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Israel's Invisible Filipino Work Force

To support their families back home, women from the Philippines have found work and a new way of life in Israel. But at what price?

By Ruth Margalit, May 2, 2017

The building behind the Central Bus Station in South Tel Aviv is peculiar, the Filipinos who rent the second floor told me one evening in April. You barely hear any Hebrew spoken there. On Friday night, as you climb its winding staircase, the doors of the apartments are ajar, and a cacophony of sounds fills the street: from the Nepalese on the ground floor, the Chinese on the third floor and the Africans — Eritrean, the women are pretty sure — on the fourth floor. And during the week? The women grow quiet, hesitant. They don't know what happens then. They are only ever in the apartment on the weekend, during their one day off. The rest of the time they live with their employers, who are, for the most part, elderly and frail and in need of constant assistance.

Twenty-one women and four men share the small one-bedroom apartment. Most of them are renting it on the sly: The visa of a foreign caregiver in Israel mandates that she (it's almost always a she) live with her employer, except in rare instances, such as if the employer resides in a nursing home. The apartment is plain and clean. The first things you notice are the beds, arranged like Tetris pieces in the narrow space, with tidily folded piles of clothes peeking from weekend bags resting on them. The living room functions as a second bedroom and all-around entertainment center. A karaoke machine from the Philippines is plugged in to the television, projecting idyllic vistas of home into the airless room. Rice fields. Rugged mountaintops. On the walls are a picture of the Virgin Mary and one of melting clocks — a reproduction of Salvador Dalí's "The Persistence of Memory."

The women filter into the apartment at different hours of the day. Then they head to the Filipino market in Neve Sha'anán, farther up the road, or to the one inside the Central Bus Station: The owner is Israeli and sells anything from stuffed banana leaves to cassava and pork skewers.

On the menu that night: shrimp cooked with a little Sprite and sticky rice. The Filipinos of the second floor miss this kind of food.

"At work it's always chicken," Gemma Gragasin said.

"*Ktitzot*" — meatballs — "or schnitzel," Kathleen Joson quickly added.

"And salad," Ligaya Lucero said, and laughed. "All the time salad."

The occupants of the Tel Aviv apartment are divided into two main groups: those who come on Fridays and those who come on Saturdays. The others usually choose to work overtime and barely come at all. "We see them once in a blue moon," Darcy Margallo told me. At 59, he is the only man in the Friday group, with salt-and-pepper hair that reaches

his waist, and a pencil mustache. The younger women call him Tatay, “Father” in their native Tagalog.

As the evening wore on, a karaoke session got underway. One of the women selected “All My Life,” by the soft-rock group America. The women, huddled together on two sofas, hummed along softly with the lyrics.

“I do recall that every moment spent was wasted time

But then I chose to lay it on the line. ...”

When the song ended, Joson took the microphone. She started singing a ballad by the Filipino singer Lea Dansalan. Joson is 29, with busy eyes and a wide smile that reveals orthodontic braces. She works in Kfar Saba, a city near Tel Aviv, for an 82-year-old woman with weak legs and insomnia. Last year, when Joson first laid eyes on her employer, who is twice her size, she panicked. How would she be able to lift her? Then she learned that her main responsibility was to keep the woman company during her sleepless nights. “Don’t leave me here in my bed,” her employer told her in Hebrew. So Joson brought her a cup of tea, and the two of them sat and talked — about her employer’s husband, who died 19 years ago but whom she was still mourning; about Joson’s parents, who are also both O.F.W.s, or overseas Filipino workers, a sector that accounts for 10 percent of the Filipino population.

When Joson was 1, her mother left to work as a nanny in Hong Kong. Her father departed four years later to work on a cruise ship, leaving her to be raised by her grandmother and other relatives. Three years ago, when she told her parents that she wanted to become an overseas worker so that they could finally afford to return home, her mother dissuaded her from going to Hong Kong; it was too hard there, she told her daughter. Instead, she encouraged Joson to apply for work in Israel, where, among the population of only eight million, there are about 30,000 Filipino caregivers (legal and illegal), almost half of all foreign caregivers in the country, according to Kav LaOved, a workers’ rights organization. Except for diplomacy, caregiving remains the only profession open to Filipinos in Israel.

