condition and searching for a way out.

More research has to be done on the construction of this virtual information, as well as their material and cultural effects, and their connection to family or professional networks that connect the Filipino community in the UAE to the population at home, or to OFWs elsewhere. The agents of these virtual and real networks — relatives, friends, alumni or simply acquaintances or “friends” on Facebook — often serve as the first link to the UAE, and exert pressure on the mindset of the virtual emigrants. Once in the Emirates, new OFWs make connections through persons they already know and through the local network of institutions: church, associations (avatar of the Filipino active “civil society” abroad) or simply their *kababayan* (countrymen or fellow Filipino).
Significantly, in the mental universe of the Filipinos in the UAE, there is little room, if any, for the Philippine authorities.

The awareness that for many years the Philippine state was not supportive, and even corrupt, has led to a general distrust amongst emigrants and potential OFWs. Three decades of neoliberal policy (the end of the welfare state and acceptance of World Trade Organisation rules) on the part of their country has taught migrants that they can only rely on themselves, confirming Rodriguez’s assumption that the Philippines is a “labour brokerage state". Yet the HSWs have no choice but to resort to diplomatic or consular posts when they become victims of a flagrant violation of their rights abroad. Filipino country(wo)men may also turn to diplomatic services when confronted with a difficult situation, although not related to abuse, such as for instance out-of-wedlock pregnancies (sanctioned by Emirati law). Some diplomats and civil servants have been genuinely concerned by the cases they handle. Some ambassadors, consuls, labour attachés or clerks go out of their way to help when others are on the back foot. For the Filipino community, the “Philippine state” is very diverse.

The Philippines, from predatory to protective state?

The “Philippine state” encompasses different bodies of administration, supervision, mediation and protection — the ministries of Labour and of Foreign Affairs, and their agencies like the POEA, but also individuals holding public office like the president, or civil servants, even private agencies contracted to implement policies on behalf of the state — and therefore different realities regarding how governance is enacted. The generic concept of “state” is purely cosmetic, especially when it pertains to emigrants.

To understand how the Philippine state has defined and applied its migration policies in general and in the UAE in particular, we may single out three different agents: the president in his/her capacity to make decisions, perennial structures such as the Department (ministry) of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the POEA, and finally the officials who apply the policy on the ground.

Since the 1970s, Philippine presidents have oriented the policies of migration according to their political convictions amid the regional and globalised economic context. The Marcos administration (1965–1986) was the first to face the combined rise of unemployment and the liberalisation of the labour market. Presidential decree 442 which became law on 1st May 1974, turned the state into a major actor of emigration. Under Marcos, the emigration programme was conceived as temporary while the country attempted to absorb the consequences of the oil shock. The Bureau of Employment Services (BES), the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB), and the National Seamen Board (NSB) coordinated their efforts to spur emigration. The recruitment and placement of workers and employees abroad became a state monopoly. Sending remittances was not only controlled but also mandatory. This new income alleviated the recipient families’ plight and allowed the Philippine state to enjoy a positive balance of payments. The administration was nonetheless a victim of its own success. Unable to cope with the rising demand for overseas employment, the state was compelled to resort to the private sector. Presidential decree 1412 of 1978 authorised recruitment agencies to process the demands of potential OFWs. Candidates could choose to apply for jobs abroad with either official public agencies or private recruitment agencies. The latter became increasingly prominent. This dual system of public/private processing and supervision
led to a redefinition of the mission. The private sector ultimately served as a satellite of and subsidiary to the international job market, while the state focused on the promotion of the Philippine workforce. To this end, the different governmental agencies merged into the POEA in 1982. Reliance on the private sector was not without consequences, especially for young women without education and connections in the host countries.

