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**‘They treated me like an animal’: how Filipino domestic workers become trapped**

Migrants from the Philippines make up a huge percentage of domestic workers around the world. But when their employers are abusive, visa restrictions force them to choose between enduring more suffering or becoming illegal

by [Margaret Simons](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/margaret-simons)

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**D**oes she love them? Mary lifted her face and smiled. “I love them like they are my own,” she replied. Mary has cared for these children since they were born. She has been at every significant school event – sports matches, awards days, graduations. She takes them to after-school classes, to doctors’ appointments. She supervises homework and playdates. It is Mary who hears, each evening, about what happened that day at school.

But she worries that the family she works for won’t need her for long. Her right to stay in the UK depends on keeping her job with her current employers. The boy is 12, the girl is eight. Soon they will be able to take themselves to school. And where will that leave Mary? If the family decides to let her go, she will have to leave the UK, or, as many of her friends have done, stay illegally, becoming undocumented – vulnerable to being exploited, prosecuted and deported.

Half a world away in the [Philippines](https://www.theguardian.com/world/philippines), she has three children of her own, now in their 20s and 30s. She has missed all of their significant events. Her daughter used to blame her for leaving them. “That was very harsh. So I tried to just take it lightly, but deep inside I had guilt feelings in me,” Mary said. Yet because of her work in London, she has been able to send enough money home to pay for her children’s education. They have completed school and been to university. Her daughter is a teacher and her sons work in IT and civil engineering. “Their life will be better than mine,” she said. “This is the achievement of my life.”

Mary tells the children she cares for that they should eat the food she prepares, because they are lucky to have food: some people are starving. They generally listen to her, she told me, despite their life of privilege. They used to ask her questions about those other children. They do so less as they get older.

The family Mary works for live in one of the most prestigious addresses in west London – a luxury apartment near Kensington High Street. The parents are senior corporate executives on high salaries. She gets the minimum wage – £10.42 an hour – for eight hours work a day, but she usually does 12. In the evenings, she must wait until the parents get home, which is often late. In the week after we met, the parents were going to the opera, and she would be expected to stay until they got home. She was not sure if they would pay her extra for that. She has raised the issue of pay with them. They respond by reminding Mary that they have covered the legal fees that have allowed her to repeatedly extend her visa, and stay in London for almost 10 years. “They are very good talkers,” she said.

And what they say is true. If they hadn’t hired very good lawyers, she would have been sent home years ago. They also pay her air fare home once a year. After one more renewal of her visa, next year, Mary will be eligible to apply for the right to stay in the UK. “I have paid my taxes all the time I have lived here,” she said. She wants to stay, and eventually to get a pension.

In a typical year, the Home Office issues about 22,000 visas for migrant domestic workers, and Filipinos are by far the largest national group receiving them, [accounting for about 50%](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/9/8/the-domestic-workers-fleeing-modern-slavery-in-the-uk) of that figure. Most arrive in the UK with their employers, families from the Middle East and south-east Asia. Worldwide, there are an estimated 53 million women carrying out paid domestic work, many of whom are migrants, according to the [International Labour Organization](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/WCMS_209773/lang--en/index.htm) (ILO), a UN agency dedicated to setting labour standards globally.

It is the privacy of their workplace that makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse. Their hours are long and unpredictable, their working conditions almost impossible to regulate. In the UK, migrant care workers in private homes are often expected to be available at all times, with no time off, and often without extra pay. And if their employers terminate their contract, they have little protection, which means they are effectively forced to return home, or become illegal.

**A**lthough they are so numerous, although they provide the support that allows so many wealthy families to live as they do, Mary considers that she and her countrywomen are invisible to Londoners. She is tiny – shoulder height to most of the British people she meets. At Kensington High Street station early on a weekday morning, there is a steady stream of Filipino women coming through the ticket barriers in the dawn light, weaving their way against the tide of City-bound office workers, fanning out into the streets and disappearing into the houses of Notting Hill and Kensington.

