

13. Questioning the ‘hero’s welcome’ for repatriated overseas Filipino workers

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As the world entered its second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, global inequalities around access to healthcare, vaccines, and therapeutics, as well as border closures and lockdowns, heightened existing inequalities between the global South and the reopening North. An emerging area of engagement has been the immobilising effect of the pandemic on migrant labour, specifically on citizens who were repatriated back to their home countries, and the communities that received them. The experience of the Philippines, which had the slowest recovery in Southeast Asia as of 2021, and its repatriated migrant workers provided early evidence of this phenomenon.

Domestically known as overseas Filipino workers (OFWs),¹ temporary migrant workers have been hailed as *bagong bayani* (modern-day heroes) for contributions to their respective households and the Philippine economy. In exchange for higher incomes and foreign currency, OFWs made the difficult decision to part from their families for prolonged periods of time in foreign lands or aboard sea vessels. As of April 2021, the Department of Labor and Employment reported 627,576 OFWs affected by pandemic closures who had been forced to repatriate (PNA 2021). Official records tallied at least 2.2 million OFWs scattered worldwide out of 108.1 million Filipinos as of 2019 (PSA 2020), although migrant workers have been historically estimated at around 10% of the population (San Juan 2009).

The Philippines was the world’s fourth largest destination of remittances in 2019 (World Bank 2020), reaching US\$30 billion (1.56 trillion Philippine pesos), or about 8% of the Philippines’ US\$377

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billion (PHP 19.52 trillion) economy (BSP 2020). The effects of remittances have been felt not only by OFW families; they have shaped the Philippine built environment as well. A settlement called 'Little Italy' south of Manila features a village of largely empty Italian-style villas constructed by its OFW population, thanks to decades of remittances from domestic and service workers, nurses, and au pairs (Onishi 2010). Shopping malls were once the pre-pandemic leisure area of choice for 'balikbayans' ('home-comers') on holiday, consistent with the country's consumption-driven economy. OFWs also comprised a sizeable portion of the condominium market, although banks have expressed concern regarding furloughed workers defaulting on mortgage payments (Dass 2020).

The global role of OFWs was highlighted early in the pandemic, as heavily affected countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom employed more than 165,000 Filipino registered nurses on the frontlines.² However, other OFWs were not as 'lucky'. Of the 327,000 OFWs repatriated in 2020, around 70% were land-based workers from badly hit industries such as logistics, construction, and the oil sector, while the rest were sea-based (DFA 2021).³

Thus, OFWs from affected sectors were forced to return and found themselves unemployed under one of the longest and most stringent COVID-19 lockdowns in the world. Despite such draconian efforts, the Philippines recorded more than one million confirmed cases as of April 2021, the second highest in the ASEAN region (CSIS 2021). Intermittent lockdown cycles halted approximately 75% of economic activities and rendered nearly half of the country's adult labour force jobless, leaving repatriated OFWs scrambling to retrain during the worst recession since the tail end of the Marcos dictatorship (Social Weather Stations 2020).

All evidence points to how the pandemic magnified persistent inequality and lack of opportunities in the Philippines – the same factors that had driven Filipino labour migration reaching back to the early 1900s, when Filipinos were first hired as temporary plantation workers across the United States; in the 1970s, when male construction and oil refinery workers left en masse for the Middle East; and again in the 1980s as more women pursued opportunities abroad as domestic, administrative, and healthcare workers (Orbeta and Abrigo 2009). How do we begin to understand these multiple layers of displacement, (im) mobility, and uncertainty?