In the three years since her arrival, Joson has become attached to Israel. A practicing Catholic, she marvels that she gets to live and worship freely in the Holy Land and feels a sense of kinship with Israelis who, like her, are “hardworking and very family-oriented.” If anything, she wants to be more like the Israelis she knows, like her employer’s children, who speak their minds freely. “They will get angry, but after an hour or two, they’re O.K. again,” she said. “Us Filipinos, when we get angry it will take us a few days to forget.” All those bottled-up feelings aren’t healthy, she thinks. But there were times, like now, a few days before Passover, when she couldn’t help keeping her feelings to herself. She saw her employer’s family come together for the holiday and found herself envying them, wishing that she could reunite with her own family. Maybe one day, she thought. “*Be’ezrat Hashem*,” she said in Hebrew — with God’s help.

Israel’s victory in the 1967 war and its subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza led to the introduction of Palestinian workers to the Israeli labor force. These workers, who were predominantly male, crossed the checkpoints into Israel each morning and were employed, for the most part, in construction and agriculture. By the late 1980s, their number topped 100,000 — about 7 percent of the Israeli work force. But

with the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada in December 1987, and the heightened security threat, Israel started to bar the Palestinians from entering the country; their jobs were left empty. The following year, the government decided on a new policy: the importation of migrant workers from developing countries. Slowly, Palestinians began to vanish from Israelis' view, and in their stead, new populations arrived — people who did not leave the country's borders at sundown. By 2002, there were 226,000 migrant workers living in Israel.

The most pressing need for workers is in the caregiving profession. In 2009, there were fewer than 250,000 Israelis over the age of 80; by 2059, there will be well over a million, according to one population projection by the Central Bureau of Statistics. Added to that is a serious shortage of working hands: In the 1990s, the ranks of the caregiving sector in Israel were occupied primarily by female immigrants from the former Soviet Union. But that population is now largely retired, leaving a major vacuum.

Women from the Philippines — who were initially brought in small numbers by Israel's Defense Ministry to care for disabled soldiers — have come to dominate home care in Israel, so much so that the word "Filipina" has become synonymous in Hebrew with "*metapelet*" — "caregiver." (I once overheard one elderly woman in Tel Aviv tell another, "My Filipina is from Moldova.") They may not be a sizable community compared with the more than three million Filipinos who reside in the United States, but their financial contribution to their country is substantial: Last year alone, Filipinos living in Israel remitted at least \$125 million back home, according to the Philippine central bank. Like other groups of migrant workers in Israel — the Thai farmhands, the Chinese construction workers — the Filipinos are sometimes described as "transparent," a community invisible to most Israelis, taking on the work that no one in the society wants to do. Unlike other foreign workers, however, they are embedded deep within Israeli families, helping the most vulnerable members of society — or the most privileged.

This dual presence — transparent yet indispensable — discomfits the national imagination. In a once-popular television series, one character, a Filipino *metapelet*, was conscripted into the Israeli military instead of her employer's son (and was later held captive in Lebanon). A 2016 documentary that tracked the rise in marriages of convenience between Filipinos and Israeli men — she gains a visa; he a maid — showed the men trafficking in familiar stereotypes: They praised their wives for being loyal, sycophantic and uncomplaining. Neal Imperial, the Philippine ambassador to Israel, told me that though there are Filipino doctors, nurses and engineers in other countries, their absence from Israeli society "tends to create a one-dimensional view of our people and our country, such that for many Israelis, the Philippines is a nation of caregivers."

