



DIGNITY FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS

COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

Evelyn Calugay

ARTISTS

Merelyn Aguirre
Jayson Palolan

MEMBERS

Agnes Calgo
Aileen Moludl
Antonio De Jesus
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Grace Minas
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Sining Laya Project

Organization

PINAY – Filipino Women’s organization of Quebec (Montréal)

October 2014 – october 2015

Created in 1991, PINAY, Filipino Women’s organization of Quebec, works for the promotion and protection of these women’s rights, and in particular those that concern domestic workers. Besides having gone through the harrowing experience of leaving their country, the Filipino community of Quebec is suffering from distressing conditions: families separated for long periods of time, poorly remunerated work, discriminatory immigration policies, reduced social benefits, etc. PINAY believes that action must be taken on both the local and international fronts, because considering that each day, about 4,000 people are forced to leave the Philippines, it is only by fighting for a just society in that country that all Filipinos will be collectively better off.



The term domestic worker designates a person that is directly employed by an individual (rather than by a business or an agency) to work in a private home to do household chores and, in some cases, take care of children, or sick or handicapped elderly persons. PINAY supports this category of workers in particular because in Canada – the numbers are telling – 90% of them are from the Philippines, and most are women. In Quebec, they number between 5,000 and 25,000. There is still a lot of work to be done, because these workers are not necessarily aware of the regulations surrounding the minimum wage, the limits to the number of hours of work, overtime work, etc.

In addition, they suffer from the discriminatory policies of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) created by the federal government to alleviate the labour shortage. This programme enables businesses that are unable to recruit Canadian citizens to hire workers from abroad. The TFWP section about live-in caregivers represents, for Filipino workers, the only path to becoming eligible for permanent resident status. But since November 2014, changes to the programme have increased discrimination towards them: the delays to obtain this status have been increased, while the number of accepted demands has decreased. Applicable regulations indeed encourage exploitation, because the work permit remains in the name of the employer, which means that a worker wanting to work for someone else must pay the costs of a new permit. Because they take care of various essential tasks, domestic workers and caregivers enable other people to work, but their contribution is negated since their right to decent living conditions is denied. Domestic workers suffer from triple discrimination based on gender, social status, and ethnic origin. This is what fuels the actions of solidarity led by members of PINAY.

Relying exclusively on the volunteer involvement of its members, the organization advocates with minimal financial resources. Fortunately, it collaborates with several women's groups and allied organizations, among which are other Filipino advocacy groups, the Association des aides familiales du Québec, and the Immigrant Workers Center (IWC – an organization that also hosts a community activist art project supported by ROUAGE: see p. 134-153). PINAY considers that its work is always political, even if it expresses itself often through numerous cultural activities.





« My goal is to work with others to improve our social conditions and to let everyone know that a change is necessary. »

– Georgina Ramos

The organization wanted to set up an activist community art project as support for its work in relation to the Commission de la santé et de la sécurité du travail (CSST). This ongoing campaign was started by PINAY in 2006, regularly reiterating its demands to the Quebec government for whom this issue is far from a priority. While workers in Quebec are automatically insured by the CSST, which enables them to get financial compensation in the case of a work-related accident or illness, domestic workers and caregivers do not benefit from the same protections unless they sign up themselves and pay insurance premiums. Yet, they do face physical and psychological health risks. A work stoppage can lead, eventually, to losing the right to work and their permanent resident status. And since most of these workers are providers for their families, the loss of revenue following an accident or an illness can have a dramatic impact on their loved ones. Accordingly, PINAY demanded that the CSST's protection apply automatically to domestic workers, whatever their immigration status or the validity of their work permit. The organization also hoped that the families that employ them should not be exempt from the obligation to offer a safe work environment.

Evelyn Calugay is a member of PINAY since its inception. An experienced and committed community organizer, she thought that an activist community artistic project would contribute to better inform and mobilize the members of the organization, some of whom were not aware of the CSST's discriminatory policies. A collective artistic action would send a clear message to the general population and would continue, by different means,

to put pressure on this institution whose rules have such a great impact on the living conditions of domestic workers.

The two artists involved in this project, who are members of Montreal's Filipino community and participants in previous PINAY activities, had lived through the same difficult experiences as the participants, which meant they could empathize with their stories. An activist when she lived in the Philippines, and also a domestic worker, Merelyn Aguirre wanted to pursue this fight for social justice, which transcends borders. Jayson Palolan, also an activist, was involved in Anakbayan, a national Filipino organization



uniting youth from different sectors of society to support democracy. He was also very active as a musician and painter within the Cordillera Peoples Support Group (CPSG), which was renamed the Filipino Indigenous People Organization (FIPOQ) in 2015. Their artistic skills complemented each other: theater, music, songwriting, and scriptwriting for Merelyn; music, visual arts, poetry, scriptwriting, theater, dance, and choreography for Jayson. Besides wanting to contribute to the project, the artists saw an opportunity to learn from the group.

