

## Globe Life

# The steep price of becoming a 'dollar mommy'

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When Pearly Almeron was 30, she made a decision she would regret for the rest of her life: She left her newborn son in the care of her family for a job as a nanny in Hong Kong, then in Canada.

With few job prospects and no husband, she had little choice but to join the exodus of migrant workers leaving the Philippines. She came to Canada in 1991 through a work-visa program for live-in caregivers that can pave the way to landed-immigrant status.

Leaving "was the hardest decision I've ever made," Ms. Almeron, now 49, says from her home in Vancouver. "I didn't know if I could make it. I couldn't imagine leaving him for one day, let alone for months and years, but I felt I had to do it for his future. It isn't easy leaving your child for money."

It's far from easy, yet growing numbers of women are doing it. From 1999 to 2003, about 2,000 live-in caregivers, mostly women from the Philippines, came to Canada every year under the federal program. That number has since doubled to almost 4,000 a year, government statistics show.

And one-third of those women are leaving kids behind, becoming what is known in the Filipino community as "dollar mommies" for the money they send home.

The years of separation are having a long-term impact on the children, according to new research. Kids whose mothers bring them over later on have the highest school dropout rates of all youth in Vancouver, according to a University of British Columbia study to be published this fall.

"Kids are being left at age 3 or 4 and being reunited as teenagers," says author Geraldine Pratt, a professor of geography at UBC who has been researching the issue for 11 years. "It's a very bad situation."

After leaving her newborn son, Ms. Almeron went to work in Hong Kong and was rarely able to get home to visit. When she came to Canada, it was three years before she saw her son again. By then he was 6.

"I spent a lot of time crying and I regretted my decision immensely. It was a really big sacrifice," she says. "My only consolation was knowing I wasn't alone. All the other nannies I knew here had made the same sacrifice and we would get together and talk about it."

Some nannies wait as long as nine years before being reunited with their children, Prof. Pratt says. "Nothing positive can come out of nine years of family separation."

It takes two full years of working in one family's home before a foreign caregiver becomes eligible to apply for landed-immigrant status.

During that time, most women earn between \$1,200 to \$1,600 a month. If accepted as a landed immigrant, women then face the paperwork associated with becoming a permanent resident and sponsoring family - a process that can take five more years, advocates say.

"There are so many economic and bureaucratic barriers," says May Farrales of the Philippine Women Centre in Vancouver, one of many groups across Canada lobbying to change the live-in caregiver legislation so that entire families can come over at the same time.

The children who are left behind are becoming the focal point in the struggle to change the law.

Mothers seeking to sponsor their children have to come up with application fees, and everyone in the family must submit to police and medical checks, all of which make the process too onerous and time-consuming, advocates say.

The women's meagre pay also makes family reunification daunting, since the average cost to sponsor a small family is about \$7,000, according to the Philippine Women Centre in Vancouver.

"Even if the government shortens the time for sponsorship, most nannies wouldn't be able to afford to bring their kids over," says Rosalinda Javier, president of the Filipino Centre in Toronto. "It's really difficult to save \$7,000 when you're only earning \$1,500 a month."

In Vancouver, the Philippine Women's Centre runs an innovative program that helps women raise money - members are asked to contribute regularly, then a lump sum is awarded to a woman in need. But they can't help everyone.

For some children, the effects and emotional stress of separation can persist for years, according to Prof. Pratt's research. In high school, they tend to have lower grade-point averages and they are less likely to be included on the honour roll. They also have a relatively low likelihood of graduating from high school.

The mothers are often caught off guard by the challenges they face upon the arrival of their children.

"The women aren't prepared for the backlash they get from their kids when they arrive," says Deanna Okun-Nachoff, a lawyer and executive director with the West Coast Domestic Workers' Association in Vancouver.

"They're surprised how angry their kids are when they arrive. And they've lost their capacity to mother their own children."

It's even more painful because many women make the difficult journey to Canada to give their children better lives. "So all that sacrifice tied to their education doesn't work out and it's terrible," Prof. Pratt says.

Rose Guillermo left the Philippines for a job as a nanny in Hong Kong and then in Vancouver when her children were one and two years old. She'd lost her job at the American military base and felt she had no choice but to leave her children for the promise of something better than the quick road to poverty that lay ahead.

Over the next 11 years, she saw her children five times on short visits there. When they came to Canada to live with her, they were 11 and 13.

"They didn't know I was their mom," Ms. Guillermo says. "It's been hard for them. The way we live here is hard to adjust to: the food, friends. They had no respect. They treated me like I was nothing.

"I did everything for them, but they didn't appreciate it. They didn't listen to me. I have needed to be really

patient."

Now 15 and 17, Ms. Guillermo's children are starting to behave differently. A trip back to the Philippines helped them put things in perspective, she says. They are both in school and starting to get involved in sports, and her daughter has a job at McDonald's.

Things have been tougher for Ms. Almeron. Her 19-year-old son is still affected by the separation during the first five years of his life. He doesn't work. He doesn't go to school.

"He's a good kid," she says, "but he's in the wrong group. It's very stressful. But I have to be strong or who will look after him?"