Israel's Interior Ministry, which controls immigration policy, considers foreign workers to be visitors: neither citizens nor residents. This is true for both "low-skilled" workers — the vast majority — and the small number of "expert" workers. The policy has been shaped by the governing Likud Party, but also, in large part, by Shas, the party of ultra-Orthodox Sephardim. Shas sees itself as a bulwark against non-Jewish immigration and as guardians of the country's Law of Return, which allows any Jew in the world to become a citizen of Israel. For Shas, migrant workers — small as their numbers may be, powerless as they are — represent a direct threat to the country's Jewish makeup. And so they've devised a byzantine system of barriers aimed at keeping the migrant population from "taking root," as the Interior Ministry puts it.



Gragasin, right, and Kathleen Josen, second from left, enjoying a Friday dinner in April at the Tel Aviv apartment they share with other workers from the Philippines. Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

Foreign caregivers are required to be on call at all hours — one of the only groups in Israel unprotected by the law regulating the daily hours of work and rest. Most are not allowed to look for work outside a given area and cannot quit more than two jobs in two years, except under extreme circumstances. The reasoning behind this, the government argues, is to prevent caregivers from abandoning employers in underserved areas of the country.

But the restrictions stretch well beyond geography: With the exception of siblings, foreign workers are not allowed to enter the country along with any immediate family members; nor are they allowed to marry, or their visas will be revoked. Until 2011, they could not bear children and continue to work in Israel legally. Their work permits are valid for up to five years and three months, and are meant to ensure their transitory presence. In that time, they often have to scramble to find new work after an employer dies. The state, which helps elderly or disabled Israelis below a certain income level hire a caregiver, makes permit renewals so hard to come by that a worker is brought from abroad for most new cases that enter the system, despite large numbers of migrant workers already living in Israel.

This makes for a grim paradox: The government's insistence on the transience of the foreign workers has only made their numbers swell. Some 6,000 Filipinos now live in Israel without documentation, according to the Philippine Embassy. The main beneficiaries of this revolving-door policy are recruitment agencies in both countries,

which pocket thousands of dollars in illegal placement fees. A caregiver from the Philippines pays, on average, \$8,316 to find work in Israel — a sum that usually comes saddled with high interest and takes the worker about two years to pay off, according to Kav LaOved.

The day I went to visit the offices of that organization in Tel Aviv, one of its volunteers was dispatched to a police station to assist a caregiver from Sri Lanka who said she had been raped by her employer. Such cases — though far from the norm — are made worse by the state of indebtedness with which a foreign worker enters the Israeli work force, Idit Lebovitch, a coordinator for migrant caregivers, told me. During a caregiver's first two years in the country, while she is paying off her recruitment fee, she "would sooner complain about not getting paid than she would about being raped or beaten," Lebovitch said.

Still, in the hierarchy of overseas destinations for Filipinos, I was told, Israel ranks somewhere below the United States, Europe and Australia, but far above Asia and the Middle East in desirability. The monthly salary of foreign caregivers — \$1,374, before deductions for food and board — is relatively high (equivalent to the Israeli minimum wage). Kathleen Joson, for example, earns about \$1,100 after deductions: double what her mother was paid in Hong Kong and about three times what a caregiver can expect to make in the Arab gulf states.



Wednesday-evening prayers in Tel Aviv at Our Lady Woman of Valor church, which holds services for Filipinos and other immigrant groups. Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

But it's not only financial considerations that draw Filipino workers to Israel. Despite the country's restrictive laws, Filipinos told me countless stories of Israeli openness and

acceptance, of caregivers becoming part of the intricate mosaic of Israeli life. I spoke to a 54-year-old woman named Leila Tugade who spent three years in Israel in the late '80s and met and married an Israeli man, then moved with him to Oregon, where her aunt needed her help running a small hotel. Tugade still dreams of moving back to Israel when she retires. "Israel is like my second home, not America," she told me. Tugade appreciated Israelis' emphasis on family and on tradition, their love of the country. "If Filipino people were patriotic people like Israelis, I think we would be better off," she said.