Mary and I were sitting in Kensington library on a winter morning, warmed by the sunlight from the tall, timber windows. She was in her work clothes – a hoodie and tracksuit pants. It was a Monday, so she had a particularly busy day ahead. “The family and the flat have been without me all weekend, so there is lots to do,” she said.

That morning, Mary had got up at 6.30am at the flat owned by a Filipino housing association that she shares with five other domestic workers. Usually there are one or two women – domestic servants who have been rescued from abusive employers – sleeping on the sofa.

Mary is part of an informal network of migrant workers of Filipino origin who support others like them who get into difficulties. Domestic workers abroad are not often helped by their government, for whom the export of workers is an essential source of revenue. The main kind of help offered by the Philippine government is repatriation in cases of abuse or other disaster. This is most frequently done for workers in the Middle East and south-east Asia. It is the last thing most migrant workers in the UK want.



Filipino domestic workers rally outside the Houses of Parliament in 2018. Photograph: Paul Smyth/Alamy

The Philippine organisations campaigning for the rights of migrant workers have been met with hostility from their government. When Mary makes her annual trip home, she is nervous going through Philippine passport control, half expecting to be arrested. Because as well as working more than full-time, holding down part-time jobs as well as her main job, she is an activist – involved in the UK Filipino Domestic Workers Association, and with [Migrante International](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/mar/17/my-employer-hit-face-pushed-down-stairs-filipina-migrant-maids), an organisation founded in the Philippines in 1996 to campaign for the rights and welfare of Filipino workers overseas.

Migrante has been “red tagged” by the government. Red-tagging is the malicious blacklisting and harassment of individuals or organisations critical of the government, widely used against all kinds of activists in the Philippines. It makes them vulnerable to violence in a country where unexplained violent deaths and disappearances are common. Mary doesn’t know if her activities have attracted the attention of the authorities in the Philippines – but she fears them. This is one of the reasons she did not want me to use her real name in this article.

**T**he Philippine government has a deliberate policy of using its people as an export commodity. Filipinos make up about 25% of the world’s seafaring staff. They are nurses, hospitality workers and labourers. But, overwhelmingly, they are women in unskilled occupations, especially care work.

It was under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, in 1974, that the organised export of labour became official government policy. It was a means of earning foreign exchange. But it was also, according to Joanna Concepcion, the Manila-based chair of Migrante, a means of exporting the youngest, most active part of the population, bringing down unemployment and reducing the risk of social unrest. Through successive regimes the aggressive export of labour has continued. Today, about 11% of the population – 1.83 million people – are working overseas at any one time. That means that almost every family has at least one absent member. Many, like Mary, leave their children behind to be raised by others. The remittances they send home totalled [more than $31bn](https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Philippines-modern-day-heroes-sent-record-remittances-last-year) in 2022.

For many of those who stay in the Philippines, the lack of social security means destitution is never far away. On the major highways, people live in cardboard shelters on the strip between the lines of traffic, burning rubbish to cook and keep warm. Every McDonald’s has a crowd of children waiting for leftovers. The Philippines is the oldest democracy in south-east Asia, but in the slums the most immediately evident benefits of the right to vote are the plastic signs promoting candidates in the seemingly endless elections: they come in handy as roofing material. The faces soon turn green from sun and mildew. Hanging above these streets are huge posters placed by recruitment agencies seeking applicants for jobs in the UK, Canada, the US and Australia. “Be the next for a better life,” the posters say.

Ten years ago, the Philippines was being heralded as a success story, an Asian tiger, thanks to the [youngest population](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/17/the-school-with-18000-students-educating-the-philippines-booming-population) in east Asia and the fact that English was a second language. Yet the gap between the small number of wealthy families and the ever increasing numbers of desperately poor grew wider. An estimated 18% of the population live below the poverty line, according to Philippine government data. International authorities regard that as an underestimate.

