

FILIPINOS IN FINLAND 2006

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Maintenance of Own Culture and Identity

With perhaps a few exceptions, the first thing that immigrants do as soon as they arrive in the country of destination is to find co-expatriates in the area. Even just one with whom they can share and compare their new and different experiences without fear of embarrassment or offending the local inhabitants. In experiences where co-expatriates are distances away, the acquaintance of immigrants from other countries are likewise sought.

As migrants, we all face the common problem of adjusting and keeping the balance between our own culture and that of the new, of one's host country. It is difficult, if not almost impossible for an adult to alter a pattern of behaviour that has been practiced for years. Fortunately for us Filipinos, we easily camouflage our old way of life and we even share them with our Finnish acquaintances and relatives. I, for one, have stopped using the umbrella to protect myself from the sun, while my Finnish husband, though he cannot stand the smell of *bagoong* (fermented fish), he will rather use the spoon when eating rice.

In Finland, old traditions are being encouraged provided that they can be assimilated into the country's practices and habits, and that they do not contradict with what is legally allowed in the country.

Assimilation and Job Opportunities

There were about half a dozen Filipinos in Finland when I first arrived in 1974. More than 30 years on and there are now approximately 1000 of us, of which about half have already become Finnish citizens. Majority are women married to Finns, others are working as domestic employees by families from different diplomatic services, some in embassies, and some as au pairs with Finnish families. Many were able to bring in their closest relatives, especially minor dependents.

Very few Filipinos have landed into the so-called "white-collared" jobs. The lack of knowledge of the Finnish language limits the opportunity to find jobs that suit one's schooling and training. Some groups of musicians and entertainers naturally have succeeded in their careers without having first to learn the Finnish language. Recently opened nursing courses in the English language have given a growing number of Filipino women the opportunity to study, and later on find jobs in hospitals and health centres in the major cities of Finland. Several have also availed themselves of the short courses in care-giving.

Finns in general are more tolerant and accommodating towards people of other races and they do not see migrants as competitors and threats. Majority of the Finnish and foreign employers prefer the services of Filipinos than other groups of migrants because of their high skills, communication abilities, and positive personal character.

There is no bilateral agreement yet existing at the moment between Finland and the Philippines, therefore the very limited opportunity to migrate to this country. Even getting a visitor's visa requires the applicant's compliance to strict and rigorous regulations.

The Filipino Community

Since the summer of 1983, A yearly Fiesta Filipiniana gathers Finnish Filipinos. Started by a group of 20 or so Filipinos, most of whom were women married to Finns, the community habitually gets together to celebrate this festive event. Participants come from all parts of Finland, the farthest being those coming from the northern city of Oulu.

In September, 1988, a preparatory meeting was called to establish the **Suomalais-Filippiiniläinen Yhdistys r.y./ Finnish-Philippine Association** and 2 years later, the association's statutes were approved and the Association was legally registered. The 3 objectives of the association are to

- 1) to promote social contact between the members,
- 2) assist Filipinos to the Finnish way of life, and
- 3) to further knowledge of the Philippines in Finland.

The association, in order to serve its goals, annually organises varying activities for the entire community, their families, and friends. These activities include:

Fiesta Filipiniana – complete with traditional Filipino trimmings and practices such as Santacruzán, sunduan, rigodon, folk dances and songs.

Filipino Food Bazaar – held once or twice a year and is open for the public.

Pinoy Pasko- annual Christmas party.

Courses such as computer, language, sewing, knitting,

Cultural Shows- by a cultural performing group called Pagdiriwang, involving children, young adults, and adults alike. The group, in varying numbers, participates in many activities arranged by other Finnish and multi-cultural organizations in and outside Helsinki.

Lectures /Demonstrations –on Philippine culture in Finnish establishments and organizations and in Finnish schools.

Social Sessions- activities like picnics, bingo, and karaoke evenings are arranged for leisure and pleasure.

Fitness program- aerobics sessions, badminton, volleyball and basketball games are arranged whenever there are players available. Tournaments are held during the summer.