Others pointed to Israelis' lack of formality, to a sense of fast intimacy that develops between employer and caregiver. As Darcy Margallo, who has been in Israel for 20 years (and currently works for a relative of mine), said: "I have friends in Canada and London, but they all want to come here. There's more freedom here. You tell your employer that your boyfriend or girlfriend is coming, and the employer says, 'Go meet him!' or 'Tell him to come here!'" It is now commonplace to see obituaries in the Hebrew press that include, alongside relatives' names, a tribute to a "dedicated caregiver."

One afternoon in April, I sat with Ella Ben Yaacov and Gemma Gragasin in the kitchenette of Ella's small apartment, inside an assisted-living facility in a tree-lined neighborhood in Tel Aviv. Even here, a residence with professional staff, there were Filipino caregivers on every floor. The sun was beating down outside, but inside the apartment it was dim and cool. In the corner of the room was what Gemma called "the Mercedes" — Ella's walker. On the counter in front of them was a bowl of freshly cut strawberries.

"When did I arrive in Israel?" Ella asked Gemma in Hebrew. She looked ruddy-cheeked and matronly, dressed in a black-and-white sweater and black skirt.

"You said when you were 22," Gemma replied. She shuffled a deck of cards and dealt, and they were off, playing rummy. The maneuver was wordless, anticipatory, reassuring.



Precy with her son at a beach in Tel Aviv. Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

“Yes, I was 22.” Ella picked up her cards. “I went straight to the army.” She spoke of Israel’s early days and the barren plot of land she and her husband received from the state. Then, midflow, she asked: “What did we farm?”

“Avocado, you said,” Gemma answered.

“Yes, avocado!”

“And you’d never tried it before. You said: ‘What, this is food?’ ”

Ella laughed. “That’s right.” At one point, her eyes clouded over. “The train doors opened —” she began, but her voice trailed off. It became instantly apparent that she was no longer present in the room. She seemed shaken. Gemma touched her arm, almost imperceptibly, and continued to play.

Such lapses happened often. The problem, if Gemma had to sum it up, was the past. It kept creeping up on Ella. Auschwitz. 1944. Her sisters and brothers who disappeared without a trace. “I’ve seen a lot of troubles, my sweetheart,” Ella kept repeating, and Gemma nodded each time anew.

Gemma is 37 and petite, with thick hair cut into a bob and pearly teeth. When she arrived in Israel almost a decade ago, she was slender. But partaking of all meals with Ella has softened her lines. She doesn’t mind, though. It means that she finally feels at home, after a rough beginning in the country. When she left the Philippines, she told her parents that she would be back in two years. But it took her three years just to pay off her recruitment fee. Her father had become ill with emphysema, and Gemma had to cover his medical bills and support her mother and sister. She managed to extend her visa because the elderly employer she was working for at the time was still alive. After seven years in Israel, she asked her employer to grant her a visit home. Her father was dying, and she wanted to see him one last time. Her employer, she says, refused. “You have problems?” the employer told her. “I have problems.” Gemma’s father tried to comfort her, but after he died she couldn’t forgive herself for not saying goodbye. Then, slowly, things started to improve. She saved enough money to build a tile-walled house with a gabled roof in her home province, Tarlac, north of the Philippine capital, where she plans to retire. She even bought a small grocery store for her mother to run. “She needed a little business,” Gemma told me. And she found work with Ella, who treats her kindly.

‘Precy is 10 times more intelligent and capable and caring than the people who govern our lives.’

Ella would like to see Gemma be more sociable. “She wants me to go to nightclubs,” Gemma said with a laugh, as Ella lightly interjected: “What’s wrong with that?” Later, reflecting on the presence of Gemma in her life, Ella said, “We are together like family.” She circled back to the war and the memories that plagued her, then shook her head, as if willing them gone. Because of Gemma, she no longer dwelled on the past more than she should, she explained. “It’s good to have a friend,” she said. “It’s good for me to forget a little.”

