

# Sinagay

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## Sikhay: Sustenance for body and spirit



Members of Sikhay work to meet an increasing number of orders from Japan

*In DAWN's livelihood project, women clients not only learn how to sew shirts and bags for a living, but also discover that they have the capability to mend their torn hopes.*

AT any given workday, including Saturday, you will find at the DAWN office several women hard at work on several sewing machines, their workroom swathed in the colorful designs of batik textiles.

The workroom looks like any ordinary small-enterprise undertaking, with each worker doing her own part in the process of making such products as shirts, vests, bags, aprons, pouches, eyeglass holders, penholders and letter holders. Except that these

women have something in common—Japan.

Three of the women used to be what is commonly known in the Philippines as "Japayuki"—a colloquial term for overseas workers, often women, who work in Japan as entertainers. Two of the other women have had Japanese husbands, while the sixth had a Japayuki daughter who died and left her a Japanese-Filipino grandson.

It is an odd mix of workers, each with her own poignant story, each with her own testimonies of how dreams of a better life can crumble in the face of exploitation and the clash of cultures. And yet each is a testimony of the things one can do to overcome tragedy.

Two of the women, Letty and Loida, had shown an early interest in sewing. When Mel Nuqui, who was then executive director of another nongovernment organization devoted to women workers, gave the organization's clients choices of alternative livelihood, the two volunteered for sewing lessons.

"I've always loved to sew and make things with my hands," says Loida.

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## In the shadow of APEC

MUCH has been said about the APEC summit. Too much, in fact, yet also too little, as far as how APEC as a whole undermines women in underdeveloped countries. One need only to go a step beyond the hype and look at the grassroots to hear this disturbing silence; one need only to direct one's perspective inward—not outward, as the proponents of globalization want us to do. While these people preach about how globalization opens the door of opportunity for business groups, women's access to basic resources and employment is being compromised.

Never has the plight of overseas women workers become so dim as it is now, in the pale light of APEC. The muffled voice in the shadow of APEC has the face of women—Sarah Balabagan, Maricris Sioson, Flor Contemplacion. Their story, along with that of many women "entertainers" abroad, have been screaming exploitative labor for years, incriminating evidence not only of a country's economic obstacles but of the social inequality it embraces.



Globalization means fierce market competition. It dislocates families, communities and women. In the wake of globalization, the labor sector has acquired an increasingly female labor force. But this labor is burdened with casual and subcontracted work as well as piece-rate payment. Labor standards have been set aside, thus

leaving informally employed women and children unprotected.

Women comprise 39 percent of the labor population in the Philippines, and about 48 percent of these women fall between the age of 15 and 24. Fifty-six percent of this labor force can be found in the agricultural sector, while the remaining 31 percent is distributed in other sectors. These statistics prove that these low-income women are under-represented in other occupations.

The greatest impact of new technologies has been in the area of traditional women's crafts and cottage industry production. Third-wave technology training has left many women still uneducated. The women who used to work the land and were important contributors to food production in the past decades have now been given redundant roles. This is a crucial problem that often gives many women no choice but to seek employment abroad.

Women have always played a central role in our informal economy. APEC, with its principle of globalization and free trade, is pushing more and more women into the labor market abroad. Half or more of those who leave the country are women; Filipino women are known mainly as domestic helpers and entertainers. Indeed, most of them earn more

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*SINAG ("akebono" or "yoake" in Japanese), which means light or daylight, is a quarterly publication of the Development Action for Women Network devoted to issues concerning migrant Filipino women and their Japanese-Filipino children.*

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The officers of DAWN discuss the direction and objectives of the new organization

## Heralding a new morning for migrant women

*The birth of DAWN and the many things it has accomplished in barely one year's time.*

DAWN broke over the Philippine horizon in early 1996, when seven individuals with different backgrounds but with a common passion—helping migrant women—met at a nuns' residence in Quezon City to midwife the birth of a new institution that would serve their cause.

The seven were Aurora Zambrano, an ICM sister; Mel Nuqui, who has had extensive experience helping women overseas workers; Lyn Resurreccion, a journalist; Perlita Domingo-Flores, a health worker; Dr. Julia Racquel Rimando, a medical doc-

tor; the Rev. Leonardo R. Morada, a pastor; and Corazon Valdez-Fabros, a lawyer.

