



**MIGRANT WORKERS' QUARANTINE EXPERIENCES:
TOWARD POLICY FORMULATION**

**Joselyn Hernandez-Bacera, RGC
Sultan Kudarat State University**

Abstract

This paper aimed to examine the migrant workers' quarantine experiences toward policy formulation. The world is now in the midst of Covid-19 Pandemic. Domestic workers face a disproportionate vulnerability towards the virus (Camille Rae Lim, August 2020; Rana Aoun, 2020; Laura Foley and Nicola Piper, 2020) in addition to the economic burdens and risks in the onset of the pandemic. The population particularly vulnerable to its effects are migrant domestic workers in the Middle East. This study employed the Descriptive-Exploratory Research Design. The objectives were to identify the needs and describe the quarantine experiences of migrant domestic workers; explore the programs and services offered by the Local Government Units (LGUs) specifically for OFWs and their families. The study found that the most urgent needs of migrant domestic workers are social protection, mental health and psychosocial support services, empowerment, and financial security and economic stability. Aside from experiencing financial crisis and social injustices, MDWs were mostly impacted by Covid-19 in terms of their psychosocial and mental well-being. LGUs implement mandated regular programs but no specific programs and services are designed for OFWs and their families. However, there are government efforts to help promote the welfare and protect the rights of Migrant Domestic Workers.

Keywords: Migrant workers, Covid-19, Domestic workers, Quarantine, Bansamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is considered as the top source of labor migrants for many countries all over the world to date. Many Filipino families accepted temporary labor migration as a way of life. Poverty still remains the main reason for many Filipinos to leave the country and work abroad. Enduring the pain of leaving their families behind is a great sacrifice that these migrant workers were forced to make. It becomes even more painful when in the host country where Filipino migrants work they suffer injustices and exploitation, and whose vulnerability has been abused.

The Philippine Statistics Authority reported that based on the results of the 2019 Survey on Overseas Filipinos, the number of Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who worked abroad at any time during the period April to September 2019 was estimated at 2.2 million. The proportion of female OFWs (56%) was higher than male OFWs (44%). The most preferred destination of OFWs remained to be Saudi Arabia (22.4%). OFWs from Region XII (SOCCSKARGEN) comprised 5.7% and from Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) is 2.3%.

The world is now in the midst of Covid-19 Pandemic. Domestic workers face a disproportionate vulnerability towards the virus (Camille Rae Lim, August 2020; Rana Aoun, 2020; Laura Foley and Nicola Piper, 2020) in addition to the economic burdens and risks in the onset of the pandemic. The population particularly vulnerable to its effects are migrant domestic workers in the Middle East.

Life has already been hard for them even before the pandemic since they live in a slave-like condition. Hence, this study identified the needs of migrant domestic workers; presented the quarantine experiences of migrant domestic workers and gauged the extent to which the pandemic has impacted them. Moreover, it provided recommendations on how the rights and welfare of this particular population can be promoted and protected.

Review of Literature

Distinction between Migrant Worker and Domestic worker

A migrant worker is a person engaged in a remunerated activity in a country of which he or she is not a national. A domestic worker is defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO) as “a wage-earner working in a private household, under whatever method and period of remuneration, who may be employed by one or by several employers who receive no pecuniary gain from this work.” Domestic workers are usually occupied as housekeepers, nannies, cooks, drivers, gardeners, and other personal servants. Some domestic and migrant workers labor under slave-like conditions (The Feminist Sexual Ethics Project, Brandeis University).

Culture of Migration

Asis, 2020 reported that migration is one of the most important global opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. The Philippines has been supplying all kinds of skilled and low-skilled workers to the world's advanced countries since the 1970s. From then on, generation to generation of Filipinos working abroad have been beset with many forms of crises that disrupted their employment, put their life at risk, and there were some who went home untimely and involuntarily. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) see that they have no other option but to face conflicts, economic downturns, natural disasters and health scares in destination countries or regions where they work. The Philippine Government was compelled to formulate policies and action plans to protect and, if necessary, repatriate OFWs. The first effort undertaken by the Philippines (Asis, 2013) was in 1990 and 1991 with approximately 30,000 OFWs repatriated due to the Gulf War. Now with the onset of Covid – 19 (DFA News, January 04, 2021), the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) repatriated 327,511 Overseas Filipinos in 2020.

Looking back in the last 30 years, a “culture of migration” has emerged (Asis, 2006), with millions of Filipinos eager to work abroad unmindful of the danger and vulnerabilities awaiting them in destination countries. In 2002, a nationwide survey of 1200 adult respondents was conducted and the result showed that one in five Filipinos expressed a desire to migrate. The development of a culture of migration in the Philippines has been reinforced by migration's institutionalization. The government facilitates migration, regulates the operations of the recruitment agencies, and looks out for the rights of its migrant workers. More importantly, the remittances workers send home have become a pillar of the country's economy. Furthermore, many contributory factors led to the Philippines' becoming a major labor exporter in Asia and worldwide. The situation was made worse by the oil crisis in 1973. In addition, economic growth could not keep up with population growth. The country was hard pressed to provide jobs and decent wages and had severe balance of payment problems. Altogether, the oil-rich Gulf countries needed workers to realize their ambitious infrastructure projects. With supply and demand converging, the Marcos Administration recognized the opportunity for the Philippines for large-scale migration. The framework for

what became the government's overseas employment program was established with the passage of the Labor Code of the Philippines in 1974. The Philippines' venture into organized international labor migration was supposed to be temporary or short-lived. This was intended only to provide ample time for the country to recover from its economic crisis. However, there was a continuing demand for workers in the Gulf and simultaneously the opening of new labor markets in other regions, especially in East and Southeast Asia, pushed further migration. On the supply side, the contributing factors remained persistent. The lack of sustained economic development, political instability, a growing population, high unemployment levels, and low wages linger to constrain people to go abroad (Asis, 2020).

The Plight of Migrant Domestic Workers

The Kafala system

The International Labor Organization in its publications in May 2017 explains how the kafala system affects migrant workers. The kafala system in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has been used since the 1960s and 1970s as a means to control the entry of migrant workers in these countries. GCC countries include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The kafala system gives the sponsor (kafeel) from the host/destination country the power to control the migrant worker's immigration and legal residency status throughout his or her contract period (Henry Eickelberg, et. al. 2020). Under this sponsorship, the migrant worker is not allowed to enter the country, resign from a job, transfer employment, nor leave the country without first asking permission from his or her employer. In this case, the kafala system is inherently full of chances for employers to violate migrant worker's human rights. Migrant workers are placed in a position of vulnerability. There is a significant power imbalance in this type of employment relationship. Common complaints articulated by migrant workers are restrictions on free movement, confiscation of passports, delayed or non-payment of salaries, long working hours, untreated medical needs, and violence – all of which are conditions that can potentially bring migrant workers to situations of forced labor and human trafficking. Undoubtedly, the most challenging aspect of the kafala system is the passing on of responsibility by the state to the private employer to manage both a migrant worker's immigration and employment status. The residency and work permits being connected with each other, makes a migrant worker's immigration status dependent on the contractual relationship with the sponsor. A migrant worker's stay in the country can no longer be considered legal once his or her employment relationship has ended or has been terminated. The sponsor, being the holder of the permit, gets the approval to exercise extensive control over the life of a migrant worker whom the sponsor hired. This allows the employer-worker relationship much more disproportionate than is common in a normal labor market situation. Following is how it was evidently stated in the 2017 publication of the International labor Organization:

“ The International Labor Organization's independent Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) has stated in its observations with regard to the Forced Labor Convention, 1930 (No. 29) that kafala ties migrant workers to particular employers, limiting their options and freedoms. The CEACR noted that “the so-called visa ‘sponsorship system’ (or ‘kafala’ system) in certain countries in the Middle East may be conducive to the exaction of forced labor” and urged governments to “adopt legislative provisions specially tailored to the difficult circumstances faced by this category of workers and

to protect them from abusive practices” (CEACR, 2015) and to “take the necessary measures in law and practice, to ensure that migrant domestic workers are fully protected from abusive practices and conditions that amount to the exaction of forced labor” (CEACR, 2016).”

Abuses against Domestic Workers

In 2016, a report on abuses against domestic workers was written by Rothna Begum, women’s rights researcher for the Middle East and North America of Human Rights Watch. The report was based on research conducted by Faraz Sanai, a former researcher in the Middle East and North Africa Division. The report vividly illustrates how migrant workers’ human rights were violated. Recruitment agents allure domestic workers to leave their home countries with the promise of good working conditions, and many sign contracts stipulating good salaries. Unfortunately, upon reaching their destination countries, many find disappointment because they have to work for less pay than promised and under worse and inhumane conditions. Domestic workers describe their conditions as subjected to forced labor. They pronounce their employers beating them, withholding their salaries, and threatening to kill them. When they wanted to leave, their employers deceptively accuse them of crimes. They experience beating as a form of retaliation from their employers when trying to flee from abuse. They are treated as if they are properties bought for a price.

Moreover, the report said that roughly 25% of domestic workers interviewed by Human Rights Watch disclosed that their employers physically or sexually abused them. Like for instance, a Bangladeshi domestic worker said that her employer cut her hair and burned her feet. Another said that her son’s employer raped her. Majority said that their employers verbally abused them by shouting at them, and calling them insulting names like “bitch.” Many domestic workers said that their salaries were delayed, or that they were paid less than what is stipulated in the contract. Some employers did not pay their wages at all. Almost all domestic workers experienced working for long periods from 15 hours a day up to 21 hours without rest and day off, even if they were sick or injured. Common employer practices such as passport confiscation, tight restrictions on communication, and confinement in the household kept domestic workers isolated from sources of support. Some domestic workers are deprived of sufficient food and are given spoiled food. Some have no rooms to sleep instead they sleep in the kitchen or living room. Many domestic workers also experience abuses by recruitment agents. They reported that the agents treated them badly when they sought help. They were confined to the agents’ offices denied of adequate food or shelter. They were beaten or threatened, coerced to return to abusive employers or work for new families, or refused to let them return to their home countries.

Impact of Covid-19 to Migrant Workers

The International Labor Organization (ILO) conducted a study on the impacts of Covid-19 on migrant workers in ASEAN. The study showed that the challenges facing migrant workers include job loss, reduced wages, health and safety concerns, violence and harassment, lack of social security and various labor rights’ violations. Migrants have been compelled to work against their will, and have been threatened with contract termination. Domestic workers, women in particular, became more vulnerable to violence and attacks in their working environment. The ILO study also found that workers who were confined with their employers were subject to greater abuse. These domestic workers likewise faced the challenge of a higher

workload despite reduced wages. In many cases, as all the members of an employer's family were at home during lockdown, they demanded more services from their domestic helpers. Some groups believed that migrant workers were spreading the virus, so they face stigmatization, and suffer verbal and physical assaults and other forms of discrimination. A notable incident involved a widely-known Kuwaiti actress callously calling for the government to “*send the [expatriates] out and put them in the desert*” so that there would be more room in hospitals for citizens infected with the virus.

Here is a summary of the Covid -19 effects on migrant workers provided by the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF):

- *The spread of COVID-19 increased the forced and excessive load of domestic work due to the domestic confinement and social distancing. While the ILO Forced Labor Protocol of 2014 requires the prevention of forced labor, and recognizes that “certain groups of workers have a higher risk of becoming victims of forced or compulsory labor, especially migrants,” it is difficult to ensure that Domestic Workers’s are not forced to work under the lockdown. It is especially difficult as their workplace is a “private” household.*
- *Albeit possibilities of encountering the virus within the workplace, the employment contracts, if existent, do not consider sickness an occupational hazard or disease. Their contracts are terminated under COVID-19 because of the suspected or feared and non-confirmed infection; such practice should be considered imputed disability discrimination.*
- *As many shelters around the world are not taking in new arrivals out of fear of virus outbreaks, violence within households becomes unescapable. With lockdowns and curfews, live-out domestic workers cannot easily travel within the same country. Migrants, who demand repatriation, find themselves, jobless and locked within the host country. With airport closures, Migrant Domestic Workers, especially those undocumented, are unable to get through the borders.*
- *In the wake of COVID-19, many Domestic Workers are stuck with their employers and prevented from joining their families. They are denied their earnings, protective gear, and the rightful access to information about the virus, and healthcare services.*
- *Governmental officials in different locations referred to COVID-19 by the geography of its emergence, calling it the “foreign virus” or the “Chinese virus.” Expressions of xenophobia and racism towards Asian populations intensified, in direct contradiction with article 2 of the “International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.” The article states that member states should not sponsor discrimination based on race. However, the allocation of blame over geographic references has contributed to the demonization of Asian populations, provoking hate speech, physical abuse and blatant acts of violence.*
- *Due to the public health concerns brought about by the virus, Domestic Workers’ tasks have exponentially increased placing additional burdens on the carers within households. The United Nations Under-Secretary General and head of UN*

Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, expressed that the pandemic exposed “the deficiencies of public and private arrangements that currently function only if women play multiple and unpaid roles.” Live-in Domestic Workers are also at risk of gender-based violence, including intimidation, humiliation, forced labor, physical and sexual assault, amongst other forms of violence.

Government Efforts on the Protection of Migrant Workers

Returning Filipino workers, as stated by Camille Rae Lim, in her August 2020 article, displaced by the pandemic has been provided assistance by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) thru one of their programs “Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong (AKAP). This program gives OFW returnees a one-time cash assistance of US\$200 (₱10,000). Two hundred fifty thousand workers are expected to benefit from this program. It has a US\$ half a billion budget. Also, last June 2020, the government launched a program called “Back to the Province.” This program offers money and other incentives for families that agree to go back to their home provinces to reduce overcrowding in Manila. Likewise, the Philippines’ national Commission on Human Rights (CHR) urged the government to set up a justice mechanism for those Filipino migrant workers who were not properly compensated before their repatriation due to the crisis, making the following recommendations:

“Funds must be set up at the national level, and contributions to them could be ensured by the government, private contributions, business, and philanthropic foundations...”