The members involved in the project came from various Filipino groups, like the Association des parents d'origine philippine, Anakbayan, and FIPOQ. The participants who were not domestic workers were nevertheless supportive of their issues. The members of the collective had previously taken part in various cultural events and protest activities organized by PINAY, including traditional anticolonial dance performances, banner painting, socio-political song creation, poetry readings, short plays, and the production of a newsletter. With this activist community arts project, the members hoped to improve their confidence in the public sphere and learn new ways to put forth a strong collective voice. Agnes Calgo and Aileen Moludi wanted «the government to know that we will fight for justice.» Grace Minas, for her part, expected the project to help her «communicate with the authorities more firmly and feel stronger with my convictions.»

From the start, the group named itself Sining Laya (The Freedom of Art). Since PINAY does not have an office, the meetings took place at IWC. Close links had already been put in place with this organization, as PINAY had previously participated in its annual cultural event *MayWorks*.



PROCESS AND ACTIVITIES DURING THE YEAR

Since domestic workers are on duty six days a week, finding a time for the meetings was not an easy task. The group decided that they would be held on Sundays, because that was the day off for many of the members. This is a testament to their level of motivation! Sining Laya met every two weeks throughout the year to work towards their specific objectives, as well as participating in various mobilisations related to diverse struggles in which the members were involved.





In addition to discussions and brainstorming sessions, the project began with a series of preparatory workshops aiming to discover the interests of the members and develop their skills.

Drawing from Filipino cultural heritage, the group first set up workshops inspired by the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA). From 1975 to 1985, during the protest movement against president Marcos' dictatorship, PETA elaborated a method for making theater a tool for social change (see the book by Engrenage Noir, *Affirming Collaboration* (Célébrer la collaboration), p. 332-336). The Basic Integrated Theater Arts Workshop (BITAW) was based on Filipino culture as well as on Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which considers education as a process of conscientization and liberation. This method, which makes use of traditional music and dance, movement, visual arts, creative drama (a form of improvised theatrical creation), and literary creation, spawned groups of political community theater across the Philippines.

The artists of Sining Laya simplified the principles of the BITAW method, presenting them through creative exercises so the members can absorb them. The group thus began collectively to develop a short theatrical piece inspired by merging individual experiences. Visual arts workshops helped with the creation of symbolic props for the play. For Jayson, who gets his inspiration as a painter from his indigenous roots, the visual arts are essential for affirming identity and expressing a long-standing tradition.

In December 2014, after only four weeks of preparation, a first public performance of the play was held before approximately 250 people during a Christmas celebration organized by the Filipino community. The scenography included singing, dance, and music played on traditional instruments by some members. It was astonishing to witness what had been accomplished in so little time, especially considering the members had no previous theatrical experience! In about ten minutes, the play touched on several issues. It began with an illustration of the situation in the Philippines that pushed many to migrate to Quebec («lost dreams in the name of progress»), expressing serious outrage towards American imperialism (personified by Uncle Sam) which controls the country hand in hand with brutal local landowners and a corrupt government. A narrator recited the text and the other participants replied, in unison or by movements, creating a very convincing and dramatic result.



The accessories used were made from, among other things, canvases painted with the words « corruption », « imperialism », and « feudalism ». In the final scene, which illustrated domestic work, the group chanted several times : « We want to be covered by the CSST ! » To get an idea of the tone of the play, a rehearsal can be viewed here : youtube.com/watch?v=alUV_PhbxM&app=desktop.

After evaluating this first presentation, the group took into account the suggestions it had received and reworked the script and considered adding some accessories to the play. Although the situation in the Philippines was close to their heart, the members decided to concentrate on the realities of living as domestic workers and the difficulties they encounter with the CSST.

Barely two weeks later, in January 2015, the new version of the play was presented during the third congress held by Migrant Canada, a chapter of Migrant International (to which also participated the IWC's artists Bloc : see p. 136). With more than 100 groups in more than 20 countries, this organization actively defends the rights of Filipinos abroad – accusing the Filipino government's workforce exportation programme as being the main factor in the commodification of workers. Migrant Canada oversees many associations across Canada ; its 2015 congress was held in Montreal. Despite a rather limiting context (a classroom that left little space for movement), Sining Laya was satisfied it had succeeded in communicating the ideas emerging from its vibrant brainstorming in a simplified form that was likely to be more easily understood by the audience. A portion of the presentation can be viewed here : youtube.com/watch?v=wynVjhotEOA.