"We saw the importance of continuing our work," relates Nuqui, who would later be appointed as executive director of the new organization.

Soon after fleshing out the details of the new development agency, the group began talking to people who could join the board.

Among those who readily assented to be members were Andrea Domingo and Bonivic Pardillo.

On February 6 that same year, the

Development Action for Women Network (DAWN) was registered at the Securities and Exchange Commission as a nonprofit, nonstock organization.

### The tasks

Now the tougher task began: of not only keeping the organization alive, but also ensuring that it will make a difference in the lives of migrant women workers.

DAWN saw its mission as all-encompassing—from the nitty-gritty of helping returning women workers get their bearings back, to lobbying for legislation that would protect the welfare and dignity of these women.

For instance, when a woman migrant worker returns to the Philippines, DAWN can help lessen her anxieties by meeting her at the airport and helping her contact her family. The organization does this by coordinating with its networks in Japan and with airport personnel.

Should the woman have nowhere to stay in Metro Manila, as often happens with those from the provinces or those who have lost contact with their families, DAWN helps arrange tempo-

rary shelter for her and her children through shelter facilities provided by other organizations.

### The services

DAWN also provides medical care to the women and their children. It also helps children of distressed migrant women continue their education while their demand for paternal recognition and support is being worked out.

Letty, for instance, one of DAWN's clients, has a daughter who has been abandoned by her Japanese father. Because Letty knew that among the few things she can give her child is a good education, she enrolled her daughter at a private Catholic school. DAWN provides educational assistance for her daughter's tuition and school needs.

DAWN also provides counseling services to help the women process their experiences, cope with their problems and start a new life. It plans to create self-help and encounter groups among women clients.

Of course, starting a new life means not just having mental, physical and social well-being, but also tying up loose ends in one's life. This is where DAWN's legal and paralegal assistance comes in. The organization helps gather documents and information needed for the paternal recogni-

tion and support for the women's Japanese-Filipino children. Networks in Japan help trace the fathers and negotiate or file cases for paternal recognition and support. DAWN also assists the migrant women and their families in filing formal complaints with the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Labor and Employment, and other government agencies.

One such case was that of Boni and her 3-year-old son whose Japanese father refused to recognize him. One of the lawyers working on the case in Japan filed a case in that country. A Japanese court ordered a DNA test on the boy and the father. The test proved that the boy was the father's son, and the father finally recognized the son. Negotiations for support are now going on.

DAWN has also not forgotten that one of the reasons why the women left the country in the first place was economic: food for the family table, clothing and shelter for themselves and their families. That is why one of DAWN's flagship programs is its income-generating project, *Sikhay*.

The alternative livelihood aspect of DAWN's services aims to assist women and their families develop their skills and set up alternative sources of livelihood. *Sikhay* is the organization's pioneering project,

where women not only earn by sewing shirts, bags and other products out of batik cloths, but also learn that there is indeed a choice other than going back to the uncertainties of life on foreign shores.

### Education and information

Yet DAWN knows that in order to help its women clients, it must go beyond looking after the immediate needs of the women. It seeks to raise the general awareness about the plight of migrant women workers, and it does so by educating not only the women but also society at large.

Already, plans for posters, information cards, and primers on the situation of women migrants in Japan and the rights of migrants are in the making. (This newsletter, for instance, is part of the information and education program of the organization.)

Clients are given a better perspective of their situation through seminars and workshops. These help to raise the level of consciousness of women and children and make them active participants in advocacy work. DAWN also sees seminars and similar activities as "preventive education" among women.

In August 1996, for instance, it held a women's orientation seminar, with Petite Peredo as resource person. Peredo is a woman activist and development worker with extensive advocacy work in human rights, especially women-related issues. Around 15 participants were made aware of their rights as women.

### Networking and advocacy

Networking and advocacy are also an integral part of DAWN's work. The organization focuses on the campaign on the government's labor export policy, violence against migrant women, trafficking in women, on-site protection for migrant women workers, and other labor-related issues.

It lobbies for favorable policies and laws on women migrants and their



One of the earliest Board meetings discussed the essence of DAWN and its services

children, and is working on expanding its network among schools and other organizations here and abroad. DAWN helps spread awareness about the plight of its clients by providing materials and resource persons to reach out to families and migrants.

