

Conceptualizing Transnational Migration of Care Workers: Between “Skilled” and “Unskilled”

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Summary

The demographic change, resulting from a low fertility rate and an aging society, has led policy makers and business sectors to rethink Japan's future population prospects. Although Japan has been considered an anomaly among the industrial democracies in not depending on foreign labor to pursue its economic goals, the acceptance of highly skilled migrants is being discussed as one option to cope with depopulation and maintain Japan's economic growth strategy. In line with immigration policy, migration of nurses and care workers from Southeast Asian countries started in 2008 upon the establishment of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) between Japan and the Philippines, and Japan and Indonesia. The migratory framework was shaped by professional organizations in a way that protects the domestic market and working conditions, and it mandates that the migrants pass the national exam on nursing and caregiving within a certain period of time. This paper will elaborate the policy factors that either enable or hinder the movement of nurses and care workers to Japan under the EPA, especially focusing on the skill of care workers three years after its implementation. Although the EPA theoretically opens up a path for migrants to work under the same conditions as Japanese once they pass the exam, in practice the skills of care workers have often been contested. How Japan defines care work and how it incorporates migrants into the care regime will shape Japan's future immigration policy, labor policy and social welfare policy.

Keywords: migration, care work, skill, Southeast Asia, Japan, Economic Partnership Agreement

1. Introduction

The dramatic demographic change caused by a low fertility rate and a rise in life expectancy has led policy makers and business sectors to rethink the future population prospects of Japan. The depopulation of productive age groups and an increasing burden on this age group to sustain the elderly population has become a social issue as well as a political one. Although James Hollifield (1992: 15) pointed out that Japan is the only industrial democracy that has not depended on foreign labor to achieve economic development, in the context of the changing demography, Japan accepting highly skilled migrants has been discussed as one option to cope