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Philippine Migrant Workers’ Transnationalism in the Middle East

Robyn Magalit Rodriguez
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Abstract

How do migrants assert their rights as workers when they do not enjoy the rights of citizenship in their countries of employment and are unable to assert their human rights through international conventions? This article focuses on the work of Migrante-International’s Middle-East chapter in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, it examines the ways Philippine migrants strategically assert their rights as Philippine citizens transnationally in local labor struggles. This case study of transnational labor activism in a region where migrant workers enjoy limited rights not only highlights how migrants exercise their agency in spite of major obstacles, but it also offers up novel ways to think about worker organizing within the context of contemporary neoliberal globalization for labor activists and scholars concerned with the labor rights of migrants.

The Philippines was one of the first countries to join the “coalition of the willing,” which the United States forged to fight the global “war on terror” declared in the immediate wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington, DC. In addition to securing US military training and aid for the Philippine front in this global war, the Philippine state was able to expand its markets for Philippine migrant labor in the Middle East.

The Middle East has long been a major destination region for short-term migrant workers from the Philippines, and this migration has been an important source of remittances for the Philippine government, which has come to rely increasingly on the overseas wages of its citizens for foreign exchange. In 2009, 669,042 Filipino migrants went to the Middle East. Workers from the Philippines are found in hundreds of countries, but Saudi Arabia was the top destination. Indeed, of the top ten countries of destination for Filipinos, five are in the Middle East. In addition to Saudi Arabia, Filipinos find themselves in large numbers in the United Arab Emirates (ranked second), Qatar (fourth), Kuwait (sixth), and Bahrain (tenth). Saudi Arabia is also among the top ten source countries for remittances. Because overseas migration has become so lucrative for the Philippine state, it has become a veritable “labor brokerage” state that actively mobilizes migrants for export.

The US occupation of Iraq and its deployment of troops to neighboring countries offered the Philippine state new opportunities for the employment of its workers. During an official visit to the United States in 2003, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo extolled the merits of Philippine workers to
prospective employers supporting US military efforts in the Middle East. Following her visit, the Philippines’ migration bureaucracy projected that ten to fifteen thousand jobs in infrastructural projects would be opening in the region due to the US military presence.2

The year after President Arroyo’s visit to the United States, a Filipino migrant worker, Angelo dela Cruz, was kidnapped by Islamic extremists who also threatened to behead him if the Philippines did not withdraw its small contingent of troops in Iraq. Philippine transnational migrant activists immediately set about mobilizing worldwide protests to pressure the Philippine state to meet dela Cruz’s kidnappers’ demands. For protesters, dela Cruz’s plight was a consequence of the Philippine state’s alliance with the US (one that actually predates the Philippines’ membership in the “coalition of the willing”) and its aggressive export of Philippine labor. The government ultimately bent to the will of Philippine citizens around the world. It withdrew its military and issued a ban on the migration of workers from the Philippines in Iraq. In exchange, Angelo dela Cruz was released.

Migrant activists’ successful struggle to secure dela Cruz’s release signals the power of migrant workers’ political mobilizations in absentia. Though they may be living and working outside of the Philippines, migrants are nevertheless present in homeland politics, and, in some instances, they are even able to successfully assert their demands for protection by the Philippine state. Amy Gurowitz observes that in Malaysia, migrant workers are typically unable to appeal to the country’s tradition of diversity (as in other multiethnic immigrant destination countries) or to draw on international human rights standards to assert their rights.3 Similar challenges exist for migrant workers in the Middle East. The successful campaign to save Angelo dela Cruz’s life, while exceptional, suggests that in spite of these constraints, migrant workers can and do strategically assert their rights transnationally. Specifically, what migrants from the Philippines have done is to assert their rights as Philippine citizens in what has become an increasingly transnational world.

