

Facts and Perspectives:

Women's Labour Migration from the Philippines



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

FACTS AND PERSPECTIVES: WOMEN'S LABOUR MIGRATION FROM THE PHILIPPINES

The **Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)** promotes the rights of migrant and trafficked women and believes that ensuring safe migration and fair workplaces should be at the core of all anti-trafficking efforts. We advocate for living and working conditions that provide women with more alternatives in their countries of origin, and to develop and disseminate information to women about migration, working conditions and their rights.

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Cover photo: Woman and child at the domestic terminal airport in Tacloban City, Philippines.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019 it was estimated that there were 272 million international migrants. In recent decades international migration has drawn the attention of many governments, and has influenced labour policies and development goals. In a UN report (2019), it is noted that the crucial linkages between migration and development are recognised in a series of landmark agreements adopted by the United Nations Member States, the most recent being the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015, and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, endorsed in December 2018.

The Philippines has an estimated population of 108 Million.¹ The country is among the top ten origin countries² with the largest diaspora populations. According to the Commission of Filipinos Overseas (CFO), the stock estimates of Filipinos residing and working abroad (as of 2013) is around 10.2 million in more than 200 destination countries and territories. This figure shows three categories of migrants - 4.8 million permanent migrants (immigrants, naturalised citizens and permanent residents); 4.2 million temporary labour migrants; and 1.2 million irregular migrants.³

In 1974, former President Ferdinand Marcos, during the Martial Law period, institutionalised a policy for labour export of Filipino workers as a temporary stop-gap measure to impede the rising unemployment rate and severe balance-of-payment pressures.⁴ Nearly five decades and six administrations later, the number of Filipinos leaving the country for work continues to grow steadily due to the government's effort to diversify its labour markets and to send more Filipino workers abroad. The once temporary labour programme had become a permanent pillar of the Philippine economy. On the one hand, the country receives commendations for its comprehensive regulations and policies, and protection measures for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). On the other hand, labour and migrant rights groups are questioning the government's overreliance on the labour export programme to stimulate growth in the country's economy while there is lack of sustainable programmes to provide domestic employment and livelihood opportunities in the country thus making migration a means for survival and a necessity rather than a choice for many Filipinos. Asis noted that "the absence of sustained economic development, political instability, a growing population, double-digit unemployment levels, and low wages continue to compel people to look abroad."⁵

Migration for labour has been part of almost every Filipino family's life for the past decades. Described as an indispensable sector of the Philippine economy,⁶ the Philippine diaspora has in many ways become a permanent feature of the country's GDP through a steady inflow of remittances from migrant workers.

¹ Statista, Published on 20 May 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/578726/total-population-of-philippines>.

² International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2020*, p. 26, Accessed on 5 September 2020, <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2020>.

³ Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, Commission on Filipinos Overseas, *Stock Estimate of Overseas Filipinos as of Dec. 2013*, Accessed on 3 September 2020, <https://cfo.gov.ph/statistics-2/>.

⁴ A severe BOP crisis later occurred after the government treasury was nearly depleted following the election at the end of 1960 under the Marcos regime. The following decade the peso was significantly devalued.

⁵ M Asis, 'The Philippines' Culture of Migration', *Migration Policy Institute*, January 1, 2006, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/philippines-culture-migration>.

⁶ Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, Annual Report 1990, <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ar/AR1990.pdf>.

World Bank has cited the Philippines as the 5 top recipient countries of recorded remittances in 2018.⁷ And in 2019, the National Reintegration Center for OFWs recorded an all-time high in remittances at 33.5 billion USD which accounted for 9.3% of the country's GDP.⁸

While much literature details the many social and economic returns of migration, cases of abuse, violation of rights and loss of lives for some, had been its major setback.

The global shifts in international trade and investments had greatly influenced the gender construction of the labour markets and mobility of human resources between developed and developing countries. The history of trade liberalisation had a significant impact on unemployment and labour casualisation in the Philippines. Scholars have shown that trade liberalisation is a major reason behind industry disruptions, retrenchment of workers, and the closure of many firms that could no longer compete due to import surges and undue advantage of foreign competitors.⁹ Within a political economy perspective, liberalisation is linked to the increase in labour migration and the OFW phenomenon in the country.

Labour sending countries such as the Philippines deployed women in large numbers to work in domestic services and care work significantly in the Middle East, East Asia and parts of Southeast Asia. It was in the late 1980s to the early 1990s where women's participation in labour migration reached its height when emerging economies in Asia signalled a growth in the demand for domestic and care work.¹⁰ From 1990s to the early 2000s, the deployment of women had outnumbered men workers, with a share of 70% from the total number of new hires in land-based work.¹¹ In the recent 2019 Survey of Overseas Filipinos, women made up 56% of the total, with age groups from 25-29 to 30-34 receiving the highest share.¹²

It is within this context that this paper seeks to review the latest developments and challenges in the labour migration programme in the Philippines, with special focus on women workers in the low paid job sectors such as in domestic and care services. This study provides a review of the general features of the country's

⁷ The World Bank, *Record High Remittances Sent Globally in 2018*, Press Release, 8 April 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/04/08/record-high-remittances-sent-globally-in-2018>.

⁸ National Reintegration Center for OFWs, *Remittances Hit All-Time High of \$33.5b in 2019*, Accessed on 15 October 2020, <http://www.nrco.dole.gov.ph/index.php/announcement/378-remittances-hit-all-time-high-of-33-5b-in-2019>.

⁹ International Labour Organization, 'The Impact of Trade on Employment in the Philippines: Country report', April 2019, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-manila/documents/publication/wcms_714022.pdf.

¹⁰ R M Rodriguez, 'Domestic Insecurities: Female migration from the Philippines, development and national subject-status', The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies CCIS, University of California, Working Paper 114, March 2005, <https://ccis.ucsd.edu/files/wp114.pdf>.

¹¹ Baggio (2008) as cited in F Baggio, 'Enhancing the Benefits and Reducing the Costs of Outward Migration: Experiences and perspectives from the Philippines,' ILO Asian Regional Programme on Governance of Labour Migration, Working Paper No.20, Research Gate, March 2009, p. 4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259308626_Enhancing_the_Benefits_and_Reducing_the_Costs_of_Outward_Migration_Experiences_and_Perspectives_from_the_Philippines. There are two categories of OFWs - the sea-based and the land-based workers. The sea-based workers are those working in any kind of international fishing, passenger or cargo vessel and usually have a one-year contract. The land-based workers, on the other hand, are engaged in offshore activities whose occupation requires that majority of their working/gainful hours are spent on land and usually have a two-year contract. (UNDESA, 2004)

¹² Philippine Statistics Authority, 2019 Survey on Overseas Filipinos, *Total Number of OFWs Estimated at 2.2 Million*, 4 June 2020, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/total-number-ofws-estimated-22-million>.

labour migration landscape including the policies, programs and practices that makes the Philippines a major labour sending country in Asia. This is followed by data from desk research and online interviews with twelve Filipina migrant workers and five representatives of self-organised groups and non-government organisations working with Filipino migrant workers in the Philippines and in countries of destination. The aim is to highlight the experiential knowledge of women migrant workers on issues of workers' organising and reintegration processes. It is noted that there is limited literature on women migrant workers' perceptions with regard to their own preparations for return and re/integration to their new or old communities. Through this process, we seek to unpack the new challenges faced by returning migrant workers for further studies.

With this research, it is important to understand the driving force and the end goal of the labour migration process, looking at its success and limitations in the lives of Filipina migrant workers.

OVERVIEW

International migration is a complex and often contradictory process, which provides women with opportunities for social and economic mobility, but can also subject them to new forms of exploitation, abuse and exclusion.¹³

LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

The earliest accounts of migration in the Philippines which constitute primarily men workers date back as early as the 16th century during the Spanish and US colonial occupations. Maca noted that “during the colonial era, for the first time, labour migration was employed as a reassuring economic strategy by the state and co-opted local elites. Early colonial education policies and practices were found to have abetted, albeit indirectly, this migration.”¹⁴

While the Philippines declared its independence as a new Republic in 1946, ending a 48-year US rule, the influence of the US in the country’s political economy has remained visible with intensified trade liberalisation policies and tariff rates that were implemented thereafter. Steps taken to liberalise the market had cost a significant decrease in growth in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors.¹⁵ Despite gains in economic activities, trade liberalisation has failed to render sufficient improvements to address the rising un/underemployment rates and widening trade deficits.

