

FIELD NOTES

Needed Services for Filipino Immigrant Women in New York City After 9-11

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I was hired by a non-profit organization in NYC to develop and deliver short term counseling, support services, and referrals to mental health and alcohol and drug prevention and treatment programs to NYC residents who were experiencing chronic stress, apprehension, and insecurities as a result of the post-9/11 environment.

The three years following the attack on the World Trade Center were a period of chronic strain and anxiety for NYC residents characterized by: (1) unpredictable “terror” alerts from the government; (2) wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, (3) reduced unemployment prospects, (4) new immigration laws and policies spreading fear among immigrant communities, (5) perceived hyper-vigilant policing in communities of color, and (6) discrimination against people who look Arab or South Asian. The relationship between prolonged stress and increases in mental health problems, family violence and abuse of alcohol and other substances is well-documented.

The project, called Moving Forward, identified a number of communities that are marginalized or historically neglected and in need of our services and referrals. These were primarily immigrant communities (documented and undocumented) with limited or no access to health, mental health and human services. Their alcohol, drug and family violence problems remain hidden. The following is a brief description of my work with Filipino immigrant women who were living and working in NYC in 2003-4.

The health and human service needs of Filipino immigrants, particularly women, have been largely ignored, despite the fact that the Filipinos are now the fourth largest Asian American population in NYC.

The number of Filipino women migrant workers was 209,822 or 73% of the total Filipino labour force overseas. Filipino women migrating through illegal, undocumented and clandestine channels are not included in this number. Women migrants from the Philippines work in the United States, Canada, Italy, Saudi Arabia and Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand. In 2006, **Filipino migrant workers sent home 12.8 billion dollars in remittances**. Filipino women often arrive in New York as a result of pre-arranged marriages with U.S. citizens, in exchange for money or as domestic workers: nannies, cooks, baby-sitters, and housekeepers. Each year, thousands come to work in the homes of foreign diplomats or officials of international agencies.

Live-in domestic workers with special employer-sponsored B-1 visas are prohibited from quitting jobs or changing employers. Thus, many are “invisible” and unprotected by laws, regulations, or government oversight. Whether documented or undocumented, Filipino domestic workers and “mail order brides” are often extremely isolated from their families and lack social and emotional supports. Their situations render them particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by their employers and husbands. The average wage of Filipino domestic workers has been reported as \$2.14 an hour, from

which deductions for room and board are sometimes made. Thus, many earn extremely low wages, living far below the 200% poverty line.

Filipino women rarely report abusive conditions, wage violations, or employer exploitation for fear of detention or deportation, regardless of their immigration status. In response to insecurity and stress among Filipino women, exacerbated in the aftermath of 9/11, Moving Forward forged links with three Filipino community-based service and advocacy organizations in New York City—Damayan, Filipino American Human Services Inc. (FAHSI) and the Philippine Forum. Through this collaboration, *Moving Forward* offered culturally appropriate support groups in which women could talk about and secure help in dealing with the difficult issues they faced.

We identified a Tagalog-speaking consultant,¹ who developed culturally sensitive and creative techniques to use in a series of support groups, discussions and informal workshops with Filipino women. A traditional dancer, nurse and pastoral Islamic counselor, our consultant, Potri Ranka Manis, used an artistically rich and multi-layered approach to stress reduction, crisis intervention, individual support, pastoral counseling and service referrals. Her “Healing Circle” program incorporated traditional dance movements, artistic expression, writing, and poetry to help participants discuss their experiences and problems, encourage them to seek professional assistance, and develop healthy coping mechanisms to reduce stress.

A total of 108 women participated in her year-long program. Discussions focused on the importance of open communication with families, how alcoholism can lead to intimate partner violence, stress reduction techniques, and the need to gain practical skills such as English and computer skills. Several were involved in physically violent relationships with alcoholic spouses and were in need of counseling and assistance. Others revealed trauma, stress, and legal issues that also required referrals to qualified service providers. The consultant referred those who needed professional counseling to our staff and other agencies.

“First, we started with a recollection phase, talking about the weather back home, favorite songs, and using body movements to loosen up physically and establish a rapport between me and the group. We used different techniques, like drawing maps, which aren’t very direct, but allow the women to talk about themselves, where they come from, why they left home, and identify their sources of stress. Some women talked about their husbands, [saying] that they were abused by their husbands who were alcoholic. As the process went on, I asked the women to create a journal where they could write a letter to themselves or write poetry.... I was able] to address the needs of people who are invisible—people who won’t tell you who they really are even though they may tell you they are sick or have fever, but [will not let you] penetrate what the real source of their stress is. It is through this program [the Healing Circle] that I reached their hearts and trust. What really caused the stress was being covered up, [but with the program] really surfaced—like domestic abuse, which is taboo [to discuss] in Filipino culture. Another issue that surfaced was their needs in their jobs. [We] actually started a jobs referral system within the group itself, where the women would tell each other if something was available” (Moving Forward’s consultant)

Participants reported that the “Healing Circle” program was helpful to them. They learned techniques for managing stress, and gained awareness of available resources when they need to talk to someone who is sensitive to their problems, fears, and cultural background. Using art, humor, and emotional engagement, the experienced consultant was able to help women in a way that produced honest testimony to their own circumstances in a setting in which they felt free of stigmatizing responses. Our intervention was a beginning culturally responsive effort toward meeting the need for social supports and services of Filipino women in New York.

¹ Potri Ranka Manis, a trained nurse, Muslim pastor, dancer, playwright and poet, is Artistic Director and Founder of Kinding Sindaw. She performs traditional classical and tribal Filipino dance.