In this article, I focus on the work of Migrante International’s Middle East chapter and the transnational activism of Philippine migrants in Saudi Arabia. Migrante International is an alliance of grassroots Philippine migrant labor groups that is headquartered in the Philippines but has affiliates or chapters throughout the world. I am particularly interested in Filipino migrant workers’ transnational labor activism. Elsewhere, I have examined Migrante International (hereafter referred to as Migrante) affiliates’ organizing efforts among Filipina domestic workers.4 Further examination of Migrante’s organizing allows us to better appreciate how Philippine labor migrants strategically assert their rights as Philippine citizens in their labor struggles transnationally. This case-study of transnational activism in a region where migrant workers enjoy limited rights not only highlights how migrants exercise their agency in spite of major obstacles, but it also offers up novel ways to think about worker organizing within the context of contemporary neoliberal globalization for labor activists and scholars concerned with the labor rights of migrants.
Methods

I have followed Migrante International’s work both in the Philippines and in the labor diaspora for the last fifteen years. I conducted ethnographic research in Migrante’s secretariat office for two months in 1997 and then returned for another seven months in 2001. I observed and participated in a range of Migrante’s campaigns and research work during that time. For instance, I watched as Migrante mobilized to demand that the Philippine government intervene on behalf of the hundreds of Filipino workers imprisoned in Saudi Arabian jails. Activists called on then-president Joseph Estrada to request a pardon from the Saudi government during the season of Ramadan for the workers. I also saw how activists worked to organize the children and other relatives of migrants in the Philippines to get involved in fighting for reforms of migration policy that would better protect workers’ rights abroad. I also interviewed numerous migrant activists including those who had worked in the Middle East.

Since my time in the field, I have conducted ethnographic research and observed the organizing efforts of Migrante’s member organizations in Hong Kong and the United States. I have also been granted access to Migrante listservs, which have enabled me to follow how it coordinates its work transnationally. For this paper, I draw on my earlier research on Migrante’s work in the Philippines. This has been combined with an analysis of Migrante-Middle East’s transnational activism between 2008 to the present based on press releases it issues (which I receive almost daily as a member of its listserv); attention on Migrante Middle East’s activism in the Philippines’ major news outlets (many of which are online); and e-mail interviews with Migrante Middle East activists.

Migrant Workers, Citizenship, and Rights

Transnational flows of workers have given rise to scholarly debates on the nature of rights and citizenship. Perhaps most provocatively, Yasmin Soysal argues that what has emerged in our new global order is a “postnational” model of citizenship. Based on research with migrant workers in Europe, her work suggests that citizenship and its associated rights and privileges no longer need to be moored to formal membership in a national polity. This extension of rights to people who are otherwise “foreigners” is a new development in the notion of citizenship, which has historically implied a bounding of rights to specific territories. Soysal’s research suggests it is no longer true, as the emerging legitimacy of international human rights discourses have led to what Soysal calls “postnational citizenship” for migrant workers.5

Soysal claims that “postnational citizenship” offers migrant workers a basis for making claims both individually and collectively around economic, civil, social, and even cultural rights. International organizations, with their circulation of international human rights discourses, provide migrants with the legitimacy to make these rights-claims. Even as she grants that “the distribution of
rights among various groups and citizens is not even,” she is confident that migrants can and do make claims for their rights drawing on international rights discourses. The fact is, outside of the context of Europe, Soysal’s site of study, this argument does not always apply. Indeed, in Europe, one can argue that rights have been unevenly extended to migrants and that, particularly since 9/11, migrants have become increasingly less able to make international rights claims. Timothy Lim observes, for instance, that migrant workers in South Korea “usually hold the dubious distinction of being first (or at least near first) in the race to the bottom[.].” Philippine migrants, in short, do not enjoy the rights of citizenship (including economic rights) in their countries of employment; neither are they able to assert their human rights through international conventions.

However, those Philippine migrants affiliated with Migrante International are leveraging their rights as Philippine citizens transnationally. Though it may be true that Philippine migrants enjoy little to no rights as foreigners in the countries of destination and are, moreover, unable to assert international human rights norms in many countries, they remain Philippine citizens. Though they may be far from their country of origin, Philippine migrants make claims on the Philippine state when they seek protection and reprieve from harsh living conditions in their countries of employment (like dela Cruz) or when they demand higher wages and better working conditions from their employers.

**Philippine Labor Migration to the Middle East**

Living and working around the globe in more than 100 countries, the Philippine migrant population is, by many, accounts, one of world’s largest. The Philippine state’s promotion of overseas employment largely accounts for this phenomenon. President Ferdinand Marcos introduced the Philippines’ labor export program in 1974. It was believed that the income generated from migrants’ remittances would help alleviate the government’s balance of payment requirements while overseas employment would address rising domestic unemployment. To what extent the export of labor is actually “developmental” is quite debatable; nevertheless, this once temporary program has acquired permanence for the Philippine government.