Indeed, in the mid-1990s three stories, including one in the UAE, captured public attention and contributed to placing the protection of Filipinos abroad high on the presidential agenda. The first case took place in Japan. In September 1991, a woman, Maricris Sioson, one of 80,000 “entertainers” working in Japan at the time, died in a Fukushima hospital. The Japanese authorities claimed that hepatitis was the cause of death. In fact, Maricris Sioson suffered a fatal head trauma after being stabbed twice. The autopsy finally performed in Manila concurred that she was murdered, but the circumstances of her death were never clarified in Japan. Therefore, no legal action followed. In the meantime, a new case occurred in Singapore. Flor Contemplacion was hanged for the double murder of a child and a fellow countrywoman, Delia Maga, who, like her, was a domestic helper. After investigation, it seemed that the child drowned after a seizure and her employer, the father of the child, may have killed Maga. Despite the international outcry and the pardon requested by Fidel Ramos, president of the Philippines, Flor Contemplacion was eventually executed on 17 March 1995. After the recall of the Philippine ambassador and banning Singapore as a destination country for domestic services workers, the commission for the protection of OFWs was created. The protection of nationals abroad became a major issue in the Philippines. Against this backdrop, a case arose in the Emirates just a few months later, during the summer of 1995. Sarah Balabagan entered the UAE when she was fifteen, illegally. In 1994, her eighty-five-year-old employer raped her. She killed him the following year as he tried to commit the offense again. Prosecuted by a Sharia court, she received $27,000 in compensation and was sentenced to 7 years in prison for voluntary homicide. After the appeal, she was sentenced to death. UAE President Zayed commuted the death sentence and she was beaten 100 times with a stick and condemned to a one-year prison term. Since then, the Philippine government has set up regulations to protect young women from the dangers of working abroad.

As a result, regulation on migrant workers such as the Republic Act 8042 of 1995 adjusted official state discourse to existing practices. Migrations were still encouraged as a personal choice but Philippine authorities tried to provide better protection to their nationals. Fidel Ramos’ presidency (1992–1998) was therefore a turning point in the perception of the six to seven million balikbayans (10% of the population at the time) as a national issue. In order to eradicate the illegal placement of jobseekers, the 1995 law on migrant workers and Filipinos abroad also instituted the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) whose mission has been since to support migrants and their families. Like the POEA, this agency reports to the ministry of Labour. It coordinates its efforts with the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) created in 1980 to help the overseas diaspora. In parallel, the diplomatic network became more sensitive to migrants’ issues. To supervise the regularity and legality of the procedures, the Philippine Overseas Labour Offices (POLO) monitor the contracts. Employees of the POLO, as well as Welfare officers, are sent to the main cities of migration, like Dubai, from which they report on the conditions of the whole community in a given country. They are key actors of the Filipino community in the UAE.
In blunt words, the different administrations since Ramos could not afford to neglect the OFWs, and especially those in the Middle East, because of the remittances. Before Sarah Balabagan’s case in 1994, there was a marked increase in the transfer of money from the UAE: from $28,000 in 1989, remittances reached $1.65 million and $1.08 million in 1994 and 1995 respectively. In the wake of the trial and the ban imposed on Filipino workers in the Emirates from 1995 to 1997, remittances were negligible ($44,000 in 1996 and $194,000 the following year). Since 1998 ($2.5 million) growth has been steady and remittances reached $1 billion in 2012–2013 (see table 4). According to the Kuwaiti investment company Markaz, Filipinos in the UAE remitted $3.457 billion in 2014. Since the beginning of the 2010s, remittances from the UAE have represented a quarter of the total remittances earned in the Middle East, the most attractive region for Filipino migrants. Even if the UAE count for “only” 1/20 of the Filipinos’ world remittances (since 2011, the total amount has reached $20 billion per year; 24,348 billion in 2014), it remains a steady source of transfer of money from abroad.

Table 4: Remittances of the Emirati OFWs from 1999 to 2015 ($ million)

Source: Central Bank of the Philippines

In a nutshell, seen from Manila, the relations between the Philippines and the UAE have been determined by the necessity to protect the OFWs and their dependents. This was to be implemented without reaching a point of no return, such as an embargo, which would deplete transfers of money vital for many families in the archipelago. In the interstate dialogue, Abu Dhabi seemed to have the upper hand.