In 1974, two years after the declaration of Martial Law by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, a series of labour reforms were introduced. One of the key policies was the Labor Code of the Philippines, where the government instituted a public policy on overseas employment of Filipinos. Most studies note that Marcos’ declaration of a labour migration policy was perceived as a temporary solution to the growing unemployment rates and economic downturns. Despite the economic challenges, Marcos saw an opportunity to utilise the country’s surplus labour and deploy Filipinos overseas to work mainly in the industrialisation projects in the Middle East. The increase of labour deployment was due to the construction boom in the region following the newfound strength of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in the global petroleum industry.¹⁶

¹³ A K Franck and A Spehar, ‘Women's Labour Migration in the Context of Globalization’, ResearchGate, May 2010, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284283340_Women's_labour_migration_in_the_context_of_globalization.

¹⁴ M Maca, ‘Education in the ‘New Society’ and the Philippine Labour Export Policy (1972-1986)’, Journal of International Comparative Education 7(1):1-16, January 2018, <https://jice.um.edu.my/index.php/JICE/article/view/1Maca/7818>.

¹⁵ International Labour Organization, ‘The Impact of Trade on Employment in the Philippines’, 2019, pp.89-90, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-manila/documents/publication/wcms_714022.pdf.

¹⁶ R E Ofreneo and I A Samonte, International Labour Organization, ‘Empowering Filipino Migrant Workers: Policy Issues and Challenges’, International Migration Papers 64, 2005, http://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_201588.pdf.

Orbeta et al., point out that the 1974 Labor Code originally envisioned complete control over recruitment and overseas placement. It was believed that the best way to protect workers against abuse was through a government-organised deployment system. However, the plan did not prove viable; instead, the government created a policy to solely regulate and monitor private recruitment agencies.¹⁷

Labour migration in the Philippines has been influenced by push and pull factors such as inadequate income levels in the country, better jobs available abroad, easier mobility due to better communications and transportation infrastructure, and the increasing need for services around the world.¹⁸ In addition, environmental factors due to calamities and environmental degradation also increased the prospect of migration.

Migration Governance

The Philippine experience in managing migration has been lauded by the global community for facilitating movement of workers within an environment of protection and welfare. Since the beginning of regulated migration, the Philippines has been an example of a country with a comprehensive institutional and legal framework on temporary migration of overseas workers. Migration management is administered by separate governmental bodies with different mandates and programmes to support the types of migration, as explained below. The past decades also witnessed the passage of domestic laws and programmes to strengthen the accountability of the State and to maximise the benefits of migration in development through the steady flow of remittances from Filipino migrant workers. However, despite the legislations in place, activists object to the gaps and motivations behind a monopolised regulation of overseas employment. It is observed that the country's long experience and approach towards labour migration may also signify the permanency of the Philippine diaspora.

The large-scale temporary migration which began in the 1970s numbering from 36,029 deployed Filipino workers in 1975¹⁹ had reached to a million in total in 2006. The most recent data shows around 2 million land-based workers were deployed by the end of 2019.

The government's efforts to diversify its global labour markets expanded in other parts of Asia and in Europe and Africa. However, the concentration and flow of workers in the Middle East has remained important while major occupations also diversified recognising the demand for women workers particularly in the services sector.

Almost five decades of having an explicit policy on international labour migration have resulted in the creation and reforms of different administrative agencies tasked to promote, regulate, and protect Filipino

¹⁷ A Orbeta Jr, M Abrigo and M Cabalfin, 'Institutions Serving Philippine International Labour Migrants', Philippine Institute for Development Studies, Discussion Paper Series No. 2009-31, 2009, p. 2, <https://dirp3.pids.gov.ph/ris/dps/pidsdps0931.pdf>.

¹⁸ R J Calzado, Department of Labor and Employment, 'Labor Migration Development Goals: The Philippine experience', International Dialogue on Migration, Workshop on "Making Global Labour Mobility A Catalyst For Development", WMO Conference Center, Geneva, 8 October 2007, https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshops/global_labour_mobility_0809102007/presentations/paper_calzado.pdf.

¹⁹ R E Ofreneo and I A Samonte, International Labour Organization, 'Empowering Filipino Migrant Workers: Policy Issues and Challenges', International Migration Papers 64, 2005, p. 7, http://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_201588.pdf.

migrant workers, as seen in Figure 1. For the purpose of this research, the main functions of some of these bodies are discussed below.

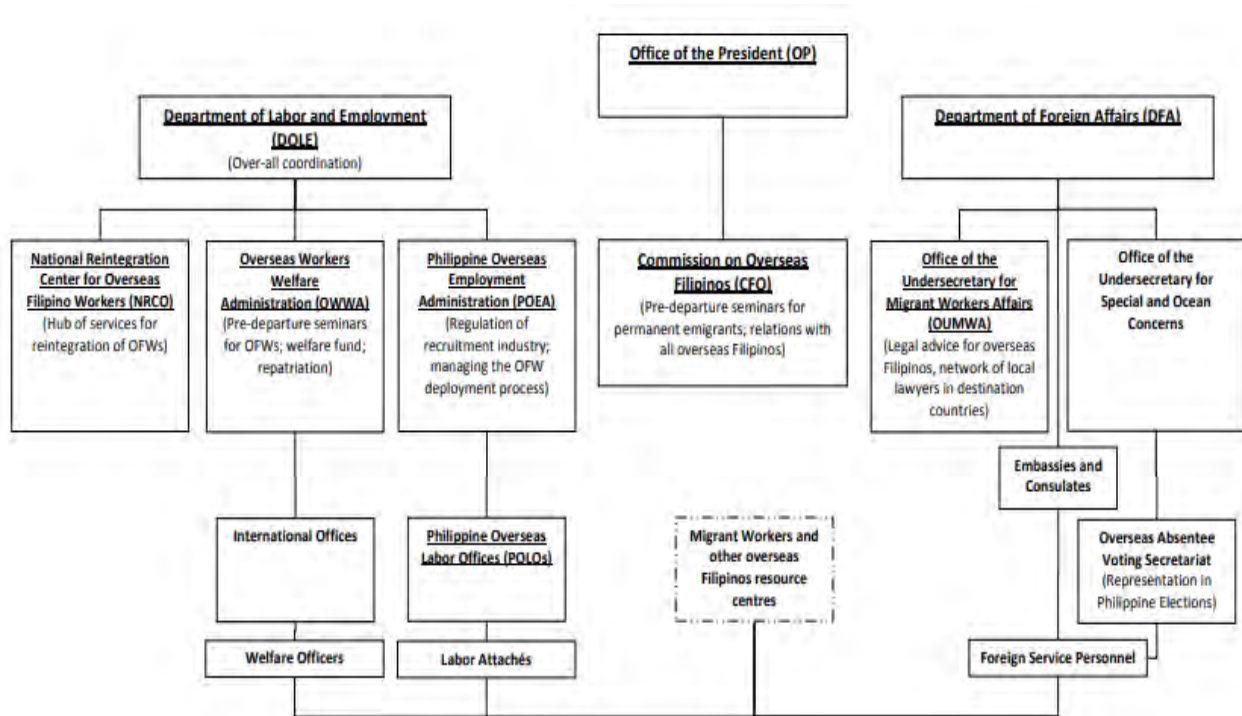


Figure 1: Philippine Government Institutions Managing Migration²⁰

The primary agency mandated to mainly promote and monitor overseas employment is the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA). Created in 1982, it assumed its role to regulate private sector participation in the recruitment and overseas placement of workers through licensing and registration processes. While its mandate suggests a primary role in monitoring employment, POEA’s main function is also central in the protection of rights to fair and equitable employment practices of workers.

The administrative agency to oversee the social and welfare services of Filipino migrant workers is the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), formerly the Welfare and Training Fund for Overseas Workers (WTFOW), established in 1977. The passage of RA 8042 or the “Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995” deepened the mandate of OWWA to include the repatriation of workers in cases of emergency or calamities and the establishment of a monitoring center for returning migrant workers. One of OWWA’s core programmes focuses on reintegration, comprised of psycho-social and economic services which includes community-based livelihood projects, skills trainings, credit facilitation and lending. In 2016, the government enacted Republic Act 10801, which launched a new charter reinforcing OWWA to manage the funds from member contributions (US \$25 per contract paid by OFWs) and interest from investments.²¹

The Commission of Filipinos Overseas (CFO) still carries its initial mandate to register and monitor emigrants leaving for various countries. CFO is one of the sources of Philippine migration statistics, apart from the

²⁰ Ibid, Orbeta Jr et al., p. 23

²¹ M Asis, 'The Philippines: Beyond Labor Migration, Toward Development and (Possibly) Return', *Migration Policy Institute*, 12 July 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/philippines-beyond-labor-migration-toward-development-and-possibly-return>.