Layers of vulnerability: double displacement and migrant work

As of 2019, the preferred destinations of OFWs were Saudi Arabia (22.4%), the United Arab Emirates (13.2%), Hong Kong (7.5%), Taiwan (6.7%), and Kuwait (6.2%), with the largest proportion of workers coming from the regions in and around the capital, namely Calabarzon at 20.7%, Central Luzon at 13.3%, and Metro Manila at 9.7% (PSA 2020). Observers have argued that the Philippines' labour export policy was originally intended only as a stopgap measure, and so the lack of in-country opportunities has been a form of displacement where citizens are forced to move elsewhere by 'push' factors such as persistent unemployment and underemployment, political instability, cyclical environmental disasters, or armed conflict (Asis 2017). However, unlike the decision to leave the Philippines for work, being displaced yet again from their jobs abroad and returning during the COVID-19 pandemic was not a voluntary choice.

The desire to provide more for the household has often been mentioned as a reason for choosing to work abroad, the higher wages contributing to the once-burgeoning middle class (Ducanes and Abella 2008). A study on 2007 and 2008 patterns of income and expenditure compared Filipino households with and without OFWs. Households with OFWs, compared to those without, sourced about PHP 28,000 (US\$630) more of their income from remittances, while sourcing PHP8,700 (US\$195) to PHP15,000 (US\$335) less from domestic wages and salaries (Ducanes 2015). The study demonstrated that remittances from a household member working abroad more than made up for the effects of an OFW leaving a domestic job or another household member leaving a job to take over household responsibilities. The same study reported that households with OFWs had higher expenditures in education and in health. Lastly, the study estimated that households able to send a member overseas had odds of climbing out of poverty two to three times greater than similar households who could not.

Precarity has remained an issue. Using 2015 data, Albert, Santos, and Vizmanos (2018) found that 19% of OFWs belonged to the lower-income cluster (i.e. between the poverty line and twice the poverty line) while 37% belonged to the lower-middle-income cluster (i.e. between two and four times the poverty line). Even OFWs categorised as middle class or lower-middle class have been economically vulnerable as many of these families are single-income households who might slide

back to poverty if the breadwinner dies or becomes unemployed (Bird 2009). Even prior to the pandemic, remittances had usually been spent on basic needs, education, and healthcare. Several surveys run by the Central Bank of the Philippines showed that 97% of OFW families depended on remittances for food and basic household needs; only 38% were able to put away savings, while a paltry 6% were able to funnel earnings into investments (BSP 2019).

With future employment uncertain, more than half of households with OFWs faced the risk of sliding into poverty. Deployment figures in 2020 decreased to around 1.4 million from around two million in 2019. The sudden shift from hypermobility to pandemic immobility had a disproportionate impact on specific sectors. Managers and technical professionals (who might have been able to redeploy easier as companies pivoted to digital work platforms) comprised a smaller share of the migrant worker population. At least 39.6% of the total number of OFWs in 2019 held elementary occupations requiring manual labour, of whom 88.3% were women. The next largest cohort of OFWs, those employed in the global service and sales industries (18%), were equally affected by layoffs (PSA 2020).

In the absence of a systematic review of pandemic impacts on migrant workers, anecdotal and partial reports indicated that permanent and temporary job losses affected OFW household allocations for food and education. Data from the Department of Education showed that only 27% of private school students who enrolled in 2019 returned for the 2020–2021 school year (Ramos 2020) – indicating that families were forced to cut a costly investment in economic mobility despite the mixed quality of the Philippine public school system.

The economic slump offered limited options to returning OFWs that sought alternative sources of income in the Philippines. In the domestic labour market, the number of employed persons decreased to around 40 million in 2020 from around 42 million in 2019 (PSA 2020). Nevertheless, the challenges faced by those forced home paled in comparison to the difficulties of those who had lost their jobs but had not been able to repatriate. By the second half of 2020, labour secretary Silvestre Bello III announced that an estimated 80,000 OFWs were stranded abroad (Terrazola 2020). Reports that circulated on social media showed images of displaced workers forced to sell blood to secure money for food (Casilao 2020), photos of organ donation scars, and even suicides among stranded cruise ship workers, whose former places of work were moored, immobile, in harbours around the world.

By the end of 2020, at least six cruise ship suicides had been Filipino (Carr 2020).