The Emirati framework

There is no special relationship between the UAE and the Philippines. According to Abdul Monem al-Mashat, Emiratis have a concentric perception of the world that bestows privilege accordingly: around the federation of the seven emirates, the neighbours of the peninsula (the GCC states and perhaps Yemen) constitute the first circle. Its constituents are deemed as equal. The second circle comprises the Arabs of the Middle East. The rest of the Muslims (the ummah) are in the third circle. In descending order of importance, the remaining states constitute the fourth circle. As the Emiratis look further away from the innermost circle, the relations become so distant that the peoples from the fourth circle epitomise the figure of the Other. We may even assume that the countries of the fourth circle are all, by and large, on an equal footing. Therefore, as the Philippines are in this remote circle, there is no particular prejudice nor special friendship to distinguish the Republic from the other countries in the fourth circle.

Against this backdrop, the UAE present themselves as a place of transience where migrants, Filipinos and others alike, are temporary guests in the federation, although some sections of this foreign workforce are actually settled in the medium or long term.

In the 1990s, in the wake of the first Gulf war, the UAE and the GCC states underwent an “Asianisation” of their labour force. South and South-East Asians were perceived as more manageable than the Arab workers who constituted until then the backbone of the working population in the GCC. Since this structural transformation of the workforce, Emirati laws and practices have remained unchanged until today. The migrants’ presence is organised by the laws of the kafala (partnership, sponsorship) system which the UAE,
like most of the Gulf States, has deliberately left unchanged. This system encapsulates the social structure of the country. It remotely stems from Islamic tradition and views the migrant as a guest under the protection of his/her sponsor for the duration of the stay in the host country; the stewardship of the country is seen as the greatest form of hospitality. In this pyramidal structure, companies apply for visas for their employees under the sponsorship of an Emirati. Unskilled workers are admitted on a one-year visa, whereas professional employees are offered a three-year visa. This system generates what Sayed Ali perfectly describes as “permanent impermanence”.

With the growing influx of migrants, placement agencies became mandatory intermediaries to regulate the market. Their role of interface between the archipelago and the Emirates is better known since Dovelyn Rannveig Mendoza’s work. The number of accredited agencies has doubled since the beginning of the 21st century, going from 179 agencies in 2001 in the UAE to 398 by 2010. In the Philippines, the POEA, whose motto is “the right way is the best way,” has lead the fight not only against rogue agencies but also against those who do not comply with the law. The POEA does not hesitate to revoke licenses to offending recruiters.

Against this background, the UAE has barely been involved in the management of the Filipino transnational communities on its territory for three main reasons. First, the federal government defines the legal framework of employment, covering all aspects of the employer-employee relationship in the Federal Laws n° 8 of 1980, n° 15 of 1985 and n° 12 of 1986. In reality, the government has let the companies deal with managing the workforce. Therefore, the power of the private sector, as long as it abides by the laws mentioned above, is more important than that of the “state” itself in this field. Second, this delegation of authority also explains why the UAE somehow tolerates a certain number of illegal (mainly overstaying) migrants in the federation (considering that the Emirates is one of the safest places in the world while monitoring the flow of 7-8 million visa-based visitors annually). According to a census of Filipinos in the UAE by Philippines authorities, there are 207,230 “illegal” residents (with expired tourist or working visas) out of 931,562 Filipinos. Emirati officials tolerate this situation because it eases the recruitment process for the private sector. Recruiting a new employee takes, at best, a couple of months (identifying the persons with the right credentials through an agency in Manila, travel, medical visit, passport, security clearance, etc.); if the applicant, and above all his/her employer, has connections (waṣṭa) in the state apparatus, it is much easier to transform a tourist visa into a work permit. To maintain the “business friendly environment” reputation of the UAE, the system needs this flexibility.

Because of the UAE’s security concerns in the wake of the Arab Springs, (im)migration services have paid particular attention to migrants coming from Egypt — especially when governed by a Muslim Brotherhood administration (2012–2016) — or Iran. In addition, the enforcement of a policy of “emiratisation” means that priority is given to the inclusion of young and unemployed Emiratis into the private workforce through quotas of nationals. However, Filipinos are not identified as a threat for the country’s security and, even when they are highly qualified, they are not perceived as competitors for the Emirati positions because they do not look as threatening as the Westerners. As a consequence, the Filipino migrants remain in a better position to obtain guest and employment status in the federation without heightened scrutiny from the Emirati government.
Finding solutions

The UAE and the Philippines have maintained cordial relations since the independence of the Emirates in 1971, even if Sarah Balabagan’s case stained this relationship in the mid-1990s. High Philippine officials, including President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (in 2001), have paid official visits to the federation to strengthen the “friendship” between the two countries. However, the media constantly report on pervasive tensions regarding household service workers, focusing on runaway maids, the violation of human rights, and the legal status of employees, i.e. the three main issues that the Philippine authorities have to tackle.