POEA and the Philippine Statistics Office. Established in 1980, the commission was created to support Filipino migrant communities abroad.

The newest addition to the institutions supporting Filipino migrant workers is the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO). The Center was established in 2007 and is tasked to optimize the benefits of overseas employment for OFWs and their communities through skills enhancement and livelihood programs. While it aims to be a one-stop shop and networking hub of reintegration services to Filipino workers, its services have not benefitted a lot of returnees particularly those in the provinces.

One significant feature of the administrative framework, which is highly important for OFWs, is the Philippine Overseas Labor Offices (POLOs). POLOs are established in a few countries in each region except in Africa. POLOs are managed by labour attachés to provide on-site assistance to OFWs with labour and welfare cases. Other functions include information gathering and labour market research on overseas employment requirements, and promoting the overall welfare of Filipino workers through socio-cultural activities and programmes to help them reintegrate to Philippine society.

The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), which is not included in the organogram, holds a key role in managing the country's technical education and skills development. TESDA formulates labour force and skills plans and sets appropriate standards and tests. TESDA offers trainings for domestic workers prior to deployment.

NGO efforts in drawing the attention of the government on human rights issues, including the rights and welfare of Filipino migrant workers, have a long history of both dissent and cooperation. As a state policy, the Philippine government considers civil society organisations as partners in pursuing migrant concerns.

Migrant rights organisations, including self-organised groups of migrant workers, complement or fill in the gaps in services provided by government agencies by giving legal advice to victims of illegal recruitment, human trafficking, labour exploitation, and other kinds of abuse in the workplace. Throughout the years, NGO services have expanded within the economic, psycho-social, education, and other auxiliary services covering not only OFWs but also their dependents. Their contributions to policy reforms, rights-based advocacy, and in monitoring government performance in terms of delivery of services and implementation of programmes have been beneficial to OFWs.

With the straightforward mandate of the government to enhance the management of labour migration and the protection and welfare of its migrant workers, it claims to cover all aspects of migration from pre-deployment, deployment, on-site services, and eventual return. However, it should be noted that the return and reintegration dimension is still far from reflecting the real conditions and needs of migrant returnees in the Philippines.

The Two-pronged Strategy

As labour migration expanded, cases of illegal recruitment, irregular practices and abuse of Filipino migrant workers in destination countries became a significant concern. The cases of Flor Contemplacion²² and Maricris Sioson²³ in the 90s, raised a public outcry for the welfare of OFWs, women in particular. This was during the time when the demand for women workers in the domestic services and entertainment industry

²² A Filipina domestic worker in Singapore, sentenced to death in 1995 for supposed murder of a young boy.

²³ The death of a 22-year-old Filipina entertainment worker in Japan in 1991.

has undeniably multiplied. Both cases triggered significant reforms in the labour migration framework and policies, hence the creation of a landmark law - Republic Act 8042, known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995, which was later amended by Republic Act 10022²⁴ in 2010, to improve the standard of protection and promotion of the welfare of migrant workers, their families and overseas Filipinos in distress. The focus on the welfare dimension and protection of migrant workers and workers' rights became one of the main thrusts of the government's policy on labour migration.

*RA 8042, Section 2 states that the Philippines does not promote overseas employment as a means to sustain economic growth and national development, and recognizes the particular vulnerability of women migrant workers. As a result, the State will only seek to deploy Filipinos abroad who are skilled, and who will work in countries where existing labour laws protect the rights of migrant workers. Such countries must also be signatories to multilateral conventions on the protection of migrant workers, and have concluded a bilateral agreement with the Philippines on such matters.*²⁵

This signified the start of mandatory training programmes prior to deployment overseas, like in the case of domestic workers and entertainers (bound for Japan). Rodriguez noted that in addition to skills training, the State also expanded its worker education programmes attempting to better disseminate "information of labor and employment conditions, migration realities and other facts, and adherence of particular countries to international standards on human and workers' rights which will adequately prepare individuals into making informed and intelligent decisions about overseas employment".²⁶

In the International Dialogue on Migration in 2007, Calzado, a DOLE representative presented the key policy elements in a comprehensive labour migration management. She noted that, "To address attendant costs of migration, the State commits to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of overseas employment through mechanisms for the orderly and systematic facilitation and documentation of workers, provision of adequate protection to minimize abuses and exploitation before, during, and after employment. These responses will show that the Philippines has a policy preference for circular or temporary migration. Some of these mechanisms are the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995; an anti-illegal recruitment program; and, the recently issued Reform Package for Household Service Workers."²⁷

Calzado mainly cited a four-pronged strategy in managing migration to include regulation, protection, reintegration and support to families. While these four strategies try to reflect the Philippine government's

²⁴ Republic Act No. 10022, An Act Amending Republic Act No. 8042, Otherwise Known as the Migrant Workers And Overseas Filipinos Act Of 1995, as amended, Further Improving The Standard Of Protection And Promotion Of The Welfare Of Migrant Workers, Their Families And Overseas Filipinos In Distress, And For Other Purposes, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2010/03/10/republic-act-no-10022-s-2010>.

²⁵ International Labour Organization, Database of National Labour, social security and related human rights legislation, https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=43183.

²⁶ R M Rodriguez, 'Domestic Insecurities: Female migration from the Philippines, development and national subject-status', The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, Working Paper 114, p. 15, <https://ccis.ucsd.edu/files/wp114.pdf>.

²⁷ R J Calzado, Department of Labor and Employment, 'Labor Migration Development Goals: The Philippine experience', International Dialogue on Migration, Workshop on "Making Global Labour Mobility A Catalyst For Development", WMO Conference Center, Geneva, 8 October 2007, https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshops/global_labour_mobility_0809102007/presentations/paper_calzado.pdf.

efforts to cover the entire migration cycle from leaving the country until return, the first two strategies – regulation and protection, had been the most prominent and well resourced.

Regulation does not only involve interventions to facilitate an orderly flow but it also meant balancing workers' freedom of movement with caution by not putting the national interest and welfare at stake. One form of intervention is the creation of Bilateral Agreements (BLAs) between the Philippines and countries of destination for OFWs. In a review of BLAs by Mangulabnan and Daquiao, it is mentioned that, 'majority of agreements have explicit provisions relating to increased bilateral cooperation on ethical recruitment, placement, standardization of employment contracts, and involvement of Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) in the verification of workers' contracts and information dissemination, among others.'²⁸ The study also notes that while the Philippine BLAs are within the international guidelines set by the ILO, there is concern on the lack of provisions pertaining to the social services, equal treatment, work and living conditions, and return and reintegration of migrant workers. Existing BLAs are mostly in traditionally top countries of destination such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Taiwan; but missing in countries where there is high concentration of OFWs and other potential countries with emerging economies.

Overall the regulation of the country's labour migration has provided a stringent framework to facilitate the outflow and supply of labour force for the globalised markets. Migrant workers benefit from the improved systems of deployment and the formalities set in workers' contracts. However, it should be noted that raising the standards for ethical recruitment, contract processing and deployment of migrant workers is only the first step to securing decent work and in ensuring protection of migrant workers' rights and welfare. Reviewing the gaps and challenges in making the existing system to actually work for migrant workers is equally important.

Protection: The government's pledge to provide protection mechanisms for OFWs has been well documented in various platforms. Programmes to secure protection and welfare of OFWs is afforded on-site and off-site. Off-site, potential migrants undergo pre-employment orientation seminars (PEOS)²⁹ and pre-deployment orientation seminar (PDOS). PDOS is a mandatory programme provided to labour migrants and emigrants.³⁰ PDOS is a one-day seminar provided by OWWA and third-party providers on information regarding government programmes and services and basic information on health, travel and financial management. Criticisms on the usefulness of the information for workers is not new to OWWA; in fact the agency acknowledged the need for making PDOS more country, gender and skills specific.³¹ Moreover, the creation of the Comprehensive Pre-departure Education Program for Household Service Workers (HSWs) was specifically designed for domestic workers, as identified by the government as one of the 'vulnerable groups' in the labour sector. The programme combines PDOS, language and culture training, and stress management course, all made into one educational programme for HSWs.

²⁸ B P Mangulabnan and C R Daquiao, 'A Review of Bilateral Labor Agreements Concluded by the Philippines with Countries of Destination: Toward a framework for monitoring and evaluation', Philippine Journal of Labor Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 2019, pp. 1-38, <https://ils.dole.gov.ph/a-review-of-bilateral-labor-agreements-concluded-by-the-philippines-with-countries-of-destination-toward-a-framework-for-monitoring-and-evaluation/>.