Exposure visit exchanges have also proven invaluable in keeping both those in Japan and the Philippines informed about developments in each other's backyard.

In February 1996, for instance, right after DAWN was set up, Sr. Auring Zambrano and Mel Nuqui were invited in a series of meetings to explore possible areas of cooperation with groups in the different Prefectures in Japan.

While there, Sister Auring learned that among the biggest problems of migrants in Japan is the "overstaying of women who continue to work despite the lack of proper visas."

Sister Auring notes in her diary of the week-long visit: "As many as 90 percent [of the women] are forced to go into prostitution in order to remain in Japan and survive."

Other problems include "drug pushing and drug addiction, divorce and complicated relationships with Japanese men or other Filipinos with families in the Philippines, the children they have, wife battering, and abandonment."

### Partners

Such serious problems cannot be addressed by one organization alone. Hence, DAWN has actively sought partners in helping rebuild the lives of these women and children.

It has affiliated itself with the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in



Petite Peredo emphasizes a point during a seminar-workshop

Women, based in Bangkok, and works hand in hand with the Citizens' Network for Japanese-Filipino Children (CNJFC) based in Tokyo, the Asian Women Empowerment Project (AWEP) based in Kobe, the Japan International Center for the Rights of the Child (JICRC) based in Osaka, the Lawyers for Japanese-Filipino Children (LJFC) based in Tokyo, the Kitami Maligaya based in Hokkaido, Jichiro, as well as the Asia-Japan Women's Resource Center, and Philippine-based organizations.

AWEP helps DAWN with its livelihood program and acts as Sikhay's marketing group in Japan, CNJFC and JICRC provide essential support in the cases of Japanese-Filipino children, LJFC works on the legal cases, while Kitami Maligaya assists in the scholarship of children as well as provide support for the livelihood project.

### Volunteers

Among the individuals who have provided support to DAWN is Agnes Mineko Hara, who gives Sikhay members Nihonggo lessons twice a week. She also joins activities involving the Japanese-Filipino children, and once in

a while helps in Sikhay work and in resource mobilization.

Another volunteer, Yoko Shirane, helps in further developing the skills of Sikhay members. A third volunteer, Kumiko Anada-Sayo, helps in the translation of communications, and in networking and resource building.

Students from the Ateneo de Manila University and the Polytechnic University of the Philippines who are doing practicum as well as seminarians from CICM doing pastoral work with

DAWN have also been helpful.

PUTTING up an organization can be challenging work, especially when you have likeminded individuals who are deeply concerned about the hardships and trauma that migrant women workers go through. DAWN has also been heartened by initial support from The Global Fund for Women, the Metrobank Foundation, the Philippine-Japan Foundation for Japanese-Filipino Children, CICM, ICM, the Pag-asa Human Development Foundation, the Alay Buhay Center for Development, the Tokyo-based Japan Rainbow Group and the Carmelite Sisters of Charity-Vedruna, the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, and several others.

It is amazing what dedication, hard work and commitment can do to make an organization grow, as what has happened with DAWN.

The people behind the organization know that after its baptism of fire during its first year, many more tests lay ahead. But it knows that, eventually, there will be light in the horizon. As the women and children it has helped realize, dawn always comes after even the darkest night.

A drawing session (right) with Jeff, Camy, Lellani, Yoshi, Ken, Junko and Honylou at the DAWN office on April 27, 1996, with Mel Nuqui, the institution's executive director. The sessions help the children interact with each other and express their own feelings.



Social Science students from the Ateneo de Manila University (above) who are doing practicum work with DAWN pose with the staff and Sikhay members and one of the Japanese-Filipino children on December 21, 1996, at the DAWN office.

# LEARNING, PLAYING, SHARING

*DAWN's activities in pictures.*



Arlene (left), a woman client, joins her daughters in a number for the Christmas program, as other clients and the DAWN staff gleefully look on. For some of the families, the DAWN Christmas party on December 14, 1996, was one of the few occasions that they got to have fun together.

Ralph and Benny (below left), seen here with the Japanese-Filipino children, are CICM seminarians doing pastoral work with DAWN. On this occasion, October 13, 1996, they had prepared a whole day of games, songs and videowatching at the CICM Compound in New Manila, Quezon City. Among those who entertained the children was Ms. Agnes Mineko Hara, a Japanese volunteer (below right)



Some Japanese-Filipino children (below) listen attentively as Sr. Aurora Zambrano, DAWN president, tells a story during a story-telling session at the Museo Pambata on October 19, 1996.