In 2013, the Filipino community in Israel came under an unexpected spotlight when Rose Fostanes, a 46-year-old Filipino caregiver, auditioned for the Israeli version of the singing competition “The X Factor.” A short video clip aired before Fostanes’s

performance, mentioning that she lived in South Tel Aviv with three other caregivers: “I love my job because I like to take care of old people,” Fostanes said. The clip drew knowing chuckles from the audience. Short and plump, in a green shirt and jeans, Fostanes represented the unlikely, diamond-in-the-rough heroine audiences love to embrace. Her rendition of Shirley Bassey’s “This Is My Life” became a national sensation; more than half of all Israeli households tuned in to watch her win the season’s finale. But the praise she received was tinged with condescension: She was shown offering to make a sandwich for the supermodel Bar Refaeli, the show’s host, and the judges kept saying how “proud” they were of her.

After the show ended, Fostanes was supposed to land a lucrative record contract, and she quit her job as caregiver. But her first single failed to sell, and her management company later dropped her. Last year, after a protracted legal battle over her visa status, she returned to the Philippines, where she now makes a living performing in small bars and clubs across Manila. “She got tired of chasing her dream,” a friend of hers, Winston Santos, told me.

If the figure of the Filipino caregiver conjures subservience for many Israelis, back in the Philippines she represents a “pillar of society,” Ramon Casiple, executive director of the country’s Institute for Political and Electoral Reform, said. A shift has occurred in the Philippine cultural narrative, with overseas Filipino workers occupying the ranks of a budding middle class. The same changes can be seen in popular culture. A common plotline in films and television shows in the past, Casiple said, “was the girl who went to Manila, got rich and came back to the barrio. Now the theme is the poor girl who becomes a domestic helper outside the country and comes back with lots of money.” Every Philippine president has made luring overseas workers back home a central campaign promise, including the new president, Rodrigo Duterte, who won overwhelmingly among absentee voters. But the annual contribution of Filipinos abroad accounts for 10 percent of the country’s G.D.P. — no easy sum to replace. As Casiple put it, “Everybody is waiting for the promise to be fulfilled.”

The longer the domestic worker stays abroad, the more fluid her sense of home becomes. For Filipinos in Israel, this often results in a kind of hybrid existence. Every year, a competition is held for Miss Bikini IsraPhil — a portmanteau of “Israel” and “Philippines.” Festivities for the Philippine Independence Day include the country’s national anthem immediately followed by “Hatikvah” — the Israeli national anthem. And even though English remains the preferred mode of communication for most Filipinos in Israel, it is often peppered with a telling dose of Hebrew words: *savta* (grandmother), *kadurim* (pills), *makel* (cane), *bituach leumi* (social security). There are many stories of Filipino caregivers who have converted to Judaism: One employer I spoke to in the city of Rehovot nicknamed the Filipino who worked for her the Rebbetzin, because of her strict adherence to Jewish law. Keeping kosher, as a domestic worker in Israel, “becomes part of your life,” Santos, who is a former caregiver, told me.



Gragasin, center in orange shirt, shopping for a shared Friday-evening dinner at a fish market in Tel Aviv. Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

For some Filipinos, the quest to assimilate into Israeli society has included marrying Israeli men. Yet here, too, the Interior Ministry has piled on the obstacles. An internal ministry document, leaked to Haaretz in 2010, chided a Filipino worker who applied for citizenship after falling in love with an Israeli man, for “waiting for a knight so she could get a visa.” The lawyer who represented the caregiver and her Israeli partner in suing the ministry called its officials “demographobes.” Pregnant migrant workers used to face a choice: leave Israel within three months of giving birth, or stay and work in the country but send your baby away. The Supreme Court has since ruled the order unconstitutional. Nevertheless, it is being enforced de facto, worker advocates say: A foreign worker who gives birth is required to name the baby’s father, which could result in the loss of both parents’ visas.