“Funds advanced by the government could be later recouped from employers and businesses who were involved in wage-theft. This approach would ensure that migrant workers are paid their dues without delay and that their cases are resolved swiftly.”

Furthermore, there are some key areas that needed to be addressed: First, the organized return of all migrant workers including the provision of humanitarian assistance and the establishment of health and safety protocols. Second, local employment opportunities to sustain their livelihood must be provided for returning OFWs. Third, Social protection of displaced workers must be made a priority within the country. Finally, social protection must be extended to those workers who still wish to continue working abroad. The Philippines is just one example of a country that has been severely impacted by the plight of its migrant workers. The national economy will have to take big steps to regulate the surfacing effects of the pandemic on its labor force.

Call for Reforms in the Kafala System

Many human rights advocates all over the world call for reforms of, if not to abolish the kafala system. They recognized the injustices suffered by migrant workers because of the kafala system. To achieve enhanced internal labor market mobility and address abuse in the employer-migrant worker relationship, the International labor Organization proposed the following policy measures that should be considered:

1) A migrant worker's entry, residence and work permit are not tied to a specific employer Implementing this policy measure would mean that an employer no longer controls the terms and conditions of a migrant worker's immigration and employment status in the country.

2) A migrant worker is responsible for renewing his or her own visas, work and residence permits To prevent a situation whereby a worker becomes undocumented and falls into irregular migration status due to an act of negligence by the employer, under this option the migrant worker is responsible for the renewal (at reasonable or no cost) of his or her own visas.

3) A migrant worker has the possibility to resign and terminate her/his employment contract at will, without losing valid immigration status In line with recent reforms in the UAE, a migrant worker should be able to end a contract for any reason by giving reasonable notice (in line with the stipulations of the contract) and without needing to obtain written approval from the current employer. In the event of an abusive situation, a migrant worker should be able to terminate their contract immediately.

4) A migrant worker has the possibility to change employer without the consent of her/his current employer, and without losing valid immigration status A migrant worker should be able to identify new employers independently and elect whether or not to work for them. In this way, the migrant worker would no longer be inextricably linked to a single employer. This measure would enhance internal labour market mobility to the benefit of migrant workers and employers.

5) A migrant worker is able to exit the country without seeking approval from her/his employer The exit permit requirement should be abolished in its entirety in countries where it still exists, as it places serious restrictions on a migrant worker's freedom of movement. Similarly, exit bans should be eradicated whereby an employer is able to block a migrant worker from departing the country of destination upon lodging a complaint with immigration authorities.

Complementary measures proposed

a) Employer-migrant worker relations should be governed by the labor law and a standard contract

b) A national coordination body should be established, or strengthened where already in existence

c) Address particular vulnerabilities of live-in domestic workers

d) Mechanisms should be introduced to decrease number of forced irregular workers

e) Dispute settlement and compensation mechanisms should be efficient and well-functioning

f) Legislative and regulatory frameworks should adhere to ILO's Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work

METHOD

This study employed the Descriptive-Exploratory Research Design. The objectives were to identify the needs and describe the quarantine experiences of migrant domestic workers; explore the programs and services offered by the Local Government Units (LGUs) specifically for OFWs and their families. The researcher found this research design appropriate and helpful in attaining its objectives. The sampling design used for this study was Purposive Sampling Design since the focus of the study consists of migrant domestic workers who serve as the primary source of data. There were 63 respondents chosen for this study, comprising 40 survey respondents who were selected OFW returnees, Active OFWs and OFW families from

BARM; 8 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) respondents who were Returning Overseas Filipinos (ROFs); another 6 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) respondents who were OFW families; and 9 Round Table Discussion (RTD) respondents who were representatives of Local Government Units (LGUs).

The data were collected thru survey method, focus group discussion (FGD), and round table discussion (RTD). The survey was done using google forms. The FGD was conducted face to face in the office of KAAGAPAY OFW Resource and Services Center, while the RTD was online using zoom cloud meeting application. Highest research ethical standard was observed by asking informed consent of the respondents. The rationale for this study was clearly explained to the respondents in order to ensure their active participation. There were 7 FGD questions and 4 RTD questions.

The profile characteristics of the survey respondents in terms of residency, sex, civil status, tribe, educational attainment, average number of dependents, category, sources of family income, and reason for returning home were treated using the central measures of tendency such as mean, frequency and percentage distribution. While qualitative data from the survey, FGD and RTD were analyzed using narrative – descriptive analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profile Characteristics of the Respondents

Half of the survey respondents are coming from Maguindanao Province and another half from Cotabato City. Majority are female, married and belonging to the Maguindanaon tribe. Very few are college graduate. Most of them obtained a secondary and elementary education. Others reached high school and elementary level only, and the rest finished a vocational course. The respondents' average number of dependents is three. More than half of the respondents who participated in the survey are OFW returnees, a quarter of OFW families and a few active OFWs. The sources of their family income include: informal services such as "*habal-habal driver*", doing laundry for others, babysitting, farming, vending or retail of goods, cooking and selling viands and remittances from OFW. Most of them are engaged in informal services, farming and vending. Majority said that their reason for returning home is finished contract.

Survey Respondents' Quarantine Experiences

Upon returning home to the Philippines, more than half of the respondents claim that their travel expenses were all paid by their employer, some received financial assistance from Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO), while a few of them spent their own money. The respondents incurred the following travel-related expenses: transportation like bus fare, swab test, personal needs and food while on quarantine. Among the listed expenditures, the highest was on personal needs. More than half of them received medical assistance from the government especially on swab test. Aside from medical assistance, there were those who also benefited from the "*Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong*"

(AKAP) program of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Some received cash assistance from other government agencies and private individuals.

The following are accounts of survey respondents on how difficult life has been for them especially during this time of the pandemic:

- One respondent disclosed to have experienced discrimination and verbal abuses by her employer and while she was staying at the foreign agency. Another said, (*"Mabagal ang pagtugon sa aking problema dahil sa covid, sabi ng agency ko sa manila."*) the assistance was slow due to Covid-19 virus according to the recruitment agency in Manila.
- The provision of cash assistance is selective. Those who can avail are only OFWs with contracts, while those working as domestic workers in Dubai cannot avail. (*"Sa pagbigay ng cash assistance ay selective para doon sa OFW na may kontrata. Pero mga OFWs na nag DW sa Dubai ay hindi maka avail."*)
- I don't have any difficulty except that when I applied for DOLE-AKAP, it took 5 months for me to process it which is supposedly not that long because I really needed the money. I found it hard to apply because I don't know what to do, but someone helped me. (*"Wala naman po. Maliban na lang sa pag-apply sa DOLE-AKAP, kasi inabot akong ng 5 months. Na dapat hindi kasi kailangan ko talaga ko ang pera para sa aking pamilya. Nahirapan din ako sa pag-apply dahil hindi ko masyado kabisado ang mga gagawin, pero at may tumulong sa akin."*)
- I went to POLO to complain about the payment I made to my sponsor, POLO requested for 3 months hearing where I shoulder my fare, that's why I did not go anymore, instead I went to Qatar Labor Office and after 2 days I was able to get my money. We were expecting help from POLO but they were not able to help us. (*"Nagpunta ako ng POLO to complain dahil pinapabayad ako ng sponsor, the POLO requested for 3 months hearings na sariling pamasaha namin, kaya hindi na kami bumalik ulit. Kaya sa Labor ng Qatar ako nagpunta, after 2 days nakuha ko na rin ang pera. Inaasahan namin ang tulong ng POLO, pero hindi po kami natulungan."*)
- Life has been hard in OWWA because of the way they run things there and I stayed there for 3 months. (*"Mahirap sa buhay sa OWWA dahil sa pamamalakad nila, at nag stay ako doon sa loob ng 3 months."*)
- There are many OFWs who wish to go home but their employers do not allow them to go home even if the contract has already ended. The government's help is insufficient. (*"Maraming OFW ang gusto ng umuwi, pero hindi sila pinapayagan ng kanilang employer kahit tapos na ang kontrata. Kulang sa tulong o rescue mula sa gobyerno sa pagpapauwi sa kanila."*)
- I spent for my ticket going home to Cotabato City, my husband had a hard time looking for someone to loan us money. (*"Ako ang nagbili ng ticket ko pauwi ng cotabato. Nahirapan mangutang ang asawa ko."*)
- There are so many requirements and the process is too lengthy, this should not be like this because we are in a pandemic. (*"Ang dami ng proseso/requirements pinapagawa sa OFWs sa gitna ng pandemic, na dapat sana hindi ganun."*)

The respondents who are active OFWs said that they were enormously affected by the pandemic. Their working time was shortened, sometimes the pay is delayed and even less. Due to travel restrictions and lockdowns they cannot easily send remittances to their families. Some contracts were terminated due to their employer's fear of getting the virus suspecting that the

migrant domestic worker have it. One of them recounted that (*“Stay at home daming nadagdag na work at minsan late ang sahod pero naiintindihan naman dahil lahat apiktado ang mahalaga kahit late sahod wala naman bawas..”*) she needed to stay at home and as a consequence she had more workloads than usual, and sometimes the salary was delayed, but she said she understands because all of us are affected by the pandemic. “What’s important...” she said, “is that even though my salary is delayed at least there is no deduction.” Another active OFW shared that (*“Sa pag renew ng passport ay isang dagok sa mga OFW dahil napakahirap at ilang beses ka pang pupunta sa embahada...”*) what really is very hard for them is the process of renewing their passport.

Similarly, OFW families who were left behind experienced the same magnitude of difficulties. There are some members of the OFW household who stopped working because of the lockdown. Their vending/retail of goods and other small businesses closed. They lost their jobs. Those engaged on small enterprise loss their profit. These difficulties were aggravated by the delay in remittances by their OFW mother or father or relative.

Coping Strategies of the Respondents

In terms of their coping strategies, most of them said that they really have to spend on a stiff budget. They tried looking for other means of earning like doing some part-time jobs or “side-lines” such as online and direct selling. Others continued their farming and some work in construction sites. Many of them relied on relief goods (*“ayuda”*) distributed by the LGUs (*“Pinagkakasya kung anong meron, at malaking tulong ang ayuda mula sa barangay, lgu at barmm.”*) Others put their focus on faith in God (*“Magdasal at nagiingat palagi”*) by praying and hoping that God will give them the strength they need to surpass their difficulties.

LGUs’ Assistance to OFWs and their Families

There were actions taken by the LGUs in response to the impact of Covid-19 to OFWs and their families. Most of the survey respondents claim that they received some form of assistance from their LGUs and majority of them were satisfied with it. They were given transport assistance and their families received relief goods and cash assistance. Some availed the DOLE-AKAP program. A respondent said, (*“Malaking tulong ang relief goods at dole/akap hindi Lang sa akin Pati sa pamilya ko, dahil kung wala siguro Yun ay mahihirapan kami Lalo.”*) “the relief goods we received, and DOLE-AKAP program were really of great help for my family, if not life could have been harder for us.”

Unfortunately, all of the survey respondents unanimously said that they have not tried seeking help from anybody or from authorities in the LGUs regarding their problems or difficulties. They just passively waited for any form of assistance to come. Somebody reasoned out that, (*“Hindi po priority ng barangay ang pamilya ng OFW dahil buong residente ang inaasikaso”*) OFWs are not the priority of LGUs because they consider all residents under them.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services

The results show that a few of them experiences these symptoms everyday. Some never, while less than a quarter said always. More than a quarter seldom experiences these symptoms and a quarter sometimes (2 to 3x a week) do have these symptoms. It seems that the current mental health condition of the respondents have been affected by the pandemic.

Moreover, it also shows that less than half of them informed their family about these symptoms, some are neutral while others preferred to keep it to themselves. None of them received any type of psychosocial support service. They also did not go to a mental health professional to seek help. Only one went to a medical doctor for check - up due to high blood

pressure, not knowingly that the cause of her high blood pressure is emotional distress. To cope with mental distress, the respondents recounted the following strategies:

- I used my cellphone to entertain myself. (*“Nag cellphone ako para malibang”*)
- I kept on crying and asking help from my family. (*“Umiiyak na lang po ako. At humingi rin ako ng tulong sa pamilya ko.”*)
- I pray and think positive. (*“Nag pray at think positive po ako.”*)
- I stay active and maintain positive mind setting for my child. (*“Active and positive mind setting para sa aking anak.”*)
- I stay calm. (*“Nagkakalmado lang ako.”*)
- I relax and watch TV. (*“Nagre-relax at nanonood ng tv.”*)
- I have sleeping problems so I am taking ferrous sulfate because I became anemic because of lack of sleep. (*“Sa tulog nahirapan akong mag adjust Kaya nag take ako ng ferrous sulphate kasi nagka anemic ako dahil sa puyat.”*)
- I pray and comfort myself. (*“Nagdasal at self comfort na din”*)
- I calm myself. (*“Pinapakalma ko ang aking sarili.”*)
- I look for recreation and other things to do. (*“Nagliliwaliw at naghahanap ng pwedeng gawin.”*)
- I try to relax myself. (*“relax na lang sa aking sarili”*)
- I try to relax and go outside to breathe some fresh air. (*“Nag rerelax ako at lumalabas ng bahay para makalanghap ng sariwang hangin.”*)
- I entertain myself by looking for something to do. (*“Naghahanap ng gawain para malibang ang aking sarili.”*)
- I just stay positive, life goes on and I pray. (*“Just stay positive Lang tuloy Lang buhay at mgdasal”*)

LGUs' Programs and Services for OFWs and their Families

The first question is asking about the awareness of the respondents regarding the programs and services offered by LGUs to OFWs and their families before the onset of the pandemic. Unanimously, the respondents claim they knew nothing. They were all not aware whether there are existing programs and services offered by LGUs specifically for OFWs. After discussing for a while, they were convinced that there are really no programs and services designed specifically for OFWs and their families.