In the Philippines, a call-centre job is one of the best paid available – accessible only to those with good English and a college degree. A call-centre worker can earn about 1,219 pesos – £17 – a day. That is more than nurses, who have an average base salary of about 1,000 pesos a day, and about the same as schoolteachers. Mary’s own daughter – a qualified teacher – has just returned from working in Taiwan as a nanny. There are qualified doctors working as nurses’ aids in the west.

What the Philippines needs, according to Migrante, is inward investment, not to export its workforce. Forcing workers into exploitation overseas, its members say, is not a solution to the country’s problems. The Philippines imports, in the words of Concepcion, “everything, even toothpicks … we are not a self-reliant economy. We are rich in natural resources, and yet we might as well still be a colony.”

In government propaganda, overseas workers are called “modern day heroes”. In his state of the union address in July, the president, Ferdinand Marcos Junior – the son of the dictator – attributed the country’s fast-growing economy to the “steady flow of remittances” from overseas Filipino workers (known as OFWs). He acknowledged a healthcare worker shortage, caused in part by qualified people moving overseas – including to positions in the NHS. He promised more training programmes. While saying his “wish” was for overseas employment to be a choice, rather than a necessity, he added: “It remains a noble calling that our OFWs have answered, requiring great sacrifice.”

Even those who have [suffered terrible abuse](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/oct/24/the-vanished-filipino-domestic-workers-working-abroad) are celebrated for their fortitude. On Philippines National Heroes Day in 2019, the former president Rodrigo Duterte talked about Rose Evangelista Reutirez, who worked for 30 years as a domestic in Kuwait, losing contact with her family, not paid a salary for years, locked in her employers’ home before escaping and finding a “humane” employer. This, Duterte said, was an example to other Filipinos of the dedication of working for the “wellbeing of their families and the advancement of the nation”.

Seldom mentioned is the fact that the relentless drive to export vulnerable, often poorly educated workers has fed the machine of modern slavery. Filipinos travelling abroad for work are prey to organised crime and corruption. The boundary between a “hero of the nation” overseas Filipino worker and a slave can be a blurred one.

**I**t seems that every family in the Philippines has a story about trafficking and enslavement. Maricris, who I met in Manila in 2022, grew up the child of street vendors, and in 2018 answered a Facebook advertisement for domestic workers in Vietnam. She had no passport, but she and the other women recruited were instructed to queue at a particular booth when they went through border control at Manila airport. They were waved through. On arrival in Hanoi, she was told that there was no domestic job. Instead, the women were taken by armed guards across the Chinese border to a hotel in Guangzhou. The hotel was filled with Filipino and Vietnamese women, and it was there Maricris discovered she was to be a pregnancy surrogate for a wealthy Chinese man. The women were fed “like princesses” but imprisoned in their rooms except for trips, blindfolded and under guard, to a hospital for health checks and insemination.

Maricris managed to get hold of a mobile phone and messaged a friend in the Philippines, sending her a photo of the bar of soap stamped with the hotel’s name. That friend alerted the embassy, and the Chinese police raided the hotel. Some of the gang members working on the hotel premises were arrested, Maricris said. She was kept in China for a month so she could be interviewed by Chinese police investigators. She was then sent home to the Philippines where her daughter, Queen Mary Ann, was born in July 2019.

When I spoke to her, Maricris was being threatened on Facebook by members of the criminal syndicate that trafficked her. They want her child. “I will never give her to them,” she said. Given the ease with which she passed through border control, Maricris suspected there was a connection between the Philippines authorities and the syndicate that trafficked her, so she was reluctant to ask for help from the police.

When I met her, Maricris was working as a street food vendor, earning 300 pesos (£4) a day, and also receiving support from the Ople Center, a charity working with exploited workers. Maricris said she had flashbacks from her time in China and was suffering the effects of trauma. But the only hope she could see for the future was to travel overseas once again, possibly as a factory worker. She said this time she would make sure she was using an authorised recruitment agency – but she could see no other way of protecting herself. She said she was prepared to go “anywhere”.