Three sources of bilateral tensions

From the Emirati perspective, meaning the federal or local governments, and the expatriate (mainly upper class Westerners) perspective alike, the issue of runaway maids has been the source of diplomatic discord and social agitation. Their employers are compelled to settle new fees to replace them (agencies, visa, etc.) and the Emirati authorities have to address lingering recriminations. No statistics have been released on the number of runaway maids but on rare occasions, when the numbers decrease, officials are more willing to provide an estimate. Since the creation of a “shelter” for these maids (the Overseas Filipino Resource Centre of the Philippine Consulate General in Dubai), the Philippine consulate has a good indication of the number of maids who leave their employers before the end of their contract with allegations of abuse or general discontent. In order to fly back to Manila, they need their passport and a return flight ticket that their employer is mandated to purchase upon fulfilment of the contract. In 2012, the shelter with a capacity for fifty persons received an average of a hundred house helpers per month. According to the Labour attaché, the monthly average declined to seventy-fifty to fifty-thirty by October 2013. In July 2014, “only” twenty-nine Filipinas went to the shelter. Two peaks are recorded during the year. Like in any other host countries, the weeks before Christmas witness an increase due to homesick mothers; and in the UAE, like in any other Muslim host countries, Ramadan also causes a surge in prompt departures because of the intense workload and more difficult working conditions.

The media underscored the issue of runaway maids in the mid-2000s, when the Filipino community dramatically increased during the double-digit growth of Dubai. During this time, an increasing number of maids called for help at the consulates. For the first half of 2008, more than 200 people sought help from the Philippine diplomats. Although there were serious cases that were ultimately brought before the Emirati courts, Benito Valeriano, the then consul general in Dubai, underlined that a root cause of the problem was that some maids were either not ready or not suited to perform the job they were recruited for; some, educated beyond secondary school, had not been previously exposed to the harsh rigour of domestic work required in their new environment. He recommended that the agencies should select their applicants with the aid of psychological tests before their deployment. This statement illustrates how the Philippine authorities perceive the role of their agencies, as reluctant partners. In the UAE, the POLO office has had strong leverage over the agencies: when a house helper
arrives at the shelter, the office scrutinises the application form of the employee, and has refused in some instances to process new applications, and therefore new visas, from the incriminated agency.

The second source of discord between the two countries is the violation of human rights. It reiterates the dichotomous image of Dubai in general, with on the one hand the narrative of a success story, downplaying the “excesses” of globalisation, and on the other a narrative that denounces the abuses and exploitation of labour workers. In an article, Nicholas Cooper describes for instance that when domestic workers arrive in Dubai, “the worker’s passports are confiscated, and from then on their employers have extensive control over them. (…) [They] are routinely abused by their employers. From beating to rape, women face violence in which they are prisoners twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week”\(^41\). Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported undeniable cases\(^42\), but there are no official statistics. An accurate perspective is difficult to get because of a lack of resources and evidence\(^43\). However, the issue of Filipino maids in the UAE should be analysed in the light of domestic violence, human trafficking and gendered violence. Pardis Mahdavi was the first to explore this field by collecting personal testimonies. Her book\(^44\), the detailed description of the life of “Mary”, a Filipino migrant, speaks volume.

Filipino maids — and more generally Filipinas in the UAE — are vulnerable because of different factors. First, the gender imbalance in the UAE is important as migration favours young male workers mainly employed in the construction sector: there are more male than female. In this context, and as relationships outside marriage are forbidden, women are more likely to be harassed. Second, as the Philippines has developed over the centuries a culture of hospitality, friendliness might be misinterpreted. South Asian employees and workers are not used to it. Third, as Islam, and Wahhabism in particular, advocates the separation of the male and female spheres in social functions and public life, sexual tension is highly present in the UAE. Fourth, a combination of racial and social prejudices threatens their safety. The story of “Du mo” illustrates this vulnerability. In May 2013, this Filipino maid in Ras Al Khaimah ran away after her boss had tried to rape her. She called her sister in Kuwait for help and the latter exposed the story on Facebook. Following the mobilisation of the Filipinos in the UAE, Dumo went to the “shelter”. However, the welfare officer made clear that, although the consulate wanted to recover the maid’s passport, no complaint would be lodged against Dumo’s employer\(^45\). This story illustrates the vulnerability of Filipino maids, especially in emirates where there are no consular representations, as well as the solidarity among the community, and the response of the Philippine authorities.