²⁹ The PEOS can be accessed online with a 48-minute video presentation, which contains 8 modules with information on overseas jobs application, expectations, processing fees, illegal recruitment, and some country specific information, among others.

³⁰ According to CFO, the PDOS is for emigrants aged 20-59 years old who are petitioned by their parents, siblings, or immediate relatives, including independent applicants.

³¹ A slideshow presentation by J S Tobia, OWWA-OIC Planning and Development Division, available on the archived web pages of the Philippine Commission on Women, <https://library.pcw.gov.ph>.

On-site services include quick responses in cases of harassment, abuse, contract violations, repatriation, installation of labour attaches and welfare offices to organise seminars and investment counselling services that guide the OFW's investment decisions upon return to the Philippines.

There are a number of government programmes in almost all aspects of the migration phase, to help address the needs of OFWs. However, the challenges to bring such protection and accountability remains as a limitation when applied in destination countries that are governed by different sets of laws and priorities. The delivery of services and relevant policies, which claims to uphold the rights of all OFWs regardless of their migration status, rely on the commitment and good will of the current leadership.

Through time, the country witnessed the passage of legislations that are supportive of labour rights and standards, with special languages on security and social protection. Many factors had influenced the country's decision to concentrate on regulation and protection within the framework of migration - from its history of oppression during the Martial law period, to global solidarity to fight abuse and harassments in the workplace, collective advocacy efforts from civil society in advancing the welfare of workers, coupled with international and national mechanisms to encourage participatory processes of policymaking. Aiming for decent work in the Philippines will require more political will from the current administration to create more domestic jobs and a more stable economy that will eventually raise the standards of living of every Filipino. Thus, building new perspectives in the culture of migration to allow realistic assumptions that labour migration can now be a choice rather than a necessity.

FACTS AND PERSPECTIVES: WOMEN'S LABOUR MIGRATION

TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Data and Women Migrant Workers

Globally, the share of women and girls in the total number of international migrants fell slightly from 49.3 per cent in 2000 to 47.9 per cent in 2019.³² Generally, the gender disaggregated data has become more and more important to identify the position of women workers within the domestic labour force and in migration. In addition, the consistency of data formats is essential to address the knowledge gaps and gender analysis on the issue of women's mobility within the labour migration nexus. Understanding the linkages between gender and migration can lead to better policies and programmes for women migrant workers.

In the past, the Philippines official statistics on migration have been dependent on foreign countries' statistics. The POEA keeps a detailed record of the destination and occupation of migrant workers deploys, either as a new hire or rehire. On the other hand, the CFO monitors the figures by their migration categories (permanent, temporary and undocumented). Majority of OFWs are land-based but there is a significant number of seamen. Despite having the statistics and information gathered by the tasked government agencies, figures and surveys of the out-migration flows of Filipino workers, quantitative data to survey the methodical impact of pre- and post-migration on the lives of Filipino women workers are still lacking.

The first recorded statistics on overseas employment started in 1975, in the same year 36,029 Filipinos left the country to work abroad. Decades after, the POEA statistics showed that the number of deployed OFW at the end of 2010 has reached 1,123,676 for land-based hires, which later on dramatically increased by 40% in 2015, to a total of 1,873,180. By 2019, the Survey of Overseas Filipinos (SOF) showed that the total number of OFWs is estimated at 2.2 million, in which women made up 56%. It is observed that the most collected statistics are on recruitment and deployment of OFWs, while there is absence on return and reintegration of workers.

In 2018, the government launched a system to tap on the Bureau of Immigration to help trace the movement of OFWs by merging the POEA's data with the Immigration records for travellers at the Manila International airports. Some useful data has been produced by the said agencies, but there are significant gaps and inconsistencies. According to OWWA Administrator Hans Cacdac, given the temporary nature of labour migration, the return of OFWs should be closely monitored at their departure.³³

Meanwhile in September 2019, POEA had launched the online welfare monitoring system (OWMS) to record the status and conditions of the OFWs. The information³⁴ will be collected exclusively by affiliated

³² UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *UN International Migration 2019 Report*, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/InternationalMigration2019_Report.pdf.

³³ Rappler, *The #BalikBayan Podcast: Ethical Recruitment of OFWs*, 4 May 2015, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/balikbayan-podcast-ethical-recruitment-ofws>.

³⁴ POEA's official advisory statement to all affiliated recruitment companies includes a basic template in harvesting the information on the conditions of the OFWs, see <http://www.poea.gov.ph/advisories/2020/ADVISORY-03-2020.pdf>.

recruitment agencies through submissions of quarterly reports on all their deployed workers. The new initiative however does not explain the use and data privacy on the said web-based system.

Occupational segregation of data reflects the kind of jobs where Filipinas are mostly concentrated. While most men are typically production workers, women are predominantly service.³⁵ Domestic work employs the biggest number of Filipino women migrant workers. In 2013, domestic and other related household work services ranked first in the list of top 10 occupational categories of new hires, followed by nursing professionals. The demand for domestic work services is crucial in countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Singapore, Qatar, Kuwait and Hong Kong. These countries have been steadily receiving women migrant workers particularly in the domestic work services.

Domestic work employs the biggest number of Filipina migrant workers. Their standard contract provides a two-year term and a minimum standard salary of 400 USD per month. Most women migrant workers including the Filipina migrant workers who were interviewed for this study, stay on as a domestic worker until they age. Their reasons vary from economic to self-independence. As women stay longer in a country, most acquire new knowledge and skills. For some, like in the case of the Filipina migrant workers who are members of Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers' Association, the life skills provided by the Association are essential to be able to have alternative income in times of crisis and for future livelihood upon return. This new form of information is vital in harnessing and assessing the potential strength of experienced OFWs as the government creates a more sustainable programme for domestic job creation for returning OFWs. In a webinar on the discussion of the Philippine employment recovery in 2021, Ellene Sana from the Center for Migrant Advocacy mentioned the need for the government to provide a skills inventory among Filipino migrant workers to address the information gap on what new skills and knowledge has been acquired by them, and the type of skills that are needed to match the jobs that are available in the country.³⁶

Women Migrant Workers in Low Paid Job Categories

Feminization of migration refers not only to the number of women working abroad but also to their huge participation in key migration routes. It can mean the marked autonomy of migrant women as workers and family breadwinners, compared to their role decades ago when they crossed borders as dependents.³⁷

Recently, there has been more recognition of the value of women's participation in the international labour force. Such effort can be complemented in the origin country to address the disparities at the workplace and to improve labour participation of women. As described in the Philippine Development Plan of 2011-2016, women are in disadvantaged position due to differences in gender roles that limit their access to

³⁵ A P Ang, J Opiniano, J E Franco and J Sescon, 'Gender, Migration and Development in the Philippines', UN Women, ResearchGate, August 2015, p. 17, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315772664_Gender_Migration_and_Development_in_the_Philippines.

³⁶ Rappler, *#BudgetWatch Webinar: Funding the PH's employment recovery in 2021*, <https://www.facebook.com/rapplerdotcom/videos/4137953316221932>.

³⁷ N Piper (2008, 1292) as cited in UN Women Factsheet, 'Filipino Women Migrant Workers', https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1037003/1930_1466505623_filipino-women-migrant-workers-factsheet.pdf.

productive resources and basic services.³⁸ In 2008, 54.7 % of the total number of women OFWs were labourers and low-paid workers, including domestic workers, cleaners, and manufacturing workers. Remittances from women OFWs worldwide were relatively lower than their male counterparts.

The biggest push factor for women workers entering domestic and other service work overseas points strongly to economic and social motives. Women migrants are concentrated in few occupations, which are often menial and low paid, often in difficult working conditions and with little or no prospect for upward social mobility.³⁹

I worked as a domestic worker in Kuwait for 15 years. Before becoming an OFW, I worked as a nanny in the Philippines.

I decided to migrate to improve our family's state of life. At that time, my husband's work was unstable and so when I had the opportunity to work abroad, I spoke to my husband and we made an agreement that he will take care of our children while I'm working abroad. – Ofelia, SKDWA member, Kuwait

The responsibility of providing financially for the family fell on me, thus I became the breadwinner. There is a saying that, 'it is almost impossible to even buy a piece of underwear for yourself if you have an entire family to feed back home'. I experienced this while my siblings were still young and my parents had no stable income. My mind was only focused on my family's survival. – Glenda Cortez Tapay Magahis, migrant returnee from Lebanon

With a big reliance on remittances from OFWs to provide for the basic needs of the family, it is also important to study the circular tendencies of labour migration especially in low paid job categories where majority of women workers are employed. Some of the participants from the research shared that they have worked as domestic workers for more than 10 years because they are breadwinners for their families while others stayed because of a sense of independence and accomplishment, appreciating the work that they do, which includes helping fellow migrant workers.