Maricris and her daughter, Queen Mary Ann. Photograph: Margaret Simons

The top destinations for Filipino workers are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, followed by Kuwait, Hong Kong and Qatar. [Abuses of migrant workers](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/oct/12/we-lie-on-the-floor-till-someone-buys-us-shocking-allegations-of-uae-agencies-abuse-of-domestic-workers) in the Gulf states have been well documented by international organisations. The ILO in 2012 estimated there were 600,000 forced labour victims in the Middle East. A study by the [Committee on Overseas Workers Affairs](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system), a standing committee of the Philippines House of Representatives, reported that same year that [70% of workers employed as caregivers or without a specific work qualification](https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Saudi-Arabia,-70-of-Filipino-domestic-workers-suffer-physical-and-psychological-violence-24260.html) in the Middle East suffered physical and psychological harassment. In more recent years there have been [cases of murder](https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3p89m/she-left-home-to-work-5000-miles-away-but-was-killed-and-abandoned-in-a-desert) of domestic workers – four in Kuwait since 2018 – and many more of disappearance. Calls for reform grew in the leadup to the [2022 World Cup](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/nov/27/qatar-deaths-how-many-migrant-workers-died-world-cup-number-toll) in Qatar. The Philippines [halted](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-halts-deployment-workers-saudi-arabia-2021-05-28/) deployment of its domestic workers to Saudi Arabia in 2021 over questions of ill treatment, but later lifted the ban.

The Philippines government maintains offices across the world to assist migrant workers who run into trouble. But according to Concepcion, the main remedy provided is help with repatriation. Once a worker returns home, any hope of recouping unpaid wages or holding employers to account for abuse and exploitation evaporates, often leaving the worker in a worse situation than before they left.

In metropolitan Manila, I met the head of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, Arnell Ignacio. He was the only representative of the Philippine government to agree to an interview. Ignacio is best known not as a government official but as a television personality. He has run popular gameshows and judged for a special edition of Philippine Idol. He granted me an interview on the understanding that the encounter would be recorded by his personal camera crew, and posted on social media. It helps his profile to show that international media are interested in his work.

He acknowledged that most problems for migrant workers are in the Middle East, but claimed things are improving thanks to the efforts of President Marcos, who was elected in 2022. Saudi Arabia is reforming its labour laws, he said, and will help with blacklisting certain employers. Marcos recently visited the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and got a commitment that the Saudi government would cover unpaid wages for migrant workers after a recruitment agency collapsed, leaving 10,000 people unpaid. “So that is wonderful, wonderful news. And we would like to thank the crown prince.”

In all this woe, the UK is well down the list of troublemakers. Ignacio described it as “a very nice country. We have no problems with the UK.”

He said he is proud of his countrypeople who travel overseas to work. “Filipinos are known to be very good workers because of our nature … we’re a very jolly population and very caring, too.”

But is it right for a country to treat its people as export commodities?

That, he said, was a question above his pay grade.

“The ideal situation is that we have more jobs here, and that is what the president is aiming to do. But, of course, it won’t happen overnight.” He said the government is doing a “splendid job” in drawing up new bilateral agreements.

Shortly after he was appointed, Ignacio made headlines in the Manila media by announcing that he was opening a cafe, called Migrant, in the foyer of the OWWA offices where so many desperate former migrant workers come to seek help. He recalled: “I just saw them sitting around very uncomfortably, and can you imagine being so burdened with problems and not having a decent seat?” He had also travelled overseas, and seen migrant workers in shopping malls, unable to afford to go into a Starbucks. “So I thought here we will provide free coffee, to make them feel special.” It is not the answer to all problems, he admits, but “it shows that we care”.

**I**n defence of its policy of exporting the labour force, the Philippine government claims that working overseas can lift a family from poverty into the middle class. And it does happen. Mary’s is a story of success, but she has paid a high personal price. She was born in 1968 in a remote part of Antique province in the western Visayas region, the third of five children. Her parents lived and worked on the land of the local mayor. “If there was work, then there was food. If not, then there is no rice for us,” she told me. From the age of six, Mary worked in the pig farm, and as a cleaner. She went to school, but never had any time to herself. “I never had a childhood. It is hard for children to lose that stage of their lives, it leaves you incomplete,” she said.