Sikhay members and DAWN staff and volunteers (left) pose with Kazumi Moriki of the Asian Women's Empowerment Project (AWEP) in Baguio City on August 24, 1996, after sourcing materials for Sikhay products.

By KUMIKO ANADA-SAYO

WHENEVER I enter the DAWN office, the first thing that always greets me are the smiles of its women clients who work in the outer office sewing batik products. That is one of the reasons why I keep coming back. To be able to see these women smile despite the hardships and the heartbreaks that they have suffered is enough to make me feel encouraged.

I've always been interested in social issues and social change, subconsciously when I was younger, but consciously when I started going to college. I think I owe this to my parents. I come from a rural community in Japan where everybody knows everyone. My father was a farmer, yet despite the hard work in the fields, he often found time to do community work. My mother was deeply involved in social work, too. Her generous spirit rubbed off on me. That spirit never left her, for even now, when she's more than 60 years old, she still helps at a home for the aged near our community.

*Anada-Sayo, 36, works as interpreter, translator and coordinator for various Japanese groups, including Japanese media outfits. She is married to a Filipino.*



Anada-Sayo (left) helps out DAWN's Mel Nuqui in translating communications

## Continuing a lifelong commitment to social work

I remember this one event in my life that has perhaps shaped my outlook on social work. In our community there was a mentally handicapped man in his twenties. He was dirty, and he smelled; the children and some of the townsfolk often made fun of him. But he only smiled back at all the taunts. He was really harmless. He even found work carrying firewood from one side of town to the other. He often passed by our house, and my mother would call out to him, asking him to do odd jobs. In return, she gave him tea and food. And always he reciprocated her kindness with his innocent smile. I grew fond of him.

But one day he did not pass by our house. And the next day. And the day after. I found out later that his relatives had him committed to a mental institution built on a nearby mountain.

I felt sad. I learned later that this was happening all over Japan: the marginalized and the handicapped were being sent off to institutions. I wondered: Why? Why do they have to isolate these people? Their so-called handicaps were partly created by the people around them, the community. Why not allow the community to take care of them?

When I went to college I took up a degree in social work, but I never got to be formally employed as a social worker—not in Japan, where being a social worker meant working in institutions. So I became a reporter for a community newspaper, because that way I felt more useful to those who have less in life.

Eleven years ago I decided to expand my horizons. The craving to serve more people meant that I had to learn the English language. So I came to the Philippines.

I enrolled for a masters degree in social work at the University of the Philippines, and at the same time I worked for various Japanese media outfits with bureaus in the Philippines. While working as a radio broadcaster in a Japanese radio program here in the Philippines, I began to get calls from

Filipino women who have worked in Japan. I began to empathize with them and their Japanese-Filipino children. At about the same time, the tragic story of Marcos Sison, a Filipino entertainer who died a mysterious death in Japan, broke. I first read about it in a magazine. That is where I also learned about Mel Nuqui and the nongovernment organization she previously headed.

During my radio program, I could not keep my mouth shut about illegal recruiters and the Sison case. The station manager forbade me to discuss the case, as we had sponsors who also had recruitment agencies.

So I resigned.

That was when I volunteered my services to Mel and her organization. I also began working as a translator. Sometimes I would waive my translation fees in exchange for support for Filipino migrant women. The support often came in the form of legal help.

Today I help DAWN translate communications received that are in Japanese, and also do resource build-

ing. I also act as liaison with interested Japanese groups, including those in the media.

My great concern right now are the Japanese-Filipino children. I am worried about their future. I see these children as agents of peace, as bridges between two disparate cultures. Whenever I am invited to talk about the issue of Filipino migrant workers, I always mention the children and the fact that they can help cement a good and lasting relationship between Japan and the Philippines.

I don't get any remuneration for my volunteer work. Instead, I profit more because of the knowledge that I am continuing what seems to be a lifelong calling, something that my mother and father started. I get inspiration from the women clients of DAWN. I have seen some of them slowly transform from the broken persons that they used to be into the confident women that I see today. I am encouraged by their effort to fight for their future.

That, to me, is compensation enough.