Women migrant workers experience difficulties and discrimination, especially those in low paid and less protected sectors, such as domestic work. They face higher risks of abuse and exposure to vulnerable work conditions. Women migrant workers are also among groups least able to access the public services and social protection that they are entitled to. Novelita, a former migrant worker and now Chairperson of UNITED, the first domestic workers' labour group in the Philippines, shared that one of the challenges that they observed among the members is the lack of social security benefits which they need and are entitled to, as per the national law on domestic work.⁴⁰

³⁸ Commission on Filipinos Overseas, *Annual Report 2014-2015*, p. 66, https://cfo.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/publications/2015_CFOAnnualReport-Final-11-27-2015.pdf.

³⁹ N Balgoa, 'Retracing Filipino International Migration: Interrogating feminization, human agency and transnational spaces', ResearchGate, September 2018, p. 7, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327673047_Retracing_Filipino_International_Migration_Interrogating_Feminization_Human_Agency_and_Transnational_Spaces.

⁴⁰ The Philippines had passed a domestic law for household workers under the Republic Act 10361, known as the 'Domestic Workers Act' or Batasa Kasambahay, approved in 2013. RA 10361 is an act instituting policies for the protection and welfare of domestic workers. See <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2013/01/18/republic-act-no-10361>.

UNITED'S main advocacy focuses on improving the status of domestic workers and to be recognised as workers. It is good that with the 'Batas Kasambahay' (Domestic Workers Act), most people are now using the word domestic workers, instead of derogatory terms associated with domestic work. As a domestic workers union, we were able to voice our demands for a salary hike for all domestic workers.

- **Novelita Palisoc, Chairperson of UNITED (Philippines)**

Migration Agendas of Two Administrations

This section provides a brief overview of the migration agenda of former President Benigno Aquino III (2010-2016) and President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2021).

The Aquino III Administration

Aquino III was elected in 2010 and was the 15th president of the Philippines. In his first State of the Nation Address (SONA) he committed to make migrants' welfare a priority. In his 16-point agenda⁴¹ he pledged to create more domestic jobs in order to make migration a choice for Filipinos, while those who choose to migrate for labour will be given welfare and protection. Aquino III reset his government's vision on labour migration to centre its thrusts on protection of Filipino workers and economic stability. Aquino's migration agenda, however, reaped a mix of reactions from both supporters and critics. During his term, minor developments such as scholarships for children of migrant workers, repatriation efforts and streamlined services by government agencies, were among the additions to the programmes for OFWs.

It was during the Aquino III administration that the landmark legislation that recognizes for the first time domestic workers, as similar to those in the formal sector, was passed. It took however, 16 years for the House of Representatives to pass the Magna Carta for Domestic Workers. The last enacted legislation (RA 7655) on increasing the minimum wage of domestic workers was in 1993. The administration's effort to provide labour protection for domestic workers were extended to Filipino household service workers overseas, as the Philippine government formed bilateral and multilateral agreements with Jordan and Lebanon (2012) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2013).⁴² These labour agreements highlighted the cooperation of countries of destination to adopt a standardised employment contract to ensure protection and welfare of Filipino domestic workers overseas.

The period of 2004-2013 marked a sustained growth in the economy according to the World Bank (2014). The average annual GDP per capita growth was 3.4%, a marked improvement over the average growth rate of 1.4% for the period 1950-2003. One of the factors which boosted the economy was partially attributed to the remittances by OFWs. The growth in the economy was complemented by a downward trend of unemployment from 2010-2016.⁴³ However, poverty rates continued to increase and new job creation was

⁴¹ See, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2011/05/30/neda-releases-philippine-development-plan-2011-2016>.

⁴² DOLE article, Official Gazette, 'Aquino Administration First to put Forward Social Protection and Welfare of Kasambahay', <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2015/08/10/aquino-administration-first-to-put-forward-social-protection-and-welfare-of-kasambahay>.

⁴³ Unemployment rate in 2016 was at 2.55 per cent and on a steady downward trend from 3.5 per cent in 2010 as detailed on <https://www.statista.com/statistics/578722/unemployment-rate-in-philippines>.

inadequate. The stagnant domestic economy was able to offer only 1.5 million jobs, or half of what Aquino III had promised in his 3rd SONA.⁴⁴

The Duterte Administration

President Rodrigo Duterte's assumption into office as the 16th President in 2016 brought in optimism for change and support from the Filipino overseas communities. Duterte's take on the 'protection' dimension of labour migration has focused mainly on fighting human trafficking, illegal recruitment and red tape in the bureaucracy, enhanced financial literacy, and better service delivery for OFWs. One concrete plan that was delivered by the administration was the establishment of 17 one-stop-shop centers to avail the government services needed by the OFWs. Meanwhile, in an effort to lessen the impact of 'brain drain' in the country, NRCO introduced the program, 'Sa Pinas, Ikaw ang Ma'am/Sir' [In the Philippines, you can be Ma'am/Sir] project (SPIMS), specifically targeting domestic workers and other OFWs from the Middle East and parts of SE Asia to return and take on a teaching job in the Philippines. The programme seeks to encourage Filipino teachers and principals who have taken on other jobs overseas to return to the Philippines by offering them a competitive salary for a teaching post within their hometown. One of the interviewees for this research, is a candidate of SPIMS:

I was 19 years old and a high school graduate when I started working in household services in Bangkok, Thailand. I decided to work abroad to help with the finances of my family.

Within my immediate family, I was the first one to be able to work abroad but we do have other relatives who are OFWs. I actually did not intend to seek employment overseas. It was my cousin who provided the financial resources for me to travel, she was also helpful in making my final decision. And so, in 2007 I traveled to Bangkok with a tourist visa and I stayed with her for a month before I was able to find an employer.

My initial goal was to help provide for my family and later on I realized that I would like to have a college degree for my own future. Meeting other Filipinos in different fields through a church community group gave me an inspiration to go back and complete my studies.

After 3 years, even though it will be difficult financially, I decided to return to the Philippines. I became a working student taking part time jobs. After 4 years, I graduated with a degree in Elementary Education and was able to find work using my new profession.

*In 2018, I applied for a teaching job in Dubai, UAE. At this time, I went through the recruitment process with a licensed agency. Now, I plan to complete my contract in November this year, then I will return to the Philippines for good. I already applied at SPIMS and I'm waiting for school selection to be able to teach in a public school. Salary is not competitive to the rates applied abroad but I feel good with my decision to return. –
Jeraleen Libutan, a migrant worker in Dubai*

Duterte's visibility in many OFW gatherings during his overseas country visits, and his administration's swift response to cases of abuse and labour violations, as broadcast in media, has earned him support from OFWs. In an opinion article on the Duterte administration's preparedness to reduce the nation's dependence on migration, Ofreneo articulated the need to 'recalibrate and re-strategize the country's

⁴⁴ P N Abinales, 'The Philippines under Aquino III, Year 2: A ponderous slog continues', Southeast Asian Affairs, 2013, pp. 223-239, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23471146?seq=1>.

socio-economic development program' and recognize the robust contributions of migration in Medium-Term Philippine Development Plans.⁴⁵ He added that the country should review its history of policy making, and learn from the experiences of other countries' transformative growth.

Before Duterte exits his post in 2022, the current administration faces even more challenges in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The unexpected event which started as a health crisis has brought the global economy into a halt. In destination countries, often migrant workers are the first to lose their jobs. Women migrant workers in insecure occupations suffer the biggest brunt and oftentimes are left to return to the country without assurance of viable jobs or livelihood. As of August 2020, around 389,000 have been repatriated through government assisted programmes. The extent of the impact on Filipino labour migrants such as cases of wage cuts, lay-off, wage thefts, and termination of contracts with other OFWs remaining in various countries of destination are yet to be surveyed.

WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF RESILIENCE AND ORGANISING

This section highlights the perspectives of research participants, women migrant workers and returnees and representatives from non-governmental organisations supporting them.

Two of the important issues highlighted here reflect the realities of women migrant workers in destination countries and in the Philippines. One of the interesting areas in looking at mobilising and organising are the creative processes by which women work towards forming a collective advocacy and a pool of services for women migrant workers. Another interest area is the issue of reintegration upon return which has been an underdeveloped component within the migration governance.