Since the labor export program’s introduction in the 1970s, the Philippines’ migration apparatus has evolved dramatically. The Philippines has numerous agencies that have the task of mobilizing migrants for export. For instance, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) studies labor markets around the world to determine which ones are open to foreign workers. The POEA’s marketing branch actually has a desk officer for different regions of the world, including the Middle East. The POEA then coordinates with the Technical Education and Skills Development Administration (TESDA) to develop training programs that can prepare those seeking overseas employment for the specific job categories and industries labor-receiving governments allow foreign workers to fill. The POEA’s labor market analysis is
complemented by the Department of Labor and Employment’s International Labor Affairs Service (ILAS) and the Philippines’ embassies and consuls throughout the world. There are ILAS labor attachés dispatched to embassies and consular offices in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar, and Israel.

Interestingly, state visits by the Philippine president, like that to the United States in 2003, can also become a vital source of labor market information. In a state visit to Bahrain in 2009, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo assured prospective migrants worried about decreasing job opportunities in the region with the global economic crisis that there was still work to be had. As noted in one of the Philippines’ major daily newspapers, the *Philippine Inquirer*, “In a statement, Arroyo said Bahraini Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa Salman al Khalifa had informed her that Bahrain needed more salesladies, preferably Filipinos.”

Philippine migration agencies not only mobilize migrants for overseas employment, they actively market Philippine workers to prospective employers. In many cases, the Philippine government formalizes flows of migrants into specific countries of destination through bilateral labor agreements. In the Middle East, an important market for Philippine workers, labor is supplied to both public (e.g., hospitals, schools, national airlines, etc.) and private employers.

**Philippine Migrant Labor Transnationalism**

Formally established in 1996, Migrante International is today an alliance of over two hundred Philippine migrant groups around the world. Before Migrante was formed many Filipino and Filipina migrant workers were involved in organizations opposed to the two-decade dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. In some regions, migrant workers contested not only the dictatorship but also specific policies affecting migrant workers. Indeed, migration policies beginning with the policy of labor export were often issued through executive fiat. Domestic worker organizations in Hong Kong, for instance, formed the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL) coalition, which mobilized against the Marcos administration’s policy of mandatory remittances. The groups of Filipina domestic workers that comprised UNIFIL included church-based prayer groups, regional associations, and credit cooperatives.

Migrante International’s member organizations continue to reflect the diversity of the UNIFIL coalition. In fact, UNIFIL, together with migrant groups based in Canada, Australia, Japan, the Netherlands, the Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands, and Saudi Arabia, would be one of the conveners of Migrante in the mid-1990s. Migrant activists have had to be savvy in negotiating with the limitations often placed on their civic engagement in different host states; Migrante activists are free to organize Philippine migrants into religious groups, regional associations (i.e., organized according to migrants’ region of origin), or ethnic organizations (i.e., organized by indigenous migrants), if not into migrant-rights’ or workplace-oriented groups.
In an interview Tito, a Migrante activist formerly based in Saudi Arabia, reveals that some Migrante activists even convert to Islam in order to organize Philippine migrant workers in that country. Conversion allowed these activists access to Muslim Philippine migrants (some themselves converts in the hopes their Muslim employers will treat them better). At the same time, places of worship have proven to be ideal places for Migrante activists to organize throughout the world, since they are a meeting point for large numbers of migrants.

Tito also revealed that Migrante activists even seek employment in countries targeted for organizing. Though these activists must still conform to their employers’ work expectations, their primary purpose is to organize their compatriots abroad. Migrante also identifies regions or countries of the world where migrant organizing may be weak and tries to send activists who have been successful elsewhere to ensure that the Philippine migrants have a platform to articulate their issues and fight for their rights. While Migrante actively works to organize the unorganized, it also expands its membership by formalizing ties with already existing migrant groups. Migrante approaches the leadership of these existing organizations and invites them to officially join Migrante International as a member organization.