The first three questions of the FGD are interconnected or interrelated. The answers to questions number 2 and 3 are dependent on the answer to the first question. Since LGUs do not have programs and services designed specifically for OFWs, then there is no need to answer questions number 2 and 3 which are all about how well are these programs serving the OFWs, and how are the implementation and management of these programs by the LGUs affected by the pandemic.

OFW Returnees' Quarantine Experiences

The FGD then proceeded to question number 4 – *“Please tell us about your quarantine experiences. How are you affected by the pandemic and what did you do to help yourself cope with this crisis?”* The following are the narratives of the respondents' quarantine stories:

- This pandemic has done a huge damage to our family. Both my parents are out of job, and my family depends on me. I loaned money for our daily needs with 20% interest and promised my creditor to pay it back as soon as I go back to

work abroad, but because of the pandemic I was not able to go back, so I now have a big financial problem. I don't know how to pay my debts. I am trying to look for a sideline, a source of income because I still have 2 siblings who are studying, grade 6 and grade 7.

(*“malaking pinsala po sa aming pamilya, nandito na po ako sa pilipinas, ang laki po ng epekto sa aming pamilya, tatay ko walang trabaho, sideline lang sa habal habal, nanay ko walang trabaho, ako lang ang inaasahan, naghahanap ng mautangan para sa pang araw-araw, may interest 20%, 5k utang. Pabalik na sana ako naabutan ng pandemya hindi natuloy. Pagbalik ng abroad saka ako magbabayad, tumatakbo ang interest. Wala akong idea paano makabayad, naghahanap pa ako ng sideline. 2 kapatid ko na nag aaral grade 6 at grade 7”*)

- I was in Kuwait with a nice job. When I decided to go abroad I also worked at first as a housemaid for two years. I was fortunate because my employer is kind. After my contract I asked my female employer if I can look for another job outside so that I will have an additional income, she agreed and allowed me to have other jobs. I had a variety of jobs, until one day I got lucky to have found a company where I was able to work, but it was also not easy because of the tedious processing of transfer of visa. I spent 23 thousand pesos for my working visa. I have a nice job but with the onset of the pandemic, I lost my job. My employer cancelled my visa and terminated me. I receive no salary and was in lockdown for 6 months. Life became so hard. I resorted to cooking and selling Filipino native delicacies online just to sustain my daily needs. I was not able to send money to my family. I have to look for a place to stay. I got depressed because I can no longer support my child's education who is studying in college. I have no visa for 3 months. I run to the embassy for help. The Kuwait government announced that all those migrants without visa can go home. I borrowed money for my ticket and some people there also helped me raise enough to buy my ticket. I was able to come home thru the “swift flight” provided for returning overseas Filipinos (ROFs). When I arrived home, I asked my child to come home from Cebu and stop studying for a while. We are all unemployed. We cooked “pastil” (a rice with fine chicken adobo wrapped in banana leaf) and sell it just to have something to support our basic needs. We relied on my mother's monthly pension which is also not enough for us. (*“Nasa Kuwait ako, maganda ang trabaho ko, nung nagdecide ako mag abroad katulong din ako 2 taon, swerte ako mabait ang amo ko, so after ng kontrata ko kinausap ko un amo kong babae kung puede ako magtrabaho sa labas dahil nga konti lang un sahod ko bilang katulong, pumayag naman sya, kaya nagtrabaho ako sa labas, marami rin akong naging trabaho, kung anu-ano na lang para lang madagdagan yun sahod ko, income ko, hanggang sa nakakita ako ng isang kumpanya, nakatrabaho ako sa kumpanya, mahirap rin yun karanasan ko, kasi yun visa, mahirap magtransfer transfer ng visa at saka binabayaran yun kumbaga pa parang sa private na company, 23k sa working visa na, maganda ang trabaho ko pero nung nagpandemya, napakahirap nawalan ako ng trabaho, walang sahod, nagsarado ang kumpanya 6 months lockdown, kaya ang ginawa namin naglutu-luto ng kakanin nagbenta online para makakain, naghanap ng bahay, pag hindi ka nakabayad ng bahay palayasin ka, nadepressed ako kasi ang pamilya ko sa akin umaasa, un anak ko nasa college, nung nagbukas na un shop namin akala ko patuloy pa rin un trabaho ko pero tinerminate ako, hindi ako binigyan ng pambili ng ticket, kinansel ang visa ko, wala akong visa for 3*

months, tumakbo ako sa embassy, humingi ako ng tulong sa embassy, ngayon yun government doon nagsabi na kung sino yun walang visa pauwiin na, kaya nauwi ako, yun company hindi ako binigyan ng pambili ng ticket kaya nangutang ako doon para makauwi ako, may tumulong naman sa akin naglikom ng pambili ng ticket para makauwi ako... sumakay ako sa swift flight, tapos ngayon nandito na ako wala akong trabaho, pinauwi ko anak ko nag aaral sa Cebu, hindi sya nag aral ngayon, lahat kami walang trabaho. Yun anak ko pinapaluto-luto ko na lang ng pastil, binebenta namin, umaasa na lang kami sa pension ng nanay ko, magkano lang naman yun pension, maliit lang, yun na lang pambili ng bigas, basta makakain lang, ginagamit naming panggasto araw araw. “)

- I was in Dubai during the onset of the pandemic in March. My contract was about to end, and I originally plan to stay to apply for a job in a company. I got paranoid because of what I see and hear in the social media, I was so stressed and finally decided to go home. I was able to save a little so when I arrived in the Philippines I plan to put up a small business but because of the pandemic I was not able to do it until I lost all my savings. Now I stay at home with my parents. I just accepted the situation and prayed for strength to overcome this difficult situation. I did not dare applied for a program given by POEA BARMM because they are selective and they are asking for so many requirements and the requirements keep on changing, so I realized I am not going to qualify anyway.

(“Dumating yun pandemic nung March which is nasa Dubai pa ako, ang contract ko about to finish na, tapos ang original plan ko talaga mag stay para mag apply sa mga kumpanya, tapos nung dumating ang pandemic, medyo naparanoid ako kasi sa mga nakikita ko sa social media, tapos yun na stress na rin, napaisip, tapos that’s when I finally decided na umuwi na lang, kasi nga medyo naparanoid na rin ako, nung dumating na ako dito sa Pilipinas, siyempre medyo may ipon tayo gusto natin magnegosyo pero hindi ka naman makastart ng negosyo mo kasi nga yun yung kasagsagan ng pandemic which is everything is affected talaga, tapos ayon hanggang sa wala na naubos na yun ipon na pang business mo sana, tapos ngayon istambay pa rin, walang trabaho pero ok lang kasi nasa parents man din ako. Na stress tayo kasi hindi tayo makastart ng business. Ang ginawa ko acceptance, prayer, na sooner or later malampasan natin itong panemic tapos yun plano plano kung wala na itong pandemic ano na ang moves mo, mga plans mo. Ang POEA BARMM kasi selective din sila doon sa 20k assistance, marami silang requirements, criteria para makapasok, ako hindi na ako nagdare kasi alam ko hindi rin ako qualified kasi paiba-iba rin sila ng requirements mam eh.”)