She first went overseas in 1996 at the age of 29, leaving two children, aged one and two, behind with her husband, who earned a tiny salary as a security guard, not enough to give their children a decent education.

Her first job was in Taiwan. She cared for three families living in the same apartment block. She spoke no Mandarin and little English. When the family members shouted at her, she didn’t understand what they were saying, so she would smile, which infuriated them further. Her hands broke out in bleeding cracks and sores from constant washing. Most of her salary went to servicing the debt to the employment agency that found her the job. The rest she sent to her family to buy food. Her only means of keeping in touch with her children was by letter. “My eldest loves to draw, so he was sending me pictures of the house he hoped I would be able to buy for us … but they didn’t know me and I didn’t know them.” She worked for three years without a holiday.

By the time she returned to the Philippines in 1999, Mary spoke better English and some Mandarin. She was not supposed to return to Taiwan under that country’s immigration law, but the recruitment agency fixed that. For a charge, they got her a fake passport and she returned for another, shorter, period.

She left the Philippines again in 2003. By this time, she had another child, who was just three years old. In Hong Kong, she cared for an elderly man while his daughter worked on the Chinese mainland. For six years, she had just one day off a week – and no holidays or visits home. She was constantly stressed and had only minimal money for food. By the time the old man died, Mary weighed just 45kg. But it was here in Hong Kong that she made contact with other Filipino workers, and ultimately became involved in campaigns for better wages. This gave her a social life “and for the first time there was the idea that I had rights”.

She worked as a cleaner for another Hong Kong family but quit when she discovered they were spying on her with a concealed video camera. Then she was hired by her current employers, who were then working in south-east Asia. She was happy with them. After one year, they told her they were moving to London and invited her to come with them. They warned her that it would not be easy to renew her visa after six months, but they were prepared to do what they could to help.

Mary arrived in London in early 2014. The problems with her visa dragged on for four years, including several appeals through the courts. She cried every night because of the stress. If she had to leave, it would have meant a return to the Philippines without savings or security – a return to poverty.

But, ultimately, using the argument that she was needed because of the family’s particular circumstances, she was granted a visa renewable every two and a half years – but it depends on her staying with her current employer. Her dependence on her employers makes it harder for her to push for a raise. It’s another reason she did not want me to use her real name: she fears her employers’ reaction.

**E**very couple of weeks, somewhere on the streets of London, a small group of Filipino women gather. “We always go together,” says Mary, “in case it gets dangerous.” They wait outside one of the houses in the wealthiest areas of the city – Hyde Park, Notting Hill. They wait on a nearby street corner or row of shops. They pace up and down, sometimes pretending to talk on their mobile phones to avoid attracting attention. They gather because one of their countrywomen has called for help.

Sheila Tilan, the founding chairperson of the Filipino Domestic Workers Association in the UK, says the community of domestic workers now has rescue down to a fine art. Sometimes, the women find them using Google search and Facebook Messenger. Sometimes, they seek help on group chats with fellow Filipino domestic workers, who put them in touch with the [Filipino charity Kanlungan](https://www.kanlungan.org.uk/), which advocates for workers in London. Sometimes, it is the women’s relatives, back in the Philippines, who make the first call for help, because the women working in London often don’t have sim cards and can only use intermittent wifi connections where they are staying. Usually, the women have had no choice in coming to the UK – they started working for the family overseas, usually in the Middle East or Asia, and were brought to London when the family moved. Their passports and visas are often retained by their employers.



Filipino domestic workers combine a union meeting with mass at All Saints Church, Battersea, south London. Photograph: Andy Hall/The Guardian

A 2019 survey by Voice of Domestic Workers, a charity working with migrant domestic workers in the UK, found that [69% did not have their own room](https://toolstotransform.net/portfolio/joyce-jiang-20210521-a-manual-for-organising-migrant-domestic-workers-lessons-from-the-voice-of-domestic-workers-in-london/) in employers’ houses. Only half had enough food to eat. Three-quarters suffered from verbal or physical abuse. Seven per cent had been sexually assaulted. Many reported not being allowed to go out without the supervision of their employers, and some had their passport taken from them.