The third source of tension between the UAE and the Philippines is the status of these household service workers. As mentioned above, the flexibility of the Emirati authorities regarding illegal immigration has led to an increase in undocumented migrants\(^46\).

In the emirate of Dubai, when the visa of the home services worker (HSW) is legally processed by Filipino and Emirati agencies, and checked by the POEA at a Philippine airport before departure and by the POLO office in the UAE, the worker is entitled to an official salary of 1,500 dirhams ($408) and other advantages (free ticket back to the Philippines every two years, at least one day off per week, etc.). But migrants entering on a tourist visa, sometimes with the help of unaccredited agencies, or migrants that remained illegally, have no legal protection. As a result, Filipino workers may be recruited in the emirate of Abu Dhabi for 800 dirhams ($204), a salary justified by the employers under the pretext of the applicant’s lack of experience or education. It is also
common practice that the illegal worker is made to sign an unofficial contract imposing a lower salary than is legally obliged and without any additional rights. Without diplomatic supervision, and although the Emirati authorities are vigilant on human trafficking, some young women may get into inextricable situations, from prostitution to domestic enslavement. Thus, the Philippine authorities have had to pay great attention to the reality of contracts and minimum wage.

Bilateral arrangements?

The Gloria Macapagal Arroyo administration (2001–2010) took a firmer stand on migration policy and in negotiations with the host country while encouraging compliance with its neoliberal policy as described by Robyn Magalit Rodriguez (2010). Many missions prospected new “markets” for migrants, including the UAE. Bilateral agreements were negotiated in the sector of labour migrations, such as the memorandum of understanding (MoU) that took effect in 2007, negotiated between the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the Emirati ministry of Labour. This MoU perfectly reflects the interests of both parties. Unlike countries such as Saudi Arabia that refused bilateral discussions, the UAE agreed to negotiate because the new legal provisions would increase its control over the overseas Filipino community in the federation. The Emirati authorities insisted upon key principles regulating the migrations; the migrants will stay for a limited period of time (Article 2) so that assimilation is thwarted and the migrant’s presence in the federation will be contingent on “the needs of the UAE” (Article 4). In cases of disputes where an amicable agreement cannot be found, the Emirati judicial authorities would preside (Article 9). DOLE made sure that information on salary, accommodation, transportation, and “any other relevant terms” could be verified by the ministry of Labour in the UAE (Article 5). Due to the importance of remittances for the Philippines (third largest receiving country after China and India), DOLE made sure that “the right to remit” (meaning the right to send money back to the Philippines) was mentioned (Article 9). Initially in force for a period of 5 years (Article 14), the application of the MoU was extended until new negotiations took place in May 2013.

The regional context changed too. On 29 June 2011, the Saudi state news agency (SPA) announced that the Kingdom would stop granting work permits to Indonesian and Filipino domestic workers. A few days before, on 18 June 2011, the Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono declared that the beheading of Ruyati binti Sapubi, an Indonesian working in the kingdom, broke the “norms and manners” of international relations. He also challenged the general mistreatment of workers in the Gulf countries. At the same time, the new president of the Philippines restored a certain sense of national pride not seen in Manila since President Magsaysay (1953–1957). DOLE demanded a minimum wage of $400 a month while the Saudi authorities offered $210. In order to coerce the Philippine authorities, the Saudis suspended the contract verification policy, paving the way to illegal recruitment, until December 2012, when Philippine demands were finally agreed upon: a basic wage of $400, better working conditions and worker protection. Manila was therefore encouraged to ask for similar working conditions for its nationals in the UAE too. The Emirati ministry of Labour also chose to stop the verification of contracts in a circular issued on 26 May 2014. The recruitment agencies were authorised to use standard contracts instead of domestic workers contracts ratified by the embassies of the countries of origin. This decision gave them more
flexibility to recruit employees without public supervision. Yet, the POEA did not issue a deployment ban, like in Saudi Arabia. Because of the interests at stake, namely, the remittances of the Filipino community in the UAE and the attractiveness of the country for unemployed Filipinos in the archipelago, it seems that the Philippine authorities seek to resume negotiations for a new memorandum of understanding.