Precy was 29 years old and had been living in Israel for years when she became pregnant. After years of caring for a fully paralyzed elderly man, she had recently begun working as a housekeeper for a family with two sons in Yehud, in central Israel. She loved her job, and now she faced an unconscionable decision: leave the country, or send her baby boy away. To her this was no choice at all. “He’s my first son,” she remembers thinking. “I want to be with him and take care of him and see him growing up.” She decided to keep her baby and relinquish her visa, rendering her stay in the country illegal. (For this reason, I am withholding her last name.) Her employers knew of her changed status and the risk it entailed — employing an undocumented worker in Israel carries a penalty of up to \$7,500 and possible criminal charges — but for them, too, there seemed to be no choice at all. “She’s like family, and you don’t get rid of family,” her employer, who is in his 50s and asked not to be named for fear of legal repercussions, told me. “How can you

tell a person that they can stay in the country but not work? That doesn't make any logical sense. How can you expel a child that was born here, or deport their mother?" After a moment, he added, his voice rising, "Precy is 10 times more intelligent and capable and caring than the people who govern our lives."

On a recent Saturday afternoon, Precy stood in the back of a crowded church in South Tel Aviv. Outside, Filipinos of all ages were busy tying palm fronds in preparation for Palm Sunday. Precy's son, Michael, now 9, sat a few rows ahead of her, lanky and mischievous in a Barcelona soccer shirt. He was there for a Catechism class, taught in Hebrew by an Israeli priest. The class draws 150 children each week, most of them Filipino and all of them born in Israel.

The church, Our Lady Woman of Valor, holds separate weekly Masses for Filipinos, Indians, Sri Lankans and Eritreans. It is common to see the children of Filipinos playing outside while their parents attend Mass in Tagalog, and for the parents to sit and chat while their children attend Mass in Hebrew. Occasionally, a weathered white face floats through the crowd: A worshiper has brought along her elderly employer.

In 2008, the government moved to deport 1,200 children of undocumented foreign workers. In response, a public outcry drew thousands to the streets of Tel Aviv. One organization called on its volunteers to physically hide the children if the order were to be implemented. A group of Holocaust survivors petitioned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "protect the honor of Israel and put this shameful chapter behind us for good." The following year, the Israeli government decided to give amnesty to 800 children of migrant workers who were born in Israel, had been living in the country for at least five years, were enrolled in school and whose parents entered the country legally. At the same time, the government also prepared to deport 400 children who did not meet these criteria.

The public outcry continued and was partly successful: In 2014, 221 more children were awarded permanent residency in the country. Many of them attend a single school in South Tel Aviv, whose student body encompasses 48 countries. (A short documentary about the school, "Strangers No More," won an Oscar in 2010.) Close to a fifth of the school's 1,200 students were born to Filipino parents (a majority are the children of African asylum seekers). As its former principal told me, "100 percent" of the graduating students who were awarded permanent residency in the country have since conscripted to the Israel Defense Forces. These children, Nitzan Horowitz, a former member of the Knesset who headed the committee on foreign workers, told me, "are as Israeli as it gets."

At Our Lady Woman of Valor, the children were growing restless. On cue, they rose and held hands.

"*Adonai itchem,*" the Rev. David Neuhaus, draped in a red chasuble, said — the Lord be with you.

"*Adonai itcha,*" the children replied — the Lord be with you.

On his way out, Neuhaus spotted Michael exiting the church with Precy. He walked over and took Michael's face in his hands. "Today you were an angel from heaven!" he said in Hebrew, while Precy beamed. "Usually he's a little devil," he added, playfully.

Sometimes, if she had to admit it, Precy worries about Michael. She has tried to get him interested in news about the Philippines, to tell him stories about his grandparents' beautiful home in Batangas Province. "But he doesn't want to go," she said. Although they are undocumented, Michael considers himself fully Israeli and alarms his mother when he declares with conviction that, like his friends, he will join the Israeli military when he turns 18. "He belongs here, and it's hard for me to explain that we came here just for work," Precy said, and sighed. "Maybe one day he will understand."

Ruth Margalit is an Israeli writer living in New York. She last wrote for the magazine about [Miri Regev](#), Israel's culture minister.

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