Nineza worked for a member of a Middle Eastern royal family as a nanny, caring for their child from the time he was born. He slept in her bed, and called her mama. When he was three, she was brought to England on a private jet and stayed in a house in Hyde Park while the family were on holiday. In Oman, she had lived on leftovers, but in London the family ate out most days and she starved. Often, she was left outside the restaurant while the family, including the child she cared for, were inside.

Trapped and isolated, she used Google and Facebook to search for Filipinos in London, and contacted Kanlungan. A rescue was arranged. It was evening. The family was absorbed, watching television. At the agreed time, she gave the child an iPad to distract him. She walked out with only the clothes on her back. A small delegation of her countrywomen met her and took her to a safe house.

Nineza has registered to be recognised as a victim of modern slavery, arguing that she had no control over coming to the UK, and that she was exploited and abused. She is waiting for a decision from the British government. Meanwhile, she misses “my little boss” – the child she raised from birth, and wonders if he misses her.

Tilan’s own story is more hopeful. She arrived in the UK in 2003 at the age of 35, recruited through an agency. Her first two employers, including a famous British couple, overworked her and treated her badly, she says, and she left them. Her present employer is “a total blessing”. The man is the managing director of a large group of companies, the woman a lawyer. They live in the US but maintain three luxury apartments in London for use when they or their friends and family visit. Managing them is Sheila’s part-time job. With her employers’ knowledge, she uses one as a safe house for rescued women. There were six of them staying there when I spoke to Tilan. The sofa in Mary’s flat is another “safe house”.

Under British law, the only way a migrant domestic worker can enter the country is accompanied by their employer. It used to be that if they left their employer their visa would be terminated, but after a 2016 review found that domestic workers were at risk of abuse and slavery, changes were introduced to permit them to change employers. Migrant workers have the right to take claims to an employment tribunal – but the long waiting times for hearings mean visas often expire before they get to plead their case.

The sole means that the British government has for dealing with the women who escape abusive employers is the [national referral mechanism](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/aug/11/uk-people-trafficking-referral-record-high-home-office-data-reveals) (NRM), set up to tackle trafficking. Referrals can be made by police, border force agents, local government and designated charities if they have reason to believe a domestic worker has been brought to the country without her consent, or is being underpaid or abused.

If there are perceived to be “reasonable grounds” to consider the woman a victim of trafficking, she becomes eligible for £45 a week of government support plus legal advice and accommodation, provided by the Salvation Army under contract to the government. If there is still time on her visa, she can work, but only as a domestic. A follow-up investigation will look at evidence that the woman has been trafficked, before making a conclusive determination. If that decision is positive, she will be allowed to stay and work as a domestic for two years.

Judith – not her real name – is one of the women being supported by her countrywomen, and sleeping on one of their sofas after fleeing her employers. She worked as a domestic and farm worker from the age of six. She went to Qatar to work for a family as a domestic servant in 2015, and they brought her to the UK when the children were attending university in London. She was repeatedly beaten and verbally abused by the family. “They treated me like an animal,” she said, “and now my mind is broken.” She was not allowed to leave the house, but one night, after some months, she packed a few clothes into a black rubbish bag and the household garbage in another. She walked out to the bins, dropped the rubbish in them, and kept walking.

That was six months ago. Identified as a possible victim of trafficking, Judith has been given permission to stay in the UK pending further investigation, but because her original visa has expired, she is not allowed to work. To help her afford clothes, food and enough mobile phone data to keep in touch with her family, Mary has passed on her part-time, cash-in-hand Saturday cleaning job to Judith.

For those women who don’t use the NRM, but leave an abusive employer, once their visa has expired their only choices are to return home to the same conditions that led to them being enslaved in the first place, or to stay and become illegal, undocumented workers and even more vulnerable to exploitation. Yet, according to a 2019 report by Dr Joyce Jiang, a lecturer in human resource management at the University of York, many Filipinos are reluctant to register with the NRM: they don’t want to see themselves as slaves. They would like to see themselves as workers and heroes of the nation.