The Finnish Philippine Association tries to maintain its ties with other Filipino and other multi-cultural organisations in Finland, most closely with the **Suomi Filippiinit Seura /Finnish-Philippine Society**, a solidarity group which was also established in 1988, which mainly takes on the task of transmitting multi-faceted news and information about the Philippines to Finland. Among its members are Finnish researchers, scholars, and journalists who, in one way or another have interest and connection to the Philippines. The activities of the Society are particularly focused on matters concerning problems in the Philippines on development, environment, human rights, peace processes, and women's concerns.

Other Filipino groups that were recently formed, each one focused on different lines and purposes, but keeping close relationship with each other are:

-**Kabayan** – is an association of Filipinos in Tampere

-**CFC, Couples For Christ**, Finnish chapter.

-**Lasten Tulevaisuus r.y./ Children's Future Foundation** – established in 2006 for the purpose of raising funds for the benefit of needy children in the Philippines.

Conflict Areas

Majority of Filipinos living in Finland are women married to Finns, with half of them already divorced. Cultural differences, lack of common language and the absence of mutual love and respect are often the main cause of problems in mixed-married couples. The worst cases are when domestic violence occurs and where the authorities from the social work office and the local police have to intervene. We, Filipinos are usually reluctant to seek the help of people outside our family and circle of friends. We also have little incentive to cooperate with these “outsiders”, especially the police, because of fear of unsympathetic response from them.

At this point, I would like to focus on the issue regarding the so-called “bride trade”, or what we commonly know as the mail-order bride. Until September 1995, the Filipino community and the Finnish public had little knowledge and interest about the mail-order bride issue. A detailed report in a leading daily newspaper in Finland where the operations of a Finnish marriage mediator in the Philippines were described triggered a nationwide media debate participated by nearly every newspaper, magazine, radio, and TV programs over several months.

As a result, the agent became a household name. But soon after the first publicity, many Filipino women complained of being harassed at work and in public places: some were asked for how much they were bought; a child was asked by a schoolmate the same about her mother; and while crossing the street, a Finnish woman called behind a Filipino woman’s back: “Whore! Go back to your country! You are using up our tax money!”

I accidentally became involved when over a period of time, a dozen Filipino women, then married and living with Finnish men, sought me up for advice and moral support. It took some time before I recognised a pattern in their situations: indifferent husbands who were quick-tempered and violent, especially when drunk. One man lay on his bed, not caring how his equally drunk friends tried to rape and beat his wife. The wives were discouraged from socialising with other Filipinos or with anyone outside their circle of friends. The men were strict with money...one Filipina was instructed to jump off the tram when she spots the ticket inspector coming. Such benefits as the maternity, homecare, and child allowances were kept by their husbands. They were misled into signing documents and were often threatened to be sent back to the Philippines when they start to be too inquisitive. The men kept their wives’ passports and deliberately neglected them until their visas expired. When one arranged marriage ended up in divorce, the mediator usually comes in again to arrange a new match for the same fee. Rather than go home in shame and more broke than ever, a woman can be a bride to several men until they find the most satisfied man who would keep them.

We all know that poverty and family obligations have made these Filipino women submit themselves into such a way of life. Most women are not aware of being involved in such activities and they look up to their agents as well-meaning mentors. While some were fortunate to have found truly caring partners, others were matched with much older men, many of whom were formerly married, jobless, heavy drinkers, un-educated, and some were physically handicapped.

Many women suffered in silence, not being aware of alternatives, with no knowledge of their rights as individuals. They feared that because of communication difficulties and lack of evidence, facts could be turned around against them.

Trafficking of women by matching marriages has been criminalized in the Philippines in 1986, but there is no law in Finland to match it. There is no clear law against the practice of mediating marriages, no law that can stop men from marrying whoever, how many times, and by whatever

means. There is always an alarming link of the bride trade activity to violence and abuse in Finland. It is a situation that is difficult to study as it has become rampant not only towards Filipino women but also to other Asian women, and women from the former eastern European countries. The Finnish government is aware of the issue and has studied the conflicts that accompany the activity. Government agencies like the health and social welfare ministries, the police and the legal offices have all worked on informative and preventive measures and are acting towards assisting those who need help. The Finnish Embassy staff are aware of the situation and are vigilant against misuse of legal migration channels.

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