- I was in Saudi that time. My husband’s shop closed. I was compelled to send my whole salary to my family in the Philippines. My female employer is so unkind and jealous, she was not treating me well and so I decided to come home with unfinished contract. I only worked for 18 months but my contract was supposedly 24 months. My employer gave my 3 months salary to my agency and my agency spent that for my ticket going home. I spent my own money for my travel expenses. I was asked by the agency to sign a waiver and if I refuse I won’t be able to come home so I signed the document involuntarily just to be able to come home.

(“Nasa Saudi pa ako, kaya yun pandemic na, yun naclose ang shop ng asawa ko, napilitan ako ipadala lahat ng sahod ko, hindi maganda ang amo kong

babae magtrato kasi selosa, pangit ang ugali ng amo kong babae kaya gusto ko mag uwi na lang. Unfinished contract (18 months lang ako), nagdecide ako umuwi na lang... un 3 months ko na sueldo binigay ng amo ko sa agency nung dinala ako ng amo ko doon, ginamit ng agency ko un sahod ko pambili ng ticket ko pauwi. Ako lahat ang gumastos sa pag-uwi ko. May pinapirma sila sa akin, kung hindi ako magpirma hindi po ako makauwi.”)

- I also experienced the same thing. They spent my salary for my ticket but I did not go to an agency. My female employer is a Saudian while my male employer is a Qatari. My female employer used to go home to Saudi, and everytime she travels home she brings me with her and makes me clean 3 huge houses and at the same time take care of small children. I have additional work loads when in Saudi and I am not paid for these. I applied for an employment in Qatar and not in Saudi. When I refused to go with her to Saudi, she terminated me and so I went home but I also spent my own money. Will I still get back my salary?

(“Excuse me mam, ganon din po yun nangyari sa akin mam pero hindi po nila ako dinan sa agency, dito sa sahod ko po na every month magpipirma po kasi kami na mga kasambahay, that time na yun mam kasi nagtravel un amo ko sa Saudi, yung amo ko na babae Saudiyan, yung amo ko na lalaki Qatari. Yung amo kong babae tuwing mag uwi sa Saudi sinasama ako, ayaw kong sumama kasi dalawang beses na po syang umuwi sa Saudi kasama ako, pagdating doon ang problema ko po doon pinapalinis ako ng tatlong bahay na hindi ko kaya tapos may bata pa po ako na inaalagaan, isa lang po ang sueldo ko, tatlong bahay ang nililinis ko kapag makauwi sa Saudi. So ito po yun tanong ko mam yun sahod ko na isang buwan pinambili nila ng ticket ko makukuha ko rin po ba yun? Hindi nila ako dinan sa agency. Pinauwi po nila ako, tinerminate po nila ako kasi ang inaplayan ko po Qatar tapos dinadala ako sa Saudi pinapalinis ng 3 bahay 3 palapag, overworked po ako hindi ko kaya, ayaw ko na sumama sa Saudi kaya yun tinerminate po nila ako.”)

- When the pandemic came I was in a Foreign recruitment Agency (FRA). I was locked down there. I wanted to go home but I was not allowed because of the pandemic. They were asking me to look for another job. I have no money to buy a ticket going home. They were forcing me to work, food was not sufficient, and we were made to clean the agency's office as if we were their utility workers. We receive threats from the agency if we don't obey them. I stayed in the agency for 8 months doing chores for them without pay. I wanted to go home because I do not want to work there anymore because I was traumatized when my first employer sent me to the police. The reason I was sent to the police was because one day I did not work anymore. I have no more strength to work, they were asking me to do too much work and I cannot take it anymore. Somebody texted me and took me to their house then to an agency where I stayed for 8 months and was put into forced labor. It was my husband who helped me and facilitated my coming home.

(“Nung dumating ang pandemya nasa FRA (Foreign Recruitment Agency) po ako, dumating ako ng agency March nalockdown po ako doon, gusto kong umuwi pero hindi ako nakauwi, ayaw ako pauwiin, pinapahanap nila ako ng ibang trabaho, walang ibili ng ticket pinipilit nila ako magtrabaho, kulang ang pagkain, pinapalinis kami sa agency, tinatakot para magtrabaho (8months).

Ayaw ko na magtrabho kasi natrauma ako doon sa ginawa sa akin ng unang amo ko pinapulid ako ng amo ko kasi isang araw hindi ako nagtrabaho kasi hindi ko na kaya overworked po kasi ako. Hindi ako nagtrabaho kaya pinapulid ako ng amo ko. May isang nagtext po sa akin sa police station tapos dinala ako sa bahay nila tapos dinala ako sa agency, 8 months po ako sa agency, tinatakot nila ako, pinipilit ako magtrabaho. Tinulungan ako ng asawa ko para makabili ako ng ticket pauwi.”)

- I got sick for 7 days and was not able to work. My employer did not let me work and locked me in a room. I was not allowed to go out because they said that I have Covid -19 virus. They brought me to the doctor for check – up and the doctor’s advice was for me to rest. So they put me in one room and let me stay there. They fed me by putting my food in front of my room’s door. Since I don’t like the idea of receiving a pay without doing anything, at night when they are all asleep, I sneak out to clean the house and the comfort rooms a little. They noticed this and asked me thru texts who cleans, I said I do. I have no problem with my employers, they are very kind. It is my employer’s sibling that is my problem. She is cruel and unkind. She does not want to see me resting. She does not allow me to sit down and take a short rest. She always wanted to see me working. She keeps on giving orders. I cannot take her attitude anymore. I was able to come home because of my ailing sister. My sister in Saudi got very sick and went home. Her health condition became worse and requested that I should come home because we might not be able to see each other again. She pleaded and begged from my employer to let me go home so that I can be with her. I was surprised when my employers brought me to the airport and gave me my ticket and passport and sent me home.

(“Nagkasakit po ako, 7 days hindi ako nakawork, hindi ako pinatrabaho ng amo ko, kinulong lang ako ng amo ko sa kwarto, binibigyan lang ako ng pagkain kasi sabi nila may covid daw ako, bawal ako lumabas, yun mga bata bawal ako lumapit. Pinacheck up nila ako sabi ng doctor wag daw ako patrabahuin, kinulong ako sa kwarto yun pagkain ko nilalagay lang nila sa may pintuan ng kwarto ko. Ang akin lang po kasi ayaw ko yun pinapasahod ako na wala akong ginagawa, kaya kapag tulog pa sila, maaga pa naglilinis na ako ng bahay ng CR. Nagtataka sila kung bakit malinis nay un mga CR, tinatawagan nila ako sa cellphone ko tinatanong nila ako kung bakit malinis na daw yun CR? Ang sabi ko- mam naglilinis po ako kasi kaya ko naman. Wala po akong problema sa amo ko kasi mabait naman yun mga amo ko, pero yun lang kapatid nya grabe makautos hindi ko makaya kasi mas sobra pa sya sa amo ko, parang sya ang amo ko, sobra sya hindi ka nya pinapaupo, kapag nakikita ka nya nakaupo tatawagin ka papatayuin at papatrabahuin, bawal ka mag upo, masungit sya yun kapatid nya. Ganito po mam kasi yun ate ko may sakit sya galling dito sa Saudi, umuwi sya kasi nagkasakit sya, tapos gusto ako pauwiin ng ate ko kahit 7 days lang kasi grabe na yun sakit ng ate ko baka hindi na daw kami magkita ulit, pinilit sya ng ate ko yun amo ko na pauwiin ako kahit 7 days lang. Yun time na pinilit sya ng ate ko na pauwiin na ako grabe na yun sakit ng ate ko nasa hospital na sya nag aagaw-buhay na. Hindi nila sinabi na may ticket na ako pauwi, binigay na lang nila sa akin nung nasa airport na ako, doon nila binigay yun ticket ko saka passport, tapos yun pera ko pinadala lang nila sa akin.”)