During International Women's Day, March 8, 2015, Sining Laya participated in the march organized by the Women of Diverse Origins collective to protest budget cuts made by both the provincial and federal governments – measures taken in response to the economic crisis, now permanent, that global capitalism had itself created. The group carried a banner reading «CSST for Domestic Workers». At the end of the march, a member of the group spoke to the protesters about the issues affecting these workers. Then, in front of the media covering the event, Sining Laya presented its One Billion Rising choreography, which is part of an international campaign combating violence against women. «One Billion» refers to baffling statistics indicating that one woman in three will be raped or beaten over the course of her life. Since its creation in 2012, this annual campaign, highlighted every February 14th, is gaining momentum – in 2015, women from more than 200 countries participated, performing the official choreography to which they can incorporate elements from their own culture.

Also in March, in preparation for a possible public awareness campaign within the project, two writing workshops were held dealing with how to communicate a message effectively via informative articles, in a blog, or newsletter, which was something new for many people in the group.

In April, Sining Laya performed at the Cordillera Day Celebration, organized each year since 2012 by FIPOQ. The Cordillera, a region in the north of the Philippines, has undergone considerable upheavals in recent decades as vast development and mining projects have forced Indigenous groups out of their ancestral lands. The Cordillera Day commemorates the assassination, under the Marcos regime, of Macli-ing Dulag, a rebel leader opposed to a hydroelectric project that caused major flooding. Though regrettable, his death on April 24, 1980, has contributed to unifying Indigenous groups of the Cordillera who were eventually successful in thwarting the project. This celebration, which is not recognized by the Filipino government, keeps this story from being forgotten. Once again mixing theatre, traditional instruments, dance, costumes, and visual arts, Sining Laya's performance recreated the events in which the army played a key role. It can be viewed here: youtube.com/watch?v=vWqL-GC9kcw.



« The project's impact is inspiring for me, because my skills are used to help the community express its struggle in a creative and effective way to the public and authorities, which gives an artist an important role to improve society or the community.»

– Jayson Palolan

For many members of Sining Laya from the Cordillera region who are still concerned by the situation in their native country, this is a particularly important celebration. Despite the legitimacy of the activity, which has benefitted from the experience gained through the previous theatrical creations, ROUAGE invited the group to concentrate on the demands which were the original objective of the activist community arts project, i.e. changes to CSST policies, in order to find the most appropriate means to succeed.

Meanwhile, in May 2015, Sining Laya presented a performance that was prepared for the Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival. The play dealt with various issues related to uprooted ancestors and the reasons for migration, drawing links between slavery in history and slavery today. Despite the fact the participants had only three weekends to prepare, they considered their performance to be better than the previous ones. This was Sining Laya's first performance outside of the Filipino community, raising awareness in a different audience to the issues affecting it.

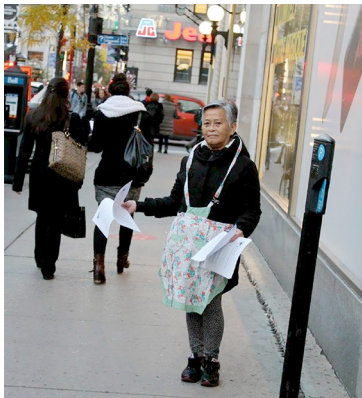


Coming back to promoting its CSST campaign, the group decided to use a symbolic element: a clothesline on which domestic worker silhouettes would be hung, each one in action, holding brooms, pots, and other tools, as well as a banner with slogans. Since it was very long, several people had to hold the clothesline; it was presented



during a summer festival held by the Filipino community that attracted over 1,000 people. The event was held in the Côte-des-Neiges borough, where a large part of the community is concentrated in Montreal. The group took this opportunity to pass out bilingual flyers (French-English) giving information about the campaign. The group also received comments from festival-goers open to – and interested by – their demands. Sining Laya had also prepared a poster which, despite containing a lot of information, had two elements that stood out: a clear and simple slogan, « Domestic workers are workers ! » ; and a reminder about the indispensable character of their work, which is invisible, « We take care of family responsibilities to enable the workforce to participate in the societal method of production ». Several posters were put up in Côte-des-Neiges.





The group also performed publicly during a benefit-anniversary banquet organized by PINAY in October 2015. There, Sining Laya communicated its message about the importance of having an adequate coverage by the CSST by presenting a short theatrical piece and installing its clothesline. The group then continued to distribute its flyers to various organizations with which PINAY maintains ties, as well as during the protest for a \$15 minimum hourly wage organized by the IWC on October 7, 2015 (see p. 146). On October 17 (International Day for the Eradication of Poverty), Sining Laya's clothesline was displayed once more, this time in front of the Famas centre (Filipino Association of Montreal and Suburbs), in Côte-des-Neiges. On October 26, the group organized a Halloween-themed action. Wearing aprons and holding various banners, and even a symbolic coffin, some members protested in front of the offices of the Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale before passing out information to passers-by on Sainte-Catherine Street Ouest, just in front of the offices of The Gazette newspaper.