In addition, since April 2007, two multilateral initiatives in the field of international migrations have expanded the bilateral discussions. On 16 June 2011, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) passed Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers, intended to take effect for state members on 5 September 2013. This document underlines the necessity to guarantee the rights of the workers. The second initiative is the Abu Dhabi Dialogue. The sending countries started joining forces in 2003 in Sri Lanka, leading to the Bali Conference in 2005 that called for common governance on international labour migrations. Finally, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, initiated in January 2008, took over the Colombo process, or the Regional Consultative Process meant to manage overseas contractual workers through a partnership with a number of recipient countries and the most prominent emigrant countries. The ministerial consultation brought together countries of the Colombo process and the GCC States. The governments, as well as international organizations such as ILO, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and NGOs like Human Rights Watch all came together for an exchange of experiences. All these actors, working in partnership and accepting the idea of shared accountability, focused on temporary contractual workers. Hosting the Dialogue, the UAE was compelled to accept the principles of a fair deal with Asian emigration countries — with inevitable consequences in the (future) negotiations with the Philippine government.

Conclusion

The composition of the Filipino working community in the UAE is misrepresented. While maids and other household service workers comprise approximately 10% of the total OFWs, the overrepresentation of this category of employees stems from the main issues that it encounters. The criminal acts perpetrated on some migrant women, the violation of human rights, and the precarious legal status of some of the women explains why this population is more visible than other categories of employees. That said, it would be unjust to condense the relations between the Philippines and the UAE to these main bones of contention.

The Filipino diaspora in the UAE needs to be explored further. First, ninety percent of the Filipinos remain “invisible”. The structure of this population in terms of job distribution is unclear. If the HSWs represent the narrow bottom of the OFWs pyramid, the upper class seems to be limited too. Consequently, the bulk of the community consists of middle managers. No information on education, gender, family gathering, etc. is available at the moment. In this regard, it would be interesting to assess the changes in Filipino sociability. The nexus of professionals belonging to different social classes puts into question the symbolic and almost hermetic barriers between these classes in the archipelago. Empirically, Filipinos tend to stay longer as long as they find a “suitable” job — well paid and where they are respected for their professional skills. An analysis of the duration of the stay would indicate if the classical stage-by-stage migrations that led to the United States is still a valid phenomenon for the UAE diaspora. As a side note,
Filipinos have the reputation of being “tech-savvy” — for the first time in history the use of SMS largely contributed in January 2001 to the success of People Power II which toppled Joseph Estrada. An in-depth analysis is necessary to examine how OFWs in the UAE use digital resources to stay connected, together, or with their relatives and friends in the Philippines. Second, the world of the HSWs deserves to be explored. How do the strategies of the Filipinas in this sector differ from other segments of the Philippine population? It seems that they have their own sociability, are somewhat conservative, and not inclined to participate in the cosmopolitan culture of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. What is not known is if the Filipino experience here is unique or not, thus opening the possibility for comparisons with HSWs from other Asian countries (Indonesia, Sri Lanka) and lately African (Ethiopia, Sudan). For both of these assumptions, sources are not easily accessible and new research will require fieldwork.