- I was in Saudi when the pandemic came. I stayed 5 months with my first employer, and then I was sold to another employer. I don’t have an agency. I

had 3 employers because my second employer again sold me to another employer. With my 3rd employer I was cleaning two houses, my employer's house and her mother's. I was also tasked to wash the cars and do male jobs. Then my 3rd employer again wants to sell me to an agency but I did not agree. I called up OWWA and asked for help. I stayed at OWWA for 3 months. Life there was hard and food was scarce. Life was even harder at home. I pity my family for this hardship that we are suffering with.

(“Nasa Saudi pa ako noon, 5 months sa original na amo tapos pinabili nya ako sa ibang amo, walang agency ako, 3 ang naging amo ko, kasi pinabili ulit ako ng second amo ko ... sa pangatlo kong amo dalawang bahay ang pinapalinis sa akin, buong bahay, bahay ng amo ko at bahay ng nanay nya, saka pinapalinis nya ako ng mga sasakyan, ang trabaho ko trabaho ng lalaki, tapos gusto ako ipabili ng pangatlo kong amo sa agency hindi ako pumayag...nagtawag ako sa OWWA humingi ng tulong... 3 months ako sa OWWA nag stay, mahirap kasi kulang sa pagkain, pag uwi ko hirap na hirap kami, naaawa ako sa pamilya ko, ang hirap ng buhay namin.”)

- There are times I don't eat in one day. They don't treat me well. They deprived me of decent food. They feed me with their left-overs. I told them how can I work if I don't eat well. I asked them to bring me back to my agency if they can't feed me well. When I came home, my child was gone....nobody told me that he committed suicide, he hanged himself. Until now I really don't know how to survive. My employer deceived me. They took the salary they gave me. While I was waiting to be sent to my agency, they meddled with my luggage and took my little savings that I kept inside a small pack of sanitary napkin and replaced it with a small notebook to make it look like the money was still intact. They also took back the things they gave me. *(“hindi ako nakakakain sa isang araw, hindi maayos ang pagkain nila, ninanakaw ko lang ang pagkain ko, tubig lang isang araw, tira tira lang pagkain ang binibigay sa akin, sabi ko paano ako makatrabaho kung kulang ang pagkain ko, tira-tira ang pinapakain nila sa akin. Sabi ko kung hindi nyo ako pakainin ibalik nyo ako sa agency. pagdating ko wala na yun anak ko, namatay na, hindi ko alam na nagbigti pala un anak ko....hindi nila sinabi sa akin na ganito pala ang nangyari sa kanya...hanggang ngayon hindi ko talaga alam kung ano ang gagawin ko sa hirap ng buhay. Tapos yun amo ko gibigay nya ang sahod ko gipulitika pa ako, hinatid nya ako sa agency tapos sabi nya sarado daw yun agency gibalik naman nya ako sa bahay tapos sabi nya magbalik na lang daw kami mamaya, tapos tinanong ko yun anak ng amo ko kung magbalik kami sa agency sabi nya bukas na lang daw kay maglakad pa sya. Sabi ko kunin ko yun gamit ko sa kotse kay wala akong magamit nandoon sa bag lahat ng gamit ko. Tapos ang sabi nya sa akin wag na kay mag alis ka na rin man bukas, tapos ang ginawa pala nila yun mga gamit ko gihalungkat nila lahat tapos yun pera ko na tinago ko sa bag na tinago ko sa hindi ko pa nagamit na napkin kinuha pala nila pinalitan nila ng maliit na notebook, kinuha nila yun pera ko pati yun mga binigay nila sa akin na mga gamit. Hindi na bale yun mga gamit pero yun pera ko sana hindi na lang.”)*

The Surfacing of OFWs' Issues and Concerns

The FGD gave the respondents an opportune time to also air out their grievances. Majority of them were able to express their emotions of fear, anxiety, anger and worry. Stories of being maltreated and other forms of injustices like forced labor, being underpaid or unpaid,

poor and inhumane living conditions and being sold to other employers show how their psychological well-being and mental health was affected. They were left on their own, no mental health and psychosocial support services were offered to them.

Moreover, a respondent told how she was illegally recruited but to her knowledge there seems to be no irregularities in the process since her parents gave their consent. She accounted that she was able to work abroad at age 15. Her recruiter took advantage of her family's vulnerability and enticed her to work abroad. She was manipulated and exploited by her recruiter. Her birth certificate was tampered. Her recruiter made it appear that she is already 23 years old, 8 years ahead of her true age. Desperate to help her family financially, she conceded to her recruiter's persuasion.

The FGD revealed that local recruitment agencies require OFW applicants to have a recruiter if not they cannot apply. This recruiter is not legally binded to the local recruitment agency because he/she functions independently, and is not an employee of the recruitment agency. When something happens to the OFW deployed by a particular local recruitment agency, the agency has no accountability to the OFW but the recruiter.

In addition, recruitment agencies do not shoulder airfare of returning overseas Filipinos (ROFs), instead they used the latter's salary to pay for the ticket going back to the Philippines. Once deployed, the OFW cannot receive her first 2 months salary because it goes to the recruiter, and another 3 months salary goes to the foreign recruitment agency. A migrant domestic worker's first 5 long months of hardship and sacrifices is unpaid, this is the cost imposed upon her/him by the recruiter as a means of repaying the financial support provided for her/him by the recruiter in facilitating her/his deployment.

LGUs Assistance to OFW Returnees

FGD question number 5 is asking about where the respondents sought help and what forms of assistance were given to them. The respondents identified the following agencies where they sought help: the Philippine embassy; Department Of Labor and Employment (DOLE) / Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA); Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA); Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO); and KAAGAPAY OFW Resource and Services Center – a non-government organization located in Cotabato City. They received the following services from the aforementioned agencies: welfare assistance, Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong (AKAP) cash assistance, transportation service, "*ayuda*" (relief goods). KAAGAPAY provides legal assistance to OFWs like salary claims.