«The project has broadened the understanding that the domestic workers, members of the Filipino community, and solidarity groups have regarding the existence of such a discriminatory policy, which excludes an entire category of workers composed mainly of women.»

– Evelyn Calugay



« I do not fear the public and making mistakes as much. After making a mistake during our first performance, I realized that I had caused no injury, except to my pride.»

– Grace Minas

« I especially valued the development of a close and trusting relationship with the participants.»

– Antonio De Jesus

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The project had a great impact on the members who gained the self-confidence necessary to make their reality known. For many, it was an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the discriminatory policies that affect them. The experience also gave some women in the group an opportunity to discover and try new things, which they had not been able to do previously because of their family and work-related obligations. The participants had rather enthusiastic comments about their experience: « We had fun working together as we tried to accomplish something »; « We have learned a lot from each other »; « I hope to share more with the others »; « I felt privileged to join this group and I realize how fighting for your rights is a necessity. » The project also offered support and solidarity to women who are too often isolated because of the type of work they do. Also, it should be noted that in the Philippines, organizations usually attract people 20 years old and younger, yet Sining Laya united people from different age groups, which helped enrich the experience.

At the start of the project, the members of the collective working as household aids were determined to participate, despite the meagre leeway their work schedules accorded them. Their participation decreased slowly throughout the year, but increased for the last few actions. Even without taking into account the possible health problems, family obligations, and other of life's necessities, many activities were competing for their free





time, notably activities organized by other organizations of which they were members. With hindsight, the group acknowledges they needed more realistic planning in terms of what could be accomplished in the time period.

Although precise demands had been established well before the beginning of the project, one year was not sufficient to reach the goal, which was ambitious, to put it mildly. But it is not surprising. Government institutions like CSST are not easily moved and actions have to be repeated over the long term to obtain changes. Moreover, as is the case in many other groups, the need to be heard and make the injustices known was urgent. Since the collective was not entirely made up of domestic workers, its message came to encompass the larger painful and global issue affecting Filipinos as a whole – a situation that is difficult to ignore, especially since this was the first time PINAY members worked together in such a concerted manner. The veritable strength of the project was to enable actual domestic workers to publicly display their everyday lives, which, for most, remain invisible. And even within the Filipino community and groups allied with PINAY, not everyone was aware of the discrimination of which these women are the victims. In this respect, the group believes it has taken an important step by informing both the domestic workers themselves and the general public about this issue, thereby garnering more support for their campaign.

Although the group did not organise actions that directly targeted the institution concerned by its demands, it has shown an inspiring collective energy for each one of its activities and, despite the challenges encountered, has gained a lot from the experience. As Evelyn has summarized: «We have learned several lessons during this first year, such as the need to reconsider our method of organizing our work, to hold deeper collective discussions, and to prioritize the political education of our members in order to foster individual commitment for social change.» The members agree on the necessity of mastering the French language in addition to English, to be able to communicate more easily, which would have greatly helped them build supportive

alliances. But their living conditions as marginalized immigrant persons greatly limits learning possibilities, keeping them trapped in the social pool of cheap labour.

For their part, the artists were able to put their skills to contribution by supporting the creativity of the members. Merelyn is very pleased with the experience because she had never before been given a chance to display her skills. In addition to this, she learned a lot from the members who were active participants during meetings and who overflowed with ideas. Accustomed to being alone to express his ideas, Jayson appreciated the collective work, which gave him the opportunity to open up to other people's ideas. This experience of facilitation in the community sector helped him develop his ability to interact and communicate. As the project came to an end, he considered it a challenge to introduce activism to an artistic project without affecting aesthetics, just as it is challenging to attract attention artistically while communicating a clear message.

IN CONCLUSION...

The project will not be renewed for a second year as not enough members have the time and energy to remain involved, given that they are also committed to other Filipino organizations in addition to their family and work-related obligations. However, PINAY will not give up and will continue to fight so that domestic workers can be covered by public insurance in the case of work-related accidents or illnesses. If favourable conditions return, the organization remains open to embark on another activist community arts project. But whatever happens, its public awareness efforts surrounding issues related to domestic workers in Quebec and, by extension, to the Filipino community in general, remains very important.



« I appreciate the fact that the project not only served to instruct the public, but also the members. »

– Merelyn Aguirre

« We have made the public much more aware than the civil servants involved. But we have contributed to increasing the political consciousness of our members, some of whom had never before considered the political causes of their oppression. »

– Evelyn Calugay