In addition to its member organizations outside the Philippines, Migrante also comprises organizations of return migrants, the family members of migrant workers, and migrants’ children. As Ceny, an activist in the Migrante secretariat in the Philippines, put it, “Action is necessary both abroad and in the Philippines. Majority of Filipinos are dependent on migrants so that means that the struggle we [as OFWs] go through abroad, [our families] get affected here too.” Migrante activists on break in the Philippines between employment contracts often help to build Migrante’s base among migrant returnees and migrants’ relatives. They target migrant-sending neighborhoods and go door-to-door urging migrants’ relatives to work with Migrante in the Philippines to voice both overseas workers’ and their own concerns. These efforts have led to the formation of a number of Philippines-based Migrante member organizations like Migrante-Youth, an organization composed of the children of migrants. As an activist declared at a conference organized by and for migrants’ children, “If the 8.1 million overseas Filipinos and their families [were] united we can change the laws that make life for them and their families harder.” The experience of the loss of a loved one to overseas employment has politicized many relatives and children of migrants and they have swelled the ranks of Migrante in the Philippines.

Migrante’s diverse organizational forms are bound by what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink would describe as a “centrality of principles or values.”¹⁰ Migrante International’s main objective is to fight for migrant workers’ rights abroad by engaging the Philippine state across national borders. Migrante’s analysis is that “The migration of Filipinos abroad is a product of extreme poverty and joblessness in the country that is brought about [by] the decrepit social system.” This is echoed by Paolo, a full-time Migrante activist organizing in
the Philippines who was previously employed as a construction worker in Saudi Arabia, where he was also an activist. “Even before Migrante was formed,” he said, “we organized ourselves because we saw that this [the Philippine] government doesn’t prioritize the rights and welfare of people overseas. It doesn’t protect them. This was since 1979, but by 1982 we started to realize that we cannot only articulate our issues as migrants but we have to join with our countrymen in the Philippines.” Indeed, Migrante International was born out of an alliance of progressive organizations in the Philippines. Together with the Kilusan May Uno (the May First Movement), a national alliance of militant trade unions and other organizations, Migrante International is a member of the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, or BAYAN (New Patriotic Alliance).

Given its home-state orientation, Migrante is headquartered in the Philippines. Though its member organizations engage in specific wage and employment campaigns in their respective destination countries, Migrante’s Philippine-based secretariat plays a vital role in coordinating the transnational aspects of these campaigns. In fact, all Migrante’s member organizations’ campaigns have a transnational component as Migrante’s Philippine-based activists (i.e., migrant returnees and migrants’ relatives), often times with their allies in BAYAN, hold joint mobilizations or other actions in support of migrants’ struggles overseas. Drawing further from Keck and Sikkink, Migrante applies what might be called a “boomerang pattern” of collective mobilization in reverse. On the one hand, because migrants face limited political opportunities in their countries of employment because they do not enjoy the rights of citizenship, they perhaps have no other recourse than to press the Philippine government to address their concerns. On the other hand, migrant activists in Migrante believe that the Philippine state must assume responsibility for its overseas citizens as it is the state that is ultimately responsible for their having to seek employment abroad. Migrante mobilizes migrants to pressure representatives of the Philippines government outside (embassy and consular offices) and inside the Philippines to compel the state to respond to migrant workers’ issues. I turn now to a discussion one of Migrante’s most recent transnational labor struggles that encompassed Saudi Arabia and the Philippines to provide a fuller illustration of Philippine migrant’s labor transnationalism.

Migrant Labor Transnationalism in Saudi Arabia: A Case

Philippine migrants employed in Saudi Arabia suffer the iniquities of being paid low wages (or wages much lower than their employment contracts promise) or what is known as “contract substitution,” which the Migrante Middle East regional coordinator describes as “replacing an OFW’s [Overseas Filipino Worker] contract with a new one—usually with lower salaries, longer working hours, watered-down benefits, among others.”

In addition, workers have to endure unlivable housing arrangements, the confiscation of their passports (and therefore real limits to their mobility), and physical abuse by their employers. Those who manage to escape these
working conditions often find themselves penniless, unable to pay for their passage back to the Philippines, and homeless, as they are generally dependent on their employers for housing. The Khandara Bridge, both Migrante and the Philippine press report, is a place where sometimes hundreds of runaway migrants without money or shelter seek refuge and await deportation from Saudi authorities.\textsuperscript{13} Philippine migrants, moreover, are subject to harsh sanctions for violating different Saudi social codes (i.e., cavorting with the opposite sex, drinking alcohol, etc.). They are incarcerated for these violations and are beaten and starved in jail. Others, similar to Angelo dela Cruz, are unwittingly caught in the crossfire of conflicts that do not necessarily concern them. Philippine migrant workers also take the fall for crimes committed by others, including Saudi citizens, and find themselves on death row. Saudi Arabia has long been criticized by international human rights groups like Human Rights Watch for its paltry protections for Saudi citizens, citing among other problems the country’s record of executions, which is both high and inconsistently applied.\textsuperscript{14}