For FGD question number 6, the respondents claim that the actions taken by LGUs to assist OFW returnees were limited to provision of transportation services, access to medical assistance such as swab tests and isolation centers. In terms of specific intervention programs specifically designed for OFWs and their families, there is none.

Profile of the Second Group of FGD Respondents

The second group of FGD respondents consist of 6 representatives of OFW Families. They are all female. Two are residents of barangay Mother Poblacion; 2 from Bagua 2; 1 from Bulalao and another 1 from R.S. Buan. The respondents' relationships to the OFW include a husband, daughter, and mother. Three OFWs are in Saudi Arabia, 1 in Dubai, 1 in Qatar and 1 in London. One of the respondents' spouse has been working in Saudi Arabia for almost 20 years now. A daughter in London has been staying there for 16 years, another spouse in Qatar for 11 years, 2 daughters in Saudi Arabia for 6 years and 1 year respectively, and a mother in Dubai for 4 years.

Interestingly, the OFW families who joined the second FGD session have the same responses as the first group of FGD respondents for question numbers 1 to 3. They all agreed that their LGUs have no specific programs and services designed for OFWs and their families.

Thus, the discussion proceeded to FGD question number 4 which is all about their quarantine experiences.

OFW Families' Quarantine Experiences

OFW families shared similar quarantine experiences where they stayed at home and were locked down. They experienced scarcity of food supply and financial problems. They cannot go out, have no means or sources of income. During the onset of the pandemic, remittances from their OFW loved ones were affected, cut and rarely sent. Some said they received remittances only every other two months. This made life even harder for them.

Realizing that relief goods from LGUs are not enough, they looked for other ways to make life easier for them. There were those who harvested bananas and sold it. Somebody disclosed that they inconspicuously go out at night to go to their relative's place and pick some vegetables then sell it to their neighbors. One of them sewed masks and sold them too. Another one engaged in selling native delicacies like "*bibinka*". She buys NFA rice from her neighbors who do not like to eat NFA rice and makes it "*kakanin*" (a Filipino native delicacy made of rice) and sells it back to her neighbors (very resourceful indeed). One recounted that she spent the remittances sent by her husband buying rice and other goods to make their food supply last for 3 months lock down. Furthermore, she bought firewoods and sold them to augment her daily income. She also sells snacks and some refreshments like "halo-halo" within their neighborhood. She was able to save her husband's previous remittances and was grateful for it because it helped suffice for their daily needs.

LGUs' Assistance to OFW Families

The respondents narrated that the only form of assistance provided by their LGUs were cash assistance and relief goods or "*ayuda*." The programs and services offered were for all the residents regardless of whether one is an OFW family, Returning Overseas Filipino (ROF) or not. However, the respondents whined that OFW families were not included in the distribution of relief goods and other supplies because they were being supported by a family member who happened to be an OFW. This was part of the former guidelines, but later they were also able to receive relief goods from their LGUs as the guidelines were modified.

The respondents also expressed that they do not seek help from LGUs instead they usually seek help from their relatives like their sisters, cousins or uncles and aunts.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study which include the OFWs' Issues and Concerns; Migrant Domestic Workers' Needs; Impact of Covid-19 to Migrant Domestic Workers from BARMM; and LGUs Issues and Concerns.

OFWs' Issues and Concerns

According to the Push and Pull Theory of Migration, there are factors that cause people to migrate. Factors that repel them to leave the country of origin and factors attract them to the country of destination. Those that repel them to get out of the country of origin are the push factors. These include the adverse economic condition in the country, lack of employment opportunities or unemployment, non-availability of enough livelihood opportunities, poverty, rapid population growth that surpasses available resources, and many other unfavorable circumstances that force them to find better living conditions and employment opportunities outside the country. Factors that magnet them to migrate to other countries are more job opportunities and better living conditions; easy availability of land for settling and agriculture, political and/or religious freedom, superior education and welfare systems, better transportation and communication facilities, better healthcare system and stress-free environment and security.

This is the case in the Philippines where many Filipinos especially in economically deprived areas leave the country for greener pasture. We saw the many struggles of Filipinos since 1970s when the culture of migration in the Philippines was just starting. The institutionalization of migration in the Philippines during the Marcos regime was seen as an instrument to uplift the country's economic condition however, this was an overestimation since the country has never rose from the economic burden that has a long time ago suffered by a majority of poor Filipinos. This supports Asis' findings in 2006. Many leave the country hoping to find good fortune somewhere else around the globe. Ironically, after having spent half of their youthful lives working for foreign employers not many Filipinos enjoyed good fortune instead they suffered the cruelty of living in a slave-like condition brought about by the kafala system. Many Filipinos fell into the trap of deception.

Illegal Recruitment and Human Trafficking

The influx of migration exacerbates the problem of illegal recruitment and human trafficking. The system of recruitment favors the proliferation of illegal recruiters. It appears after all that illegal recruiters function as fixers under the guise of legal recruiters. They are like wolves in sheeps' clothing deceiving susceptible young individuals especially girls with the promise of good life. These illegal recruiters penetrate impoverished communities and take advantage of the poor people's vulnerability. They stage a hero-like image ready to rescue victims from desperation and poverty. Bringing with them promises of glory, making young people be dazzled with wealth and abundance, recruiters succeed and earn a living at the expense of their recruits.

Moreover, the kafala system has aggravated the sufferings of migrant domestic workers. The kafala system is inherently abusive and adheres to modern slavery. A respondent was sold to another employer more than once, and she was treated like a property for sale. The kafala system gives space for employers to become abusive and so is human trafficking to continue to flourish. For as long as there are no reforms in the kafala system, human trafficking will not cease.

Lack of Programs and Services for OFWs and their Families

The findings of this study further show that there are gaps in the programs and services of LGUs. There seems to be no programs and services are designed for OFWs and their families. The needs of this group of population are less appreciated. Looking at what OFWs and their families go through, one cannot deny that somehow these people are not getting enough social protection and psychosocial support. Many have suffered injustices and abuses from their foreign employers and yet no intervention programs were created for them. Programs were limited to cash assistance. The lack of psychosocial programs and mental health and psychosocial support services for migrant workers lead to mental health problems like post traumatic disorders and depression.

Migrant Domestic Workers' Needs

Need for social protection

Migrant workers contribute important part in the country's economy and yet they are the ones deprived of social protection. This has been a perennial problem. We have seen and heard so many tragic stories about migrant domestic workers being abused physically, verbally, economically and psychologically. It is imperative to create better and stronger social protection systems for them. The Philippine government together with social partners and other stakeholders should see the importance of including migrant workers in national social protection responses, parallel with the equality of treatment and non-discrimination principles preserved in international human rights.

Need for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Services

Migrant workers suffered so much. They have been bombarded with lots of trauma, but no mental health and psychosocial support services are afforded for them. The pandemic has greatly affected them especially in terms of their mental well-being. During the early onset of the pandemic in the Philippines, majority of the respondents recounted that they have experienced moderate to severe anxiety, moderate to severe depression and other psychological effect. These traumatic experiences when left unchecked will lead to lowered self-esteem and hopelessness. The need for MHPSS services