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NOTES

1. LAUSCH, 2015, p. 185.
2. For a review of the literature, see CAMROUX 2008.
6. Since 1998, I have met different categories of actors involved in the migration process; politicians, diplomats and other high officials, researchers, OFWs from diverse social backgrounds in the Philippines and abroad. The discrepancy between the discourses, from the different decision-makers in the administration since Estrada or the narratives of the balikbayan themselves and the reality of migrations, has always struck me. This empirical knowledge has exerted some influence over my perception of the phenomenon. It is always easier to paint social reality in black and white instead of taking into consideration the different shades of grey. Actors adopt postures that are not necessarily consistent with their actions. In the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal's administration glorified migrants as the “new heroes” but seemed to be more interested in the increase of the remittances. Some Filipinos themselves pay a high price for their expatriation—creating dysfunctional families for instance—but, at the same time, gain some social recognition—sometimes, for women, the possibility to live a “different” life. In this regard, the Philippine authorities warn the candidates upon leaving the archipelago. But some OFWs do not listen and generate their own problems (lately contracting loans and leaving the UAE). Yet, by and large, the experience goes “well” for Filipinos in the UAE, meaning that the problems
related to their status are more the exception than the rule. However, the lack of reliable data leads researchers to focus on those exceptions. Conversations that I had with immigration officers in the UAE allowed another understanding of the Filipino community in this country. As always in geography, finding the right scale of analysis remains the main issue.

9. WATANABE, 2014. Among many others, the “Global Filipino” is one the oldest television networks in the Philippines, ABS-CBN’s website, focused on the latest news on the OFW: http://news.abs-cbn.com/global-filipino [accessed on April 4, 2016].
13. According to the Commission of the Filipinos Overseas (CFO) there are 93,000 HSW for a total population of balikbayan (Synonym to OFWs, Filipinos leaving abroad (workers and relatives) of 931,562 in the UAE.
17. HERRERA, 2008.
18. BRYSON, 2013.
22. RUIZ, 2013.
32. See the article of Hélène Thiollet in this special issue.
34. GARDNER, 2010.
35. BEAUGÉ, 1986
37. MENDOZA, 2010.
38. See the article of Delphine Pagès-El Karoui in this issue.
39. RUIZ, 2014 b.
40. LIBO-ON, 2008.
41. COOPER, 2013, p. 69-70.
42. HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2014, p. 79.
43. GUÉRAICHE, 2014, p. 12-16.
44. MAHDAVI, 2011, p. 91-106.
45. LIBO-ON, 2013 b.
46. There are no official numbers but, according to Kakende, in 2007, 341,958 illegal residents took the opportunity of an amnesty to leave the country, as opposed to 61,826 in 2013. Kakende, 2014.


51. With some observer states as well: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. The nine destination countries are Bahrain, Kuwait, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.


ABSTRACTS
The United Arab Emirates are the second destination of Filipino emigrants in the world. Working opportunities in the Gulf along with endemic unemployment in the archipelago have attracted one million Filipinos to the UAE, mainly in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The first objective of this paper is to identify this population in order to confirm or disprove received ideas regarding the figures and structure of migration: do all Filipinos working in the UAE fit in the category of domestic workers or low-skilled workers? The second objective is to understand how the actors in these migrations (Filipino migrants, the Filipino State, UAE authorities) interact and what strategies — sometimes opposed, sometimes complementary — they use. The third objective is to identify in practice the problems arising from the interaction of these three actors, namely the issue of domestic workers who do not complete their contracts, the negative consequences of their abuse on the image of the Emirates, and setting a reference wage.

Les Émirats arabes unis sont la deuxième destination des émigrés philippins dans le monde. Les opportunités de travail conjuguées à un chômage endémique dans l’archipel y ont attiré un million de Philippins, principalement à Dubaï et Abu Dhabi. Le premier objectif de cet article est de recenser cette population pour confirmer ou infirmer les stéréotypes sur le nombre et la structure des migrations : tous les Philippin(e)s travaillant aux Émirats entrent-ils dans la catégorie des employé(e)s de maison ou des travailleurs peu qualifiés ? Le deuxième objectif est de comprendre comment interagissent les acteurs de ces migrations (migrants philippins, État philippin, autorités émiriennes) et quelles sont leurs stratégies, parfois opposées, parfois complémentaires. Le troisième objectif est d’identifier dans la pratique les problèmes qui résultent de l’interaction de ces trois acteurs, à savoir la question des employé(e)s de maison qui ne terminent pas leurs contrats, les conséquences négatives des abus sur l’image des Émirats, et la fixation d’un salaire de référence.
INDEX

Keywords: transnational, Dubai, UAE, Gulf, work, Philippines, migrations, administration, expatriation

Geographical index: UAE

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