Given that Philippine migrants in Saudi Arabia are subjected to tremendous forms of labor exploitation and oppressive living conditions, it may come as a surprise that Filipino migrant workers frequently engage in labor struggles there. In early 2010, for instance, Philippine migrants in Saudi Arabia protested low wages and other violations of their employment contracts. In May 2010, thirty truck drivers with Migrante-Middle East filed complaints with Philippine officials in Saudi Arabia that their wages were below what was stipulated in their contracts and that they were housed in inhospitable makeshift barracks.\textsuperscript{15} A month later, more than two hundred medical workers at the Al Ansar Hospital stormed the Philippine consulate general’s office, demanding that officials finally respond to their back-wage claim. Six months earlier, the workers had alerted Philippine government representatives of the hospital’s impending closure and its failure to pay their wages. The workers escalated their campaign after receiving no action from the state for half a year.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, when Migrante activists noticed a major spike in labor malpractice issues in the Middle East in the first six months of 2010, similar to those suffered by the truck drivers and the hospital workers, it called on the government to investigate the widespread practice of contract substitution.\textsuperscript{17}

Philippine migrants engage in such activism despite considerable risks. For example, Saudi police raided a safe house that Migrante Middle East established for runaway migrants, arresting and detaining eighteen migrants and accusing them of violating injunctions against mixed-gender gatherings.\textsuperscript{18} Philippine migrants’ transnational activism is nevertheless quite vibrant, as illustrated by a recent labor struggle. This case also illustrates the transnational nature of Philippine migrant labor activism and the way this activism relies on the migrants’ transnational assertion of their rights as Philippine citizens. Notably, the key actors in this labor struggle were women.

In September 2009, after their employer failed to pay them the salaries specified in their contracts, twenty-three Filipina migrant workers at a drug
rehabilitation center in Saudi Arabia stopped working.\(^{19}\) One month later, a second group of sixty women joined in the work stoppage. They were then joined by a third group of women working at different facilities. All of these women had been recruited to work in Saudi Arabia by the same firm, the Annasban Group. In addition to being denied their contractually specified wages, these workers complained of being housed in filthy, stiflingly hot quarters.\(^{20}\)

The workers themselves contacted Migrante Middle East, while a relative of one of the women contacted Migrante-International secretariat in the Philippines for assistance in the struggle. Together, these organizations launched a transnational campaign to pressure the Philippine government to intervene on the workers’ behalf and to ensure that Annasban met their demands. In a press release, the Migrante-Middle East regional coordinator stated, “We would like to remind the POLO (Philippine Overseas Labor Office) officials, as representatives of the government that they are mandated to protect the rights of our fellow OFWs [Overseas Filipino Workers], especially victims of labor malpractices. They should to [sic] defend and protect our OFWs’ rights in dealing with erring employers, and not to compromise our OFWs’ interests.”\(^{21}\) It is clear in this case that Philippine citizenship is being asserted as the basis for migrants’ claims for labor rights transnationally. Migrante-Middle East insists that Philippine government officials outside of the Philippines, like those at the Philippine Overseas Labor Office, are duty-bound to intervene on their citizens’ behalf in their labor struggle.

While Migrante–Middle East pressured the Philippines’ POLO officials to confront Annasban in Saudi Arabia, Migrante’s secretariat office in the Philippines coordinated numerous protest actions calling for the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration to ban employment with Annasban. In addition, Migrante’s Philippine secretariat, in anticipation of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s state visit to Saudi Arabia, mobilized Annasban workers who had been repatriated to the Philippines to participate in protests to pressure her to make OFWs’ labor issues a priority during her trip. As one of the workers said, “If she [President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo] truly is sincere in protecting the welfare of our kababayan, she must settle all the cases against Filipinos such as contract violations, death sentences, employer abuse … during her 3-day visit.”\(^{22}\)