Repatriated OFWs and lacklustre public sector response

Although the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of Labor and Employment had existing capacity to facilitate repatriation and assistance in host countries, the COVID-19 experience exposed the limits of existing government mechanisms. Previous economic shocks that resulted in job loss and mass repatriation of OFWs – such as the Gulf War in the 1990s or recent events in Libya, Syria, and Lebanon – were contained and had minimal impact on domestic affairs. With COVID-19, however, repatriation requirements no longer ended once OFWs were brought back to the country. It extended until OFWs were able to get back to their home provinces amid lockdowns and multiple quarantine arrangements. Asis (2020) has noted that, unlike previous repatriations, COVID-19 needed not only a 'whole-of-government approach, but a whole-of-nation approach, which hinges on joint efforts between government and nongovernment entities'. Without this interlocking and collaborative approach, haphazard policies affecting migrant workers that were not fit for purpose unnecessarily extended the discomfort of an unemployed cohort in cycles of transit and forced immobility, facing risks greater than other citizens who had the option to stay indoors.

The suffering was marked by stretches of movement and immobility: at sea or in their previous host countries, upon arrival in Manila, and yet another two-week quarantine upon arrival in their communities of origin. The final leg from Manila to their home provinces was facilitated through the now-suspended Balik Probinsya and Hatid Probinsya programmes (return and bringing back to the provinces), which rendered close to 593,000 individuals, including OFWs, stranded on Metro Manila's streets, under its overpasses, and in its sports arenas for weeks or even months while waiting to be brought home (CNN Philippines 2020a; NDRRMC 2021). The lack of coordination between the national government and the receiving communities meant that impoverished provinces and municipalities were forced to set up rudimentary systems for testing, quarantine, and basic financial assistance for those displaced. One consequence included stranded individuals from the provinces of Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi in the southernmost region

of the Philippines being dropped off by a government vessel at the wrong port, Cagayan De Oro, nearly 500 km away from the intended destination (Maulana 2020).

Upon reaching their hometowns, repatriates had to contend with the dual stigma of losing their jobs and disinformation regarding COVID-19 transmission. Reports told the tale of returning OFWs experiencing discrimination or animosity from neighbours due to misconceptions that they were potential vectors of the disease (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2020). This prompted a flurry of local orders and a congressional bill criminalising discrimination against frontline workers, confirmed or suspected cases, and returning OFWs (Cepeda 2020). A widely shared photo showed a tarpaulin congratulating a repatriate for testing negative for COVID-19 – a family's public announcement for all the neighbours to see (Laureta-Chu 2020).

Initial COVID-19 repatriation programmes offered by the Overseas Workers' Welfare Agency were limited to its regular menu of capacity-building activities, job placements, livelihood packages, and individual loans, for which about US\$14 million (PHP 700 million) had been allocated before the pandemic (DBM 2020; OWWA 2020). When demand for emergency repatriation soared, the government disbursed USD\$103.6 million (PHP 5 billion) to almost 500,000 OFWs to cover quarantine and transportation expenses as well as some cash aid. In March 2021, OWWA sought an additional US\$202 million (PHP 9 billion) since they claimed that their agency budget was about to run out that year (*Business Mirror* 2021). The Philippine government also promised to support unemployed OFWs by matching them with 60,000 jobs in special economic zones (Philippine Economic Zone Authority 2020) and in the construction sector through the infrastructure-led growth strategy of the Duterte administration called 'Build, Build, Build' (CNN Philippines 2020b). However, no detailed plans related to these initiatives had been released by the first half of 2021.

