

## Filipinos marrying foreigners to flee poverty



Twenty-year-old Rita pointed to the words stretched on her tight-fitting mid-rib t-shirt as the reason she's marrying 66-year-old Endo: "Sweet Love," it says on her chest.

"Love? Who is she kidding?" whispered one of the women at the seminar on inter-racial marriages sponsored by a Catholic group in Manila where Rita, a former garments factory worker, spoke.

However, some who share similar state of affairs or maybe feel the same way as Rita nodded.

After a break, Rita saunters over to a group of women and admits "love" is the farthest reason for accepting the proposal of Endo, who is 46 years older than her.

"I don't really love him. I want to work there (in Japan) and help my family here," Rita says almost in a whisper. That revelation brought her words of sympathy, quick hugs, and light squeezing of hands.

She is not alone.

Rita and other Filipina brides-to-be admit that marrying foreigners is the easiest ticket for possible overseas work and settlement overseas, as well as income for the families they would leave behind, says a report published in the Overseas Foreign Workers journalism Consortium.

Based on government data, Rita is adding to the rising number of Filipino women marrying Asian and Western nationals nearly thrice their age.

The year 2006 also had historic record-high numbers for spouses going to the United States (10,190), Japan (8,601), Canada (988), and the United Kingdom (619). The increase for Japan alone is 2,279 spouses from 2005 figures (6,322).

In Vancouver, Filipino women's right advocates are actively involve in crusades to ensure brides from their homeland are not victims of abuse.

As part of its advocacy, The Philippine Women Centre - housed at the Kalayaan Centre located along Powell Street - recently conducted a film review of the documentary Say I Do which chronicled the experiences of Filipino mail-order brides.

Film director Arlene Ami chronicles the stories of three "mail-order brides" from the Philippines now living in Canada. In order to escape lives of poverty and support their families, these women married men they didn't know.

Upon arriving in Canada, they found themselves isolated in remote regions of the country. One woman arrived in a small town in the dead of winter to find herself living in a camper with no running water.

She soon discovered that her husband was a violent man. With no one to turn to, these women were at the mercy of their husbands - men who searched for women with traditional family values, and were unsuccessful with Canadian women whom they felt had too many freedoms and were "spoiled."

"Whether you like it or not, whether your marriage is good or not, you have to take it. So it's just like a gamble. You're gambling yourself," says Ami in the film synopsis posted on the website

Ami adds that the mail-order bride industry has exploded with the advent of the Internet. Websites, newspaper advertisements, and pen pal agencies sell contact information to link men from the West with women from developing countries.

Ami explains, "What lies ahead for these women is uncertain. The lucky ones may find stability. The less fortunate may suffer terrible consequences. All of them are willing to take the risk."

The rising number of Filipino women going to countries such as Taiwan, Japan, and Korea are "significant" and reveal an Asian marriage migration trend that's also on the rise.

Some spouses-to-be admit: marrying foreigners "is the easiest ticket for possible overseas work and settlement overseas," the Consortium's Jeremiaah Opiniano writes. Marriage for convenience also provides income for families locked into poverty

The number of Filipino women marrying spouses of various nationalities is rising as of late, says Director Minda Valencia of the Commission on Filipinos Overseas. The commission's 18-year data showed there are now 309,745 Filipino spouses who have married foreign partners, and some 92 percent of them are women.

Valencia says she can't count the lectures she has given to women like Rita, as required by her job in government.

Her agency's data shows more women marrying nationals of East Asian countries like Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea are becoming younger and less educated than their foreign spouses.

Before, they were called mail-order brides, because of relationships and arrangements brokered through the traditional postal system.

Today, Filipino women are meeting their future foreign spouses through mobile phones, the number referred to by a friend of a friend, Internet-based chatting, and the facilitation of a relative overseas.

According to Valencia, everything goes back to motivations: of the Filipina for marrying a foreigner and the latter for marrying Filipino women.

Former entertainer Sharon, 26, asserts it was "love" that moved her to marry 44-year-old taxi driver Hiroki.

Still, Sharon, a hotel and restaurant management graduate of a central-Philippine college, says she also wants to earn money her own way: going back to the nightclub in Hiroshima where, she said, she and Hiroki met.

Sharon married the Japanese at a civil marriage here, and will mark her third trip to Japan given her marriage.

She claims Hiroki has approved of her plans.

For her part, 21-year-old Elizabeth was introduced by her cousin working in Seoul, South Korea to a 37-year-old Korean cab driver.

She says the Korean went to their hometown of Nasugbu, Batangas. On the 11th day of his stay, Elizabeth and the Korean got married.

She says she entered into matrimony despite having been told by her husband that she cannot work in Korea and that she'll have to go along with his family.

"I am amenable to that," Elizabeth says.

The authors said Filipino women choosing to marry foreigners capitalize on opportunities for overseas migration that they believe "could dramatically change their lives."

At a conference on overseas Filipinos organized by the Bangko Sentral Pilipinas in Manila, acting CFO director Golda Roma said that the number of inter-marriages in 2006 at 24,954 was triple the number in 1989, which stood at 7,819.

In terms of distribution, the U.S. has the highest number of Filipino inter-marriages with 124,638 or 40.24 per cent of the total. Japan follows with 94,792 or 30.60 per cent. Australia is third with 25,073 or 8.09 per cent.

Ranking fourth is Canada with 12,401 or 4 percent, and fifth among the top five is Germany with 11,307 or 3.65 percent. The United Kingdom has only 5,780 or 1.87 per cent.

Among Asian host countries, Taiwan has the highest number with 6,950 or 2.24 percent. South Korea follows with 4,582 or 1.48 percent.

The remaining 21,989 or 7.10 per cent are distributed in other countries.

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