While demanding that the state pressure Annasban to live up to its contractual obligations and that it ban new recruitment to Annasban, both Migrante-Middle East and Migrante’s secretariat in the Philippines called on the Philippine government to hasten the repatriation of remaining workers to the Philippines. Refusing to meet the workers’ demands, Annasban also refused to issue clearance for the workers to exit Saudi Arabia, which made the workers undocumented and therefore vulnerable to detention.\(^{23}\) Despite an official announcement by the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs that arrangements were being made for the return of the Annasban workers, after nearly two months many migrants were still stranded in Saudi Arabia.
The workers finally successfully staged a hunger strike to compel state officials to act more decisively in repatriating them.\textsuperscript{24}

The Internet, e-mail listservs in particular, was an important means by which Migrante staff in Saudi Arabia and the Philippines communicated with one another. These listservs also kept Migrante’s other member organizations around the world abreast of the campaign. Activists connected to Migrante’s member organizations around the world frequently posted words of encouragement to their colleagues in Saudi Arabia and the Philippines and also issued formal statements of solidarity. Often, however, communications between Migrante-Middle East staff and migrant activists as well as workers seeking assistance (many of whom joined Migrante-Middle East) were conducted through cellular SMS (short-message service), as many migrant workers do not have access to the Internet. Migrante staff have nevertheless been able to use the internet to effectively penetrate the Philippine press. Migrante-Middle East press releases are often quoted in full by major Philippine news outlets like the widely read \textit{Philippine Daily Inquirer}.

In the Philippines, the families of Annasban workers figure prominently in the campaign.\textsuperscript{25} A relative of one of the Saudi workers approached Migrante’s secretariat office in the Philippines. Many relatives participated in protests and other actions, and workers often invoked their family members in their bid to increase media coverage of their plight. In one press conference, a former Annasban worker and mother of three declared that the government’s failure to impose an employment ban on Annasban not only “put our lives in danger” but also “kill[ed] my family here in the Philippines”.\textsuperscript{26} Also in attendance at the press conference was the husband of an Annasban worker still stranded in Saudi Arabia who demanded that the government help to facilitate his wife’s return home.

Significantly, Migrante’s transnational actions targeted the Philippine state, but the demands varied with location, reflecting the complexity of transnational employment relations. Migrante Middle East pressured embassy officials to challenge Annasban in Saudi Arabia and to ensure that migrants’ wage demands were met. Meanwhile, Migrante’s Philippine secretariat pressured migration officials to prohibit the recruitment of workers to Annasban until the labor dispute was resolved. Moreover, Migrante pressured the state to expedite the repatriation of migrants and to ensure that workers’ claims against the Philippine-based agencies that had recruited them to work for Annasban in Saudi Arabia be granted.

The hunger-striking Annasban workers were successfully returned to the Philippines, but they vowed to continue working with Migrante’s secretariat in the Philippines to fight for state support in the labor struggle. As one of the activists put it, “Once we have regrouped, we will pursue our case against Annasban. And we expect the government’s support on this battle. This is not just for our monetary claims, this is to save other Filipinos who are being victimized and will be victimized by powerful exploiting companies such as Annasban.”\textsuperscript{27}
Within weeks of returning to the Philippines, the workers continued their protests and added a demand for financial compensation from the Philippine government itself. Migrants staged a “camp-out” at the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), which, according to one of the workers, was meant to “show that we are never again allowing ourselves to be deceived by the government, who abandoned us when we were being treated like slaves abroad, and continue to treat us like dirt in our own country. Enough is enough! We will not leave until justice is served.”

The migrants demanded that the Philippine government compensate them for their lost wages and travel expenses. Even though Annasban finally relented and issued the workers an exit clearance to leave Saudi Arabia, the migrants had paid the airfares back to the Philippines. After three days of protests, OWWA gave the workers P10,000 in financial assistance.

The transnational mobilizations of these Annasban workers emboldened migrants working at the company’s other facilities to launch agitations with the support of Migrante-Middle East and Migrante’s Philippine secretariat. As of this writing, the Annasban workers’ struggle continues, but they have succeeded, however incrementally, in pressing their demands with the Philippine state. By August 2010, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration was forced to suspend recruitment agencies from recruiting workers for Annasban.