Other policy choices met criticism from repatriates and the public alike. A knee-jerk decision to institute a deployment ban for health-care workers in April 2020 was lifted eight months later. In May 2020, President Duterte announced the suspension of a policy that required OFWs to pay higher state health insurance premiums. This announcement came on the heels of protests from OFWs who had lost their jobs and could no longer act as 'cash cows', as well as a corruption controversy involving the embattled state health insurer, PhilHealth (Lopez

2020). By early 2021, reports surfaced regarding a thriving black market for vaccines, first for presidential guards, then for elites, and potentially for workers desperate for ‘vaccine passports’ so they could return to work abroad (Cabato 2021)

In the face of continued restrictions and incoherent, oft-changing policies, the onus to support returning workers fell on provincial and city governments, together with the private sector, to kickstart economic activity in their respective localities. However, the magnitude of the local and international repatriation and reintegration problem coupled with staggering unemployment required resources for social services and livelihood support that not all local governments possessed. In the last quarter of 2020, the Philippines was ravaged by eight different typhoons barely weeks apart, depleting strained local disaster funds used for both pandemic and typhoon response (Torres 2020). Some affluent provinces and cities were able to offer jobs by purchasing agricultural produce and personal protective equipment (PPE) from local businesses, entering into service contracts with transportation providers, and enabling e-commerce platforms to thrive in their areas.

In the absence of publicly funded safety nets, the burden of survival was carried by neighbours, relatives, and fellow Filipinos through various mutual aid arrangements. The Catholic Church and various faith-based groups launched their own OFW-focused programmes, acknowledging the dual economic and social costs to affected families. Local microfinance institutions reported that OFWs resorted to loans to pay for basic necessities and secure start-up capital. Along with other displaced workers, repatriates were forced to start small online businesses, usually food-based, and find forms of alternative livelihood such as motorcycle delivery. The ventures that emerged were small but quickly absorbed OFWs and other affected local workers.

Conclusions: quo vadis?

Ultimately, the pandemic exposed the Philippines’ vulnerability as an unequal society kept afloat by remittances while underinvesting in human capital and community infrastructure. The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 states that the government ‘does not promote overseas employment as a means to sustain economic growth and achieve national development’. However, exporting labour will remain the reality until long-standing recommendations to shift the structure of the Philippine economy away from remittances are implemented

– an unlikely scenario with current calls from the Duterte administration to create a Department of OFWs.

Global evidence has pointed to how post-COVID economic recovery hinges on how well governments are able to address the health crisis. Based on the challenges faced by repatriated OFWs, the existing public sector response can be described as fragmented at best. At worst, it has displayed a vacuum in leadership that has resulted in poor prioritisation and haphazard execution of support programmes (Quijano, Fernandez, and Pangilinan 2020). Inconsistent messaging, coupled with harsh lockdown–release cycles and different punishments for elite rulebreakers and regular citizens, translated into dismal public health communication despite the Philippine government's sizeable investment in state broadcasting and online platforms – including so-called 'troll armies', which have instead been used to stifle dissent (Billing 2020).

Nevertheless, the pandemic forced local governments and private actors to try to creatively piece together long-overdue reforms to create and sustain local jobs as well as support families battling multiple rounds of economic displacement. Early evidence has pointed to the promise of digital and neighbourhood-level economic and food security initiatives as a survival measure, although many have been simply bidding their time until borders open again. But, even as target countries in the global North reopened, redeployment proved more difficult thanks to suspended flights and stricter, costlier requirements because domestic efforts to battle the pandemic were unsuccessful. Thus, the romanticised rhetoric of OFWs as long-suffering heroes is no longer tenable – this time, it is the old saviours that need saving.

Notes

1. Alternative terms include overseas contract workers (OCWs) and overseas Filipinos (OFs), although the latter also captures Filipinos who have migrated and have since taken foreign citizenship.
2. A Filipina nurse was the first to administer the coronavirus vaccine jab in the UK (Baker 2020; Batalova 2020), and nearly a third of nurses who died of COVID-19 in the US during the first year of the pandemic were Filipino despite comprising only 4% of the country's nursing population (Shoichet 2020).
3. The Philippines is presently the world's largest source of seafarers. Prior to the pandemic, a third of all global cruise ships were staffed by Filipinos (Maritime Industry Authority 2020).

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