## In a woman's world

I HAVE been visiting the DAWN office for almost a year now, often on Saturdays and on special occasions. It is part of my apostolate, my formation in CICM. It is an integral part of my preparation for our future ministry as missionaries.

I share stories, laughter and jokes with the staff of DAWN and the members of Sikhay. Sometimes I sit in during their meetings. When DAWN's clients bring their children to the office, I volunteer as babysitter while the mothers work in the livelihood program of DAWN. We all have lunch together, and I usually leave the office in the afternoon. Once in a while we have special activities—an outing with the children, a party, or a visit to the CICM house.

I am grateful for having met the people of DAWN and Sikhay. I have

learned many things from them. I admire their determination to fight for their rights, I am amazed by their perseverance. They have opened my eyes to the reality that life outside the walls of the seminary is not always easy.

The fact that all the staff of DAWN and the members of Sikhay are women make my visits to their office always special, a learning process. It is a different world, seen from the perspective of women. I just hope I have, in my own small way, made their lives a little easier to bear.

*Brother Benny, CICM*

## Sharing laughter and experiences

AS far as I know, this is the first time for a CICM seminarian like myself to have an apostolate among a group composed entirely of women. This is different from my past exposures, and the adjustment and flexibility I have had to show has indeed helped me grow as a person.

Despite my limited, once-a-week visit to the DAWN office, I have learned a lot from this apostolate. I sometimes also visit them at their homes so I can understand better the life they live. My encounter with women who previously worked in Japan has changed my perception of them. I realize that every woman in DAWN is somehow a reflection and product of the society in which we live. In every person I see the political, economic, religious and cultural biases of our society.

There are many things to admire about DAWN and its clients. Though the group is still young, the courage they have shown in standing up for what is rightfully theirs despite the odds is worth emulating. Indeed, this is helping in my formation as a missionary.

And every time I leave the office, I already look forward to visiting them again. I want to listen to more stories, to join in the laughter, to share my own thoughts. The moments with the group I will always cherish. I salute the women and I hope they continue their struggle.

*Ralph Mestosamente, CICM*



Ralph and Benny

## Sikhay

From page 1

"And I saw the potential of such a livelihood."

"We are learning a lot from Yoko," Letty and Nita add. Yoko Shirane is a Japanese volunteer who is an expert in pattern making.

When Nuqui and several others set up DAWN, Loida and five others joined the new organization as clients. They became the first beneficiaries of DAWN's livelihood program, called Sikap Buhay, or Sikhay, which was set up on March 5, 1996. Nuqui had seen how successful the sewing project had been, and decided to continue it through Sikhay. The program started with two borrowed sewing machines and several batik cloths. Today, one year later, Sikhay can boast of four sewing machines, an edging machine, a buttonholer, and enough product turnover to pay its suppliers as well as keep up the monthly allowance for the six women members.

Sikap Buhay means, literally, "striving hard for a better life" or "self-empowerment." It is an appropriate name for DAWN's income-generating program, and fits nicely into DAWN's main mission—to give returning women workers a better shot at a dignified and stable life without the many pitfalls of working abroad.

"Of course Sikhay is not just meant to feed our clients and their family," explains Nuqui. "It also helps make these women realize that if one only knows where and how to look, they need not go beyond our shores to find good work. The program offers a viable alternative to going to foreign shores."

Sikhay's benefits are not just measured by tangible yardsticks, such as the monthly allowance the women get or the food they place on the family table. It has also served to rebuild the shattered confidence of DAWN's women's clients.



**AWEP staff in Japan sell Sikhay products in a bazaar in Japan**

"I remember when Boni, one of the women clients now benefitting from Sikhay, first came to us," Kumiko Anada-Sayo, a volunteer worker, recalls. "Every day all she did was cry quietly. She looked so helpless and vulnerable."

But now Boni is not only a valuable part of Sikhay, but has even regained enough of her self-confidence to learn how to use the computer and do routine office work.

DAWN's network and contacts in Japan regularly communicate with Sikhay on what products to make and how many. "But we also make our own suggestions, and we send samples to Japan to see if they would like them," says Nuqui.

All six current beneficiaries now get regular allowance, enough to keep body and soul together as they come to terms with their past, grapple with the present, and marshal their strength for the future.