Approached for comment, the Home Office provided a statement saying it was “committed to protecting migrant domestic workers from abuse and exploitation” and that the NRM was tailored to allow workers to “rebuild their lives … However, we will continue efforts to ensure that no worker suffers abuse at the hands of their employer.”

Meanwhile, the numbers of rescues are growing. Tilan says that between October 2022 and June 2023, there were 27 rescues. But in August and September this year alone, there were another 17. The domestic workers association and Kanlungan used their Facebook pages to call for volunteer hosts to provide more safe houses for the rescued victims: “Do you have a spare room or sofa?”

**E**very weekend Sheila Tilan holds an event in London where the Filipino workers, on their day off, can share food and stories. Tilan recruits lawyers and activists to give them talks about their rights at work and the politics of the Philippines. When I visited, it was a picnic in Regent’s Park, attended by about 18 women. They lolled in the shade, shared salads and grilled chicken and listened to a passionate speech from a Filipino lawyer denouncing the Philippines government labour export policy. Tilan says: “Sometimes they have never been told before that they have rights.”

Most of these women will return home when their visas expire. Even while overseas, they have the right to vote in Philippine elections. Perhaps, Tilan hopes, they will start to use it. Political parties in the Philippines are largely flags of convenience. Dynasties and cults of personality dominate politics. But there are members of congress pressing for workers’ rights.

On a warm Sunday morning in June, Mary was in the All Saints Church on Prince of Wales Drive, immediately opposite Battersea Park. Outside, the residents were easing into the morning, buying coffee, taking their dogs for walks. Inside, Mary and her fellow Filipinos thanked the Lord for keeping them safe and healthy. Mary is a coordinator of this congregation, with a particular responsibility for the Filipina members. Most of these women were raised Catholics – the dominant religion in the Philippines, but it is this Anglican church that has become the centre of their social and religious lives. They meet here every Sunday for the mass, always followed by a communally cooked lunch. Every fourth Sunday there are special activities, such as cultural dances, choir practice or activities focused on health and wellness.

It happened, says Reverend Anand Asir Anand, by accident. One day about four years ago, a Filipina came to him and asked him to take her confession. He told her he couldn’t do so – he was not a Catholic priest. She asked him to pray with her instead, and out came her story of hardship and abuse. The church had no brief for Filipino people, but he contacted other Anglicans who did, and was soon in touch with Mary, Kanlungan and other organisations. On the two Sundays I visited, Filipino domestic workers made up most of the congregation. Once a month, mass is conducted by a Filipino priest, himself a migrant worker. Before the service, Filipinas from the congregation cleaned the church and brought flowers for the altar – yellow and white roses from Waitrose. On this day, of the 50 or so gathered in a circle around the humble altar, more than 40 were Filipina.

The next day, Mary took a break from work to meet me in the Pret a Manger by the ticket barriers at Kensington High Street tube station. She was exhausted. After the previous day’s service, followed by lunch, she had gone with her employers to a ballet performance by their daughter’s after-school group. Mary was not sure if she was invited for herself or because she has a particular way of plaiting the little girl’s hair.

The event ended late, she walked home to save the tube fare and spent a few hours talking to the women she lives with, including those sleeping on her sofa.

I asked her whether she believes in God and she reflected before answering. She prays every day, but as for heaven and hell, “I sort of believe in them. But perhaps it is not true.” She said she imagines the Philippines was once a paradise – before colonisation, when there was no wealth or poverty, and everyone shared everything. She said, with a hint of hesitation, that she thought she must be a revolutionary. She wanted fundamental reform of the system.

But asked if she hoped for a revolution – in the Philippines or in Kensington High Street – she said: “There will not be a revolution in my lifetime. This I accept.”

Then she had to go. It was Monday. There was lots to do, and she had not yet cooked dinner for the family.

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