The State and International Human Rights

Migrant workers from the Philippines asserted their rights as Philippine citizens in their labor struggles in the Middle East. As we have seen, workers and activists in Migrante International mobilize across borders to demand that the Philippine state respond to migrants’ labor disputes through support for migrants overseas as well as through sanctions against the labor recruitment companies based in the Philippines. They mobilize in these ways in large part because migrant workers in this region cannot assert their rights through invocations of international human rights discourses in the way that migrants can in other places. What is interesting, however, is that when Philippine migrants attempt to invoke the language of international human rights, they do so by pressuring the Philippine government to play a more active role as a member of a global community to ensure that international human rights protocols are recognized by its allies. In a press statement, for instance, Migrante Middle East states that, “the Arroyo administration, like previous administration and even any succeeding administrations, has the duty to urge and influence counter-part receiving and host governments to ratify the UN convention for the protection of migrant rights and members of their families[.]”

Indeed, Migrante International even works to expose how the Philippine state itself fails to live up to the international rights conventions that it has ratified. Testifying before the tenth session of the UN Committee on Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (UNCWM) in 2009,
Migrante International highlighted the ways that the Philippine government had violated the rights of Filipino and Filipina migrants and ultimately failed to comply with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.\footnote{33}

\section*{Conclusion}

This study of Migrante International’s transnational organizing in Saudi Arabia and the Philippines has shed light on the ways Philippine migrants engage in wage and employment struggles. I suggest that Filipino and Filipina overseas workers assert their rights as Philippine citizens, even when they are abroad, in their labor disputes. For the migrants involved in Migrante International, their status as Philippine citizens entitles them to protection and privileges from the Philippine state even if they reside and work outside the territory of the Philippines. Hence, they call on the state to intervene on their behalf in struggles with their employers abroad as well as their labor recruitment agencies in the Philippines. The research in this paper suggests that citizenship is being dramatically reconfigured under contemporary conditions of globalization. What has emerged is what might be termed a kind of migrant citizenship, that is, a mobile notion of citizenship that entitles migrants to their rights wherever they may be. This migrant citizenship proves to be distinct from postnational models of citizenship proposed by scholars. Where international rights conventions fall on deaf ears, migrants have turned to their home states for protections.

In the Annasban workers’ struggle, Philippine migrants were clearly engaged in a transnational campaign. Migrante-Middle East together with Migrante’s secretariat pressured the Philippine state to negotiate with Annasban on the workers’ behalf and demanded that should Annasban fail to comply, it must be prohibited from hiring Philippine workers. Furthermore, Migrante’s activists in the Philippines fought for sanctions against the private recruitment agencies that were responsible for placing the workers in jobs with Annasban. In both Saudi Arabia and the Philippines, activists rallied the state to expedite migrants’ repatriation when Annasban refused to meet workers’ demands and ultimately demanded that the government extend them monetary compensation for failing to guarantee their wage and employment rights. In the Philippines itself, Migrante-International transnational activism was anchored to the organizations of migrants’ relatives and children. Though the Annasban workers’ struggle continues, they have enjoyed incremental success as some of their demands have been met. The Philippine government conceded the workers’ demand that Annasban be banned from hiring workers from the Philippines, and it awarded the workers compensation for their travel back to the Philippines. Indeed, the workers’ ability to return home was due to their success in getting the Philippine state to secure exit clearances from Annasban.

Though I have only focused on a case study of transnational activism around labor violations in Saudi Arabia, Migrante-International is just as
engaged in transnational labor organizing in other countries of the Middle East and beyond. Furthermore, Migrante is engaged in transnational struggles aimed at securing runaway workers’ expedient repatriation to the Philippines and migrants’ release from unjust incarceration. Consistent across these transnational struggles are their transnational assertions of Philippine citizenship.

Inasmuch as Philippine migrant workers have been able to assert their rights as Philippine citizens to gain a modicum of justice in their wage and employment struggles overseas, employers benefit the most from national “corporate” citizenship. Labor-receiving states have the power to ultimately assert their sovereignty over their territories against the rights of migrant workers. While they sometimes concede to some of the demands of labor-sending states after vigorous transnational action by migrant activists, more often than not the interests of business prevails. Nevertheless, Philippine migrant labor transnationalism through Migrante-International is an important testament to the resourcefulness and resiliency of workers under contemporary neoliberal globalization.

NOTES


11. Ibid.


21. Ibid.
26. Ibid.