Nuqui is excited about the possibilities of Sikhay. "The program has grown in such a short time that we're thinking of designing Sikhay's own label and attaching it to the program's

products. "Also, eventually, I see the program spinning off into a cooperative. As we get more clients who need a livelihood to feed their family and themselves, Sikhay will grow. Even now we have a hard time catching up with orders. We certainly need more people."

Like most enterprises, Sikhay has its own lean season. Because the program's main customers live in Japan, the group's production output is dependent on Japan's weather. "The cold months are the lean months," says Boni. "That's because our shirts, vests and other wearables are made of light material, not ideal for keeping warm. When the fall season starts in Japan, that's when we start to get fewer orders."

But the women keep themselves busy just the same, making products in anticipation of the high demand during spring and summer. "The most saleable items are the aprons, women's bags and shirts," Loida says.

Asian Women's Empowerment Project, a nongovernment organization in Kobe, Japan, helps Sikhay sell its products through flea markets and bazaars and by distributing them to

other nongovernment organizations in Japan. It has also been assisting Sikhay in the acquisition of machines, skills training, and office rental.

Nuqui is quick to point out that the program is just one component in the rehabilitation of DAWN's clients. It certainly has given the women so much hope for the future. "This also shows the government that with the proper guidance and the right opportunities, these women would rather stay in the country and be with their families than work in some foreign land."

It is desperation and abject poverty that drive these women away from Philippine shores. Hunger and hopelessness can make people do anything just to survive. But given a choice, they would rather not leave. It is this choice that the government has not given them.

Nuqui says persuading these women to remain in the Philippines is no easy task. Work abroad pays much better. But the women need to realize what they would have to give up in exchange for the sought-after dollars: their dignity, their family, a significant part of their life.

Sikhay and DAWN have shown their women clients that there is life after Japan. "We all know that this is really for us," says one of the women. "That the success of this program will also be our success."

## Editorial

From page 2

than what they would get here, but at the cost of loneliness, loss of dignity, sexual abuse, and even loss of lives.

All the highly industrialized nations share a common perception of Asia: it is a cheap source of labor. Owing to a lack of a stable economic lifeline in their regions, millions of Asian women willingly offer themselves up as hirelings. A disturbing side effect of the migration of the labor force is this: thousands of unprotected female migrant workers in danger of falling into the hands of abusive bosses and subhuman working conditions. APEC does not provide answers to the institutionalized prejudice in countries where most migrant women work.

Contributing to the massive exodus of the Asian labor force are the illegal recruitment agencies, manpower suppliers, overseas employment promoters, and other legal and illegal channels.

What steps has the government

taken to prevent the debasement of its female labor force? In the Philippines, the best that it could come up with are empty platitudes in the form of "uplifting" labels. Nowadays overseas contract workers are called bagong bayani or new heroes of the struggling economy. But they are treated as heroes not because of their personal sacrifices; they are deemed as important citizens because of the amount of dol-

lars that they bring in. Indeed, gender inequality is not primarily a matter of how poor a country is, but how committed to the realization of equality its political leadership is.

We believe that APEC is not concerned with the welfare of our

women, particularly those working abroad. The Philippines must seek an alternative economic plan that is not gender-biased, that does not compromise the country's women. The pale light that APEC casts upon our migrant workers silhouettes them. We need an economic plan that does not just say much, but does something. Often it is that which is not said that really illuminates.

*Gender inequality is not primarily a matter of how poor a country is, but how committed to the realization of equality its political leadership is.*

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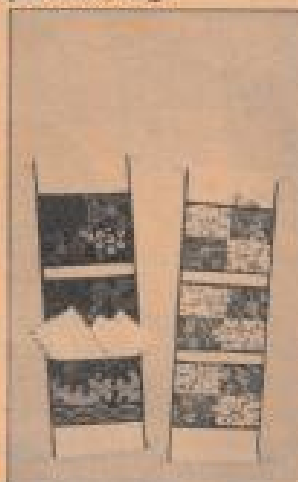
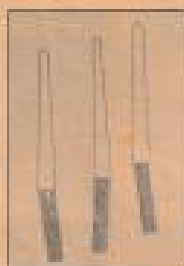
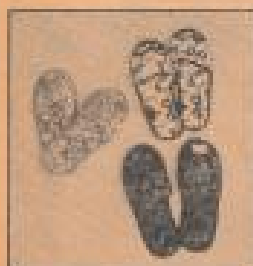
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