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# Leny Tolentino on Women Empowerment of Marriage Migrants in Japan

by Janice Lopez

**Leny Tolentino** is a Catholic Filipino lay missionary doing pastoral work for Filipino migrants in the Diocese of Yokohama for the past 18 years. The closure of her former diocesan migrant office in 2002 gave birth to the *KALAKASAN* Migrant Women Empowerment Centre, an organisation committed to address violence against women. “*Kalakasan*,” a Tagalog word for strength, stands for the inner strength of the woman that, once recognised and reclaimed, can lead to transformative personal empowerment and collective action.

Based on her experiences in *KALAKASAN* Centre, Leny shared with Isis International-Manila her thoughts on women’s empowerment.

*Women in Action [WIA]: In your opinion, how has marriage migration contributed to the further marginalisation of women in Asia?*

**Leny Tolentino [Leny]:** Usually, the women involved in marriage migration come from the less developed countries while the men who are interested to marry these women come from the developed countries. In this kind of situation, you can easily see the power structure coming into play. Men, who hold much of the power since they have the money, marry women who hold less power since they come from poor families. This is one basis for their marginalisation.

Men believe they can buy women through marriage. All expectations come from those holding a more powerful position. Men expect women to stay in the house to take care of the children and the entire family. If the women fail to perform this role, violence comes into

the picture. It’s really difficult to think of solutions to change this situation.

*WIA: Being part of KALAKASAN Migrant Women Empowerment Centre, how do you see such a service-oriented organisation playing a role in helping women reverse the situation from victimisation to empowerment?*

**Leny:** Our organisation aims to help migrant women develop self-esteem and feel at home with their own selves, especially those married to Japanese. We have a lot of activities, but I would like to call it actions rather than activities.

In times of crisis, women call the office asking for information. Often they ask, “What should I do because I am in this situation?” After that, we provide direct counseling or consultation. There are women who do not reach this point because they are able to talk and dialogue with their husband. We have very few cases where we encourage the women to assert themselves and to stand for what they believe in. Even in the initial stage, we encourage the women to really stand up and dialogue and be confident in saying what they feel to their partner. It takes a lot of time but there are cases where the husband really listen and change. But when we cannot do anything about the relationship, we offer other alternatives.

Usually, in Japan, the ones tasked to find shelter for victims of domestic violence are the police and the municipal counseling office. We call them to find shelters, the safest place at the time of extreme violence. After that, we provide follow-up care. It’s good that initial support is being extended to the woman at the time of crisis, but follow-up care is more important for us. During this



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*Leny Tolentino speaks of women's agency and empowerment during the 2007 Regional School on Marriage Migration in Asia held in November at Pagsanjan, Philippines.*

stage, women confront themselves and personally identify all their fears and doubts and what can be done about them. There's the tendency, many times, to go back to that abusive situation if self-esteem cannot be maintained. Many women have failed during this stage but we still continue to help them.

As a continuous journey with the women, follow-up care takes various forms. One is the home visit. We see what really happens within the household and can really assess the gaps in the relationship. For example, a relationship between a mother and a child. In case the mother is separated from the father of her child, we identify their needs and offer training, such as language or cooking skills. And there's this Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), where women share their stories among a small group of women. We want to duplicate this in many places. This is like an intimate sharing of life stories. Here, women are able to assess how they view themselves.

We also have programme for children. It's a big programme, in sync with the women's programme, because children are a big problem in marriage migration. In Japan, among three groups of women—Chinese, Korean, Filipino—it's the Filipino women who bear more children. Usually, the children of Filipino mothers and Japanese fathers are bullied because of their skin color. Classmates make fun of their lack of skills in writing and speaking Japanese, and make fun of the mother's ways and her spoken Japanese. In extreme cases, some children become ashamed of their mother. So, we have to address the concerns of the women, as well as that of their children. We introduce the children to the larger community and offer English lessons and summer camp.

We also have this advocacy work where women themselves speak in public about their experiences. Although not speaking directly to their husband, this activity impacts on men. It somehow helps men change their perception of these women.

*WIA: How do women mobilise and strategise around issues of marriage migration? How do they turn their personal empowerment towards collective empowerment?*

**Leny:** From their being concerned with individual endeavor, women go beyond their own personal life crisis. We expose these women to counseling, to different seminars and training activities. Gradually, the way they see themselves changes. They realise they are not alone in the situation, even realising that other women, who face the same situation, may have bigger problems. With that consciousness, women participate in various activities, particularly towards policy change on domestic violence. They feel the need to participate in such

activities as well as the need to voice out their experiences.

There is this one undocumented instance where one woman lobbied for policy change. She was supported by many other women and did not do it alone. This is one level of contributing collectively, although not as a big group. At the local level, where there are a number of networks, women tell us that if they participate in these gatherings, they have to assert who they are. These women believe that equal treatment, their mutual support of one another, are very important, not only within the family, but also within the larger society.

*WIA: How could service-oriented organisations or groups, such as KALAKASAN Centre, further strengthen their advocacy at the local and national or even at the regional and international levels?*

**Leny:** The chance to be here at the 2007 Regional School on Marriage Migration in Asia, to talk about marriage migration is one instance that KALAKASAN Centre can further its advocacy. We have been doing these things. We are engrossed in our local situation but we feel that we cannot change the situation faced by migrant women without really connecting to other social groups who have the same vision. But since we only have a few people in our organisation, we also have our limitations in addressing the local situation. We feel that we have to do something but it's probably not the right time. This chance, for example, is a beginning. From today forward, we would have to think of how we can bring back and apply to the community what we have learned from this school. ■



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