Women Workers Organising

"Participation in worker organizations, cooperatives, trade unions and self-help groups play an important role in upholding women's labour rights, ensuring decent work and defining policy priorities."
- Ms Panudda Boonpala, Deputy Regional Director
ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific⁴⁶

The participation of women migrant workers (WMWs) as active agents of change and development is crucial in labour migration reforms and policy making. Filipino WMWs' participation and contribution to such intergovernmental processes on labour migration provides a more accurate response to their demands, labour conditions and welfare.

The Philippines has a long history of activism within the labour movement; however, women workers' concerns were not regarded as a priority area in the labour agenda. Women's formations had flourished in post Martial law period when workers, especially women, were most affected by the economic and political

⁴⁵ R Ofreneo, 'Can Duterte Reduce the Nation's Dependence on Migration?', Business Mirror 2018, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2018/02/21/can-duterte-reduce-the-nations-dependence-on-migration>.

⁴⁶ International Labour Organization, 'Regional Planning Meeting for Promoting ASEAN Women Migrant Workers' Rights through Organizing', Meeting report and technical background paper, 11-12 October 2018, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_717419.pdf.

crisis. In 1983 concerned women labour organisers together with women trade unionists initiated the formation of women workers' organisation in the industrial sector. These efforts led to the formation of the Women Industrial Workers' Alliance or WIWA but a year later, after an assessment on 'union style' of leadership, they re-established into a Women Workers' Movement (KMK or the Kilusan Ng Manggagawang Kababaihan). KMK's thrust was to effectively convince and mobilise not only unionised women but also unorganised women in the manufacturing and services sector who are still in the process of establishing their own trade unions.⁴⁷

Another example of an alternative vehicle for women's leadership and mobilization in the 1980s was shared by Jen AC Albano, the Executive Director of LEARN:

'LEARN (Labor Education and Research Network), as the name implies, sees workers' education as the primary instrument in organising and such is the primary program of LEARN. Established a few months after the People Power Revolution in 1986, LEARN was formed due to the need for a place for workers groups who could not identify with the extremes – the left and the right. Those extreme left labour unions and the extreme right are those belonging in the conservative labour union. So LEARN became a third pole.'

LEARN started its organising as early as 2012. The main mandate is to organize not just women workers but all workers so we made sure that we organised labour unions to include even associations of informal workers and the urban poor.

Hega, et al note that, 'These developments [in women workers' organising] emerged from a combination of different circumstances and motivations, such as the vigorous advocacy of the organized women workers themselves who had the support of the vibrant women's movement that urged unions to tackle women's issues, the pressure from the international labour movement that called on all affiliates to put gender equality in their agenda, and support from local and international NGOs to help raise consciousness on gender issues'.⁴⁸

Today, one of the biggest examples of Filipino women workers organising has been the formation of various women migrant domestic workers groups around the globe to promote the rights of all domestic workers internationally. Apart from construction and agriculture sectors, domestic work has been recognised by the International Labour Organisation as particularly important because of the evident concentration of migrant workers and the unregulated nature of the work which involves largely individualised forms of employment relations; and the temporary nature of residential/employment status.⁴⁹ The global call to organise domestic workers had been instrumental in the passage of Domestic Workers Convention (C189), 2011, and which then intensified the strength of movement formations of self-organised groups and unions in both countries of origin and destination.

⁴⁷ J Porte, 'Women's Center, Women Workers Movement in The Philippines — KMK and Its Organisation', ISIS International, Feminist Archives, <http://feministarchives.isiswomen.org/90-women-s-journal/women-s-journal-no-4/1325-women-workers-movement-in-the-philippines-kmk-and-its-organisation-by-jing-porte-women-s-center-philippines>.

⁴⁸ M D Hega, V C Alporha and M S Evangelista, 'Feminism and the Women's Movement in the Philippines: Struggles, advances, and challenges', Country Study, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, August 2017, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/philippinen/14072.pdf>.

⁴⁹ J Jiang and M Korczynski, 'When the 'Unorganizable' Organize: The collective mobilization of migrant domestic workers in London', ResearchGate, January 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715600229>.

UNITED⁵⁰ was formed when Labor Education and Research Network (LEARN) and the Alliance of Progressive Labor (APL) started campaigning for C189 and then later when we developed our policy advocacy for the Batas Kasambahay/Domestic Workers Act. One of the motivations behind the formation of UNITED also came from International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). At that time there was a global call to campaign for the ratification of C189 and to organise domestic workers at the national level.

The challenge to mobilise [this sector] was not the same as organising unions. The women became responsive when the organisers started using the ‘organising of cooperatives.’ They started as a cooperative where women’s issues and concerns were discussed, and eventually women workers’ rights became part of the discussion. The ratification of C189 by the government made organising of local domestic workers more accessible.

The skills of the organisers in initiating a dialogue with the employers should also be commended for the success of the formation of the 1st domestic workers union in the country - UNITED. - Jen AC Albano, LEARN

In their study, ‘When the ‘unorganizable’ organize: The collective mobilization of migrant domestic workers in London’, Jiang and Korczynski noted three key barriers to the mobilization of migrant workers – employment conditions, which tend to prevent migrant workers coming together; the framings held by migrant workers, which marginalize an understanding of their position as that of exploited workers; and the issue of the sustainability of any mobilization.⁵¹

Creating Spaces for Organising and Learning

Organising of women migrant workers in the domestic services sector has proven to be more challenging in countries of destination, particularly with the absence of legal frameworks that recognize and uphold the rights for workers. Despite the barriers facing women’s organising, domestic workers groups are finding innovative approaches to ensure that women are able to utilize spaces for organising and learning.

In Kuwait, Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association (SKDWA)⁵², in coordination with Sandigan Kuwait has started a series of skills trainings for migrant workers although after the lockdown due to Covid-19 pandemic, they started receiving more interest from the wider migrant communities of different nationalities. These trainings prepare the women for their life after they leave Kuwait:

We have been planning this reintegration program for a long time since the government is quite weak in providing such program. We realised that many of our domestic workers have stayed here [in Kuwait] for a long time and are now aging. As they reach the age of 50 and above, there is hardly any chance of getting employed back in the Philippines. The longer they stay here the less opportunities they will get upon return. That is why they need to start somewhere and at least allow themselves to develop certain skills. We also offer

⁵⁰ UNITED is the first national union of domestic workers in the Philippines. Established in 2015, UNITED currently has 601 members nation-wide.

⁵¹ J Jiang and M Korczynski.

⁵² Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association (SKDWA) is a self organised group of women migrant domestic workers. SKDWA aims to strengthen the domestic workers sector through workers’ education, and knowledge and skills building. Sandigan Kuwait played a key role in the formation of SKDWA.

financial literacy workshops especially to those who have plans of returning and availing the OWWA reintegration program.

As the lead organisation, we do the organising, facilitation and planning. We now have a physical space for meeting, training sessions and an office. Almost every day we come here and we welcome visitors and members. – Ann Abunda, Sandigan Kuwait/ Integrated Community Center

In the Philippines, KAAGAPAY⁵³ and BATIS Center for Women⁵⁴ share their experience in organising returnees in rural communities.

Previously BATIS was a center-based organisation. But in 2007-8 we expanded our work in the National Capital Region, Bulacan and Ilocos Sur to cater to women returnees who are not based in Manila. Many of our clients who received services from the center eventually became our project partners and members of BATIS Aware [a self-help organisation of women returnees]. The members act as peer support within their communities. For example, in Nueva Ecija, we have a micro-level of organising, where women leaders are called ‘community champions’. These women provide direct support services, counseling for women migrant workers and returnees. They no longer need to go to the center to avail these services but it is through women’s network that they are able to support their own communities. – Andrea Anolin and Nora Guillermo, BATIS Center for Women

Our role as organisers is to assess the need for organising among women returnees in their communities. Right after they form their networks, we initially supplement their needs when it comes to trainings, livelihood and other relevant concerns. Women are involved in the process of deciding which trainings would be most relevant to their needs in the communities. – Jasmine, KAAGAPAY

Framing Migrant Perspectives through Politicised Learning

One of the common elements in the organising of migrant domestic workers is the use of politicised learning to gain understanding of the critical issues on women workers’ rights. For example, LEARN has been providing leadership trainings among women workers’ groups, including migrant domestic workers.

Through our project, we train leaders to be organisers. As organisers they have to learn how to do the basic orientation seminars – which includes information on workers’ rights, migrants’ rights at gender rights. Apart from mentoring, we also supervise and guide them through their practicum on-site. We make sure that they use the skills that they acquired from the training so in the period of 6 months, they start mobilizing among Filipino migrant domestic workers. – Jen AC Albano, LEARN

⁵³ KAAGAPAY works for the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), their families and relatives, particularly in Mindanao region.

⁵⁴ Established in 1988, Batis Center for Women advocates for the rights of women migrant workers, in general. The Center supported the formation and the current programs of BATIS Aware, a self-help group of women returnees and their families.

In Jordan, a group of community leaders representing migrant domestic workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, had formed a network in 2014, called the Domestic Workers Solidarity Network in Jordan (DWSNJ). Support from the Solidarity Center, in providing thematic workshops and dialogues with the migrant domestic workers communities on labour exploitation and human trafficking, was instrumental in grounding the vision and advocacy of DWSNJ.

We started with 10 community leaders who went through the thematic workshops. And then we were able to do a public launch where we were officially introduced as a grassroots network to the civil society groups in Jordan.

Mobilising and case handling are the core tasks of community leaders. We also have a network of NGO support services, such as legal clinics, where we can endorse cases of migrant domestic workers. – Joy Guarizo, community leader, DWSNJ

In the UK, Angie Garcia, the Chair of Waling-Waling, recounts the challenges faced by organised migrant domestic workers. Waling-Waling was formed by migrant domestic workers in the mid-80s to campaign for their basic rights as workers in the UK. Following a ten-year-long campaign, Waling-Waling won for domestic workers basic rights as any other worker in the UK and specifically the right to change employer. However, in April 2012 these rights were taken from them with the promise that they would be protected under the Modern Slavery Act. In 2017 the Waling-Waling members reconvened and are now campaigning to reclaim their rights as workers.

I joined the organisation to campaign for the rights of the migrant domestic workers in our fight for justice! Many migrant domestic workers are suffering from physical, sexual and emotional abuse; the non-payment or under payment of wages; long working hours; and sleep and food deprivation. In 1997-'98 we won our campaign and gained rights for the migrant domestic workers in the UK. But in 2012 the home secretary of the coalition government (Teresa May) stripped migrant domestic workers of their rights. Since the removal of the rights of the migrant domestic workers, workers are still experiencing in many ways even worse situation due to the present hostile environment.

In 2018 we took the decision to reconvene and reclaim our rights. And as Chair of our organisation, Waling-waling, we want to campaign to reclaim our rights with the help of other organisations like the Unite the Union, Kalayaan, The Voice, other organisations and religious organisations with similar objectives. – Angie Garcia, Chair, Waling Waling

Sustainability of Mobilisation and Leadership

Some studies on migrant organising suggest that sustainable organising relies on formal leaders, who are frequently drawn from the well-educated middle class, and outside grants ().⁵⁵ While this may be true within some communities, others rely on various strategies to ensure their ongoing support to migrant domestic workers groups and unions and sustainability.

Income Generating Activities

⁵⁵ Ibid, Moody (2009) as cited in Jiang and Korczynski.

Access to resources will always be a challenge because it requires a certain kind of language and bureaucratic processes. Not everyone is well versed with this bureaucracy. However, BATIS may be able to help to access such funds for our partners to be sustainable.

*One way to look at this challenge is to maximize the benefits of the group's livelihood activities within their communities. Their income generating activities would be able to support their operations. Also the success of allowing women returnees to be self-sufficient rests in a variety of enterprises. However, most of these enterprises have a short life span of 7 years. This is the dilemma with regard to livelihood support programs since the needs of women migrant returnees requires a longer timeline. Hopefully, the importance and challenges of this process when applied at the community level, should not be overlooked by donors and project partners. – **BATIS Center for Women***

It is important to have more SKDWA members so that we can mobilise more people to act/volunteer and help strengthen the voices of domestic workers.

*With regard to sustainability, we have our livelihood training programs where we collect fees to support our ongoing activities. The training program is open to all nationalities though we give priority to those who wish to become a member of SKDWA. – **Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association***

Membership Fees

*Having union dues is important in sustaining the growth and operations of the local chapters at the community level. In case, LEARN runs out of funding to support UNITED, at least their activities will continue and move forward. – **LEARN/UNITED***

Network Building

*It is extremely difficult for us to have access to resources not like the old days that we have the Commission of Filipino Migrant Workers in the UK who supported us by giving space for our meetings and activities any time. And it is hard to connect with funding agencies, we don't have the resources to comply with charitable regulations. We are actually a self-help group, with the help of our old members as our supporters, we have fund raising event for our organisation to support us financially with our campaign. – **Waling Waling- UK***

Building the capacity of unions, self-organised groups and women migrant workers groups in destination and origin countries to achieve sustainable leadership and mobilisation can be realised by strengthening networks of stakeholders to take on roles in providing technical, learning and financial support. Recognising the contributions of women workers' organising in bringing critical women leaders and grounded advocacy on migrant workers' rights are vital in bringing long-term support from donor communities.

Return and Reintegration

All interventions should incorporate the voice of returnees, where appropriate, through consultation and participation with returned workers and their associations. This is in line with Article 28 of the ASEAN Consensus, which states: "The Sending State will ensure the right of the

*returned migrant workers to establish associations, participate in policy making and programmes affecting migrant workers”.*⁵⁶

Preparation for return and reintegration is not a straightforward path for many women. Many factors influence their preparedness to return, such as having a sense of successful migration experience, status of education of children, support systems in origin communities, and most importantly, prospects for a stable income source and livelihood. This section shares how the eleven women interviewed for this study feel about their (potential) return and reintegration.

Reintegration Preparedness

At the moment, I don't have any plans of retuning for good. On my part I'm not yet ready. I just want to try working in another country. I already applied online in the Middle East, in HK and a friend of mine told me of an opportunity in Canada but the placement fee is quite high. My sister is now in Germany, she is married to a German national. She plans to take me but processing the papers will be quite expensive. – Glenda Cortez Tapay Magahis, has worked in Lebanon for 20 years and is currently back in the Philippines since early 2020

When my child completes a bachelor's degree then I would feel okay to go back home. At the moment, it is hard for me to tell if I can return home in five years because the needs of my family might shift again. My plans for now are on track and is focused only on my child. I also started buying pieces of land as an investment. – Gemma Daba, Case Officer-SKDWA (9 years in Kuwait)

If ever I decide to return home for good, I will make sure that I have a source of income to continue supporting my family.

I hope to complete my studies as a way of preparing myself to reintegrate back to the Philippines. Once I earn my diploma it will open new opportunities for me to find a stable job since I am still young. I only need 2 more years to complete my studies but financially, it will depend on the current needs of my family. I don't intend to stay in Kuwait for a long time because I know my kids need me back home. In addition, I plan to save up and maybe, invest in a micro business. I believe that having a permanent income will create more economic stability. – Jinky Escuadro, SKDWA, Kuwait (7 years in Kuwait)

In my experience as a case worker for DWSNJ, I noticed that among the OFWs here who returned in the Philippines, whether distressed case or not, almost 80% of them would like to re-migrate. Sometimes they send me messages that they are now in Qatar or in Kuwait.

As for me, I feel happy here. I am single and I got used to living abroad. I am happy handling cases and assisting other Filipino migrant workers in need. – Marjorie Majorenos, case worker-DWSNJ (15 years in Jordan, 3 years in Lebanon)

⁵⁶ ASEAN (2017) as cited in P Wickramasekara, International Labour Organization, *Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers with special focus on ASEAN Member States*, 2019, p. 8, https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_733917/lang--en/index.htm.

Some of the women have yet to discuss reintegration with their families. Though they have the intention to return, they feel that they have yet to achieve the goals that they set prior to migration. In an ILO study, free will and readiness to return are major preconditions contributing to better return preparedness.⁵⁷

Harvesting Potential Gains

It is hard to tell if I can go home for good in the next few years. Not until I have all my family needs supported. One way to prepare is to start our own savings. However, we cannot rely only on our savings because eventually it will get depleted. What we want is for the government to develop more job opportunities that match the skills and knowledge of returnee migrants. Age limits within the available job sectors should be more considerate to the aging population of returnee migrants especially in the domestic work and other low paid job sector. As long as the returnee migrants are capable to execute the tasks, they should be given priority in job placements.

One of the challenges for returning migrants is the sustainability of their resources. Since there is a chance to deplete their hard-earned savings, it is important to have financial loans available for business capital.

I hope job opportunities are there for returning migrant workers because here domestic workers are only getting their needed rest during sleep time. While if they are employed back in the Philippines, they will have a chance to be with their families and rest time to recover from a hard day's work. For some who would like to re-migrate due to the lack of opportunities back home, they will have a hard time getting accepted again by recruitment agencies if they are 50 years and above.

I hope the government considers our skills and experience. Most of the time, fresh graduates are preferred in government positions. I hope they still accept me as a social worker. – Josephine Tecson, SKDWA (8 years in Kuwait)

When it comes to livelihood, many returning migrant workers may not be able to find a job easily although they are still capable to work, they may not be qualified because of the age limits. Alternative livelihood is very important. If they acquired the skills to sew, they can find ways to earn by selling their products. SKDWA offers livelihood training activities in sewing, cross stitch, bottle recycling, spa, and manicure and pedicure. So far we plan to develop more ideas to enhance the program. – Ofelia, PIO and Assistant Treasurer, SKDWA (15 years in Kuwait)

As long as I am fit to work, I will stay here. For now, I plan to take a holiday to visit my family. In case I do decide to go home for good, I will make the necessary preparations. I plan to engage in business and buy new sewing machines while my sister already has her own shop for motorcycle parts. We will try to help each other. – Rosalina Lacanilao, Chair, SKDWA (4 years in Kuwait)

⁵⁷ Ibid, Wickramasekara, p. 6.

Economic reintegration remains as the biggest challenge for many migrant returnees. While they may have gained extensive experience and skills while working abroad, migrant workers find it hard to find domestic jobs or livelihood opportunities in their communities. In the case of women migrant domestic workers many have spent almost half of their lives working and as they return home, they are at their senior years. It is crucial for the government to assess their potential contributions within the domestic economy as well as to understand where to link these opportunities when creating long term development plans for the country.

Saving up for the Future

I agree that there is a right moment to think and save up for my future when I return home for good. Even though there are opportunities here in Canada, I still want to go back home to the Philippines.

One of my worries upon return is not having enough savings. This is why it is important for me to be prepared while I am still healthy and I have a job. –C A, migrant domestic worker in Canada

I'm now 57 years old, and I think I will go back home for good when I reach 60 years old or maybe I will stay here (Bangkok) as long as there are employers who are willing to hire me for work. I thought about my plan for retirement only this year. I still plan to complete the renovation work of our family house before I go home for good. It is quite difficult to pursue my plan now because of the economic situation back home. For many years, I have been the breadwinner for my family and so until now it is a challenge to save up for my own retirement. As an OFW, returning back to our families can be a great challenge, our savings can easily dry up if we have no one else to rely on within the family. – Heidi, 57, migrant domestic worker in Thailand

While migrant workers toil hard to provide for the continuous economic needs of their families, the majority are not able to save up for their eventual return to the Philippines. A number of studies have shown greater dependence on remittances and many OFWs are still unable to manage their finances effectively. Recently more information on financial literacy programs have become popular online due to the increasing concern over misplaced and imbalanced priorities of spending. The POEA has also included financial management in its module for pre-deployment of workers.

Rights and Portability of Services

As a migrant worker, I do have plans going back to my home country, the Philippines. I want to settle with my family and relatives. I have plans in life, like building a small business for some financial support and at the same time, helping people to have work and income, as well. But the economic situation back home is difficult and unstable, sometimes climate and natural disasters affect my plans. One reason I keep on changing my plan is about my medical situation - here in the UK I have a free medical care and free medication for my chronic disease but back home medication and treatment are expensive. – Angie Garcia, Waling Waling, UK

There is an advantage to have more allies here (in the Philippines). You will also know who to turn to and where to file a complaint once you don't receive your salary from your

employer. As compared to working abroad, many are not entitled with the same rights as here. – Novelita Palisoc, returnee migrant, UNITED Philippines

Returnee women migrants have diverse needs. From their reflections, we can identify the economic aspect, personal security, and family well-being. During the interview, KAAGAPAY noted the importance of having localised government services particularly in providing trainings and assistance, given that most migrant workers are not from Manila. Bureaucratic processes should be streamlined to speed up the delivery of services, while economic programmes need to match the sectors, gender-specific needs and new skills of returnee migrant workers.

As discussed in the Overview section, there are separate government agencies with specific mandates in providing on-site and off-site services and reintegration programmes. In a discussion paper on the Philippines’ Voluntary National Review of the Sustainable Development Goals, the table below shows the assistance provided to OFWs from 2016 to 2018. Given the huge population of Filipino migrant workers the total number of those who accessed the reintegration services projects a fairly low access rate, although there was an increase from 5,340 in 2016 to 35,626 in 2018 for those who received both training and livelihood services.⁵⁸

Majority of the research participants noted that they have not accessed any government services, while some have no intention to apply due to the long processing times and the lack of interest. Only one participant was able to attend the orientation on reintegration programme but did not continue with the application for livelihood assistance.

Physical accomplishments of DOLE programs for protection and security of OFWs, 2016-2018

Programs/Projects	Indicator	Accomplishment		
		2016	2017	2018
Onsite Programs and Services for OFWs	100% of requests for assistance served within the prescribed period (Repatriation Services)	8,222	36,000	15,372
	100% of requests for assistance served within the prescribed period (Welfare Services)	515,727	721,256	843,295
Documentation of OFWs	Number of OFWs documented	2,552,879	2,754,001	2,713,186
Assistance to Illegal Recruitment and Trafficking-in-Persons (AIR-TIP)	Number of victims of illegal recruitment and trafficking-in-persons assisted	17,170	15,337	24,921
Reintegration Services	Number of returning OFWs provided with skills training	1,385	4,379	4,261
	Number of returning OFWs provided with livelihood assistance	2,220	3,686	3,518
	Number of returning OFWs provided with skills training and livelihood assistance	5,340	21,924	35,626

Source: DOLE, as cited in Reyes, et al (2019)⁵⁹

⁵⁸ C M Reyes, et al, ‘The Philippines’ Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals,’ Philippine Institute for Development Studies, Discussion Paper Series no. 2019-10, November 2019, <https://think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/11359/pidsdps1910.pdf?sequence=1>.

⁵⁹ Ibid

It is important for the government to pay special attention on sustainable return and reintegration by focusing not only on services but on transformative growth of the economy in order to stir more jobs and investments. Grounded research and recognition of women workers' participation are also integral in strengthening and reframing programmes and policies on return and reintegration.

REFLECTIONS

While looking at the milestones and imminent challenges on managing migration, it is important to reassess the push factors driving women's migration in the Philippines. Undeniably, economic need has been one of the key motivations for women to take up work abroad. For decades, the government had been successful in pulling off its centralised programs and legal frameworks around regulation and protection of Filipino overseas workers. However, it continues to be complacent with its promise to raise the standards of living of Filipinos and efforts to create more sustainable jobs and livelihood in the country.

The real issues of migrant workers, especially women, both in destination and origin countries, have often been side tracked by bigger political and economic priorities, which often times do not address women workers' demands for decent work, equity, sustainable environment, and good governance. The need to organise to raise women migrant workers' concerns paved way for innovations and creative learning spaces for knowledge and skills building. The concept of social movement within the unorganised women's sector had been integral in the growth and sustainability of many self-organised groups, unions and community-based formations.

With the temporary nature of labour migration, it is but necessary to find out if policies, strategies and services in place are in line with the expectations of migrant workers should they decide to return to their home country. The vision of the government to make migrants actors of development needs to be backed up by concrete programmes and incentives to provide sustainable growth not only to the economy but also to migrant communities and their families.

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ANNEX

Interviews with women migrant workers:

1. Jinky Escudro, Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association, Kuwait
2. Josephine Tecson, Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association, Kuwait
3. Ofelia, Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association, Kuwait
4. Rosalina Lacanilao, Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association, Kuwait
5. Gemma Daba, Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association, Kuwait
6. Angie Garcia, Waling Waling UK
7. Heidi (not her real name), Thailand/Singapore
8. C A (not her real name), Canada/HK
9. Jeraleen Libutan, UAE/Thailand
10. Marjorie Majorenos, Domestic Workers Solidarity Network in Jordan
11. Novelita Palisoc, UNITED, Philippines
12. Glenda Cortez Tapay Magahis, Lebanon

Interviews with NGOs:

1. Jasmine, KAAGAPAY
2. Ande Anolin and Nora Guillermo, BATIS Center for Women
3. Jen AC Albano, LEARN
4. Ann Abunda, Sandigan Kuwait/ICC
5. Joy Guarizo, Domestic Workers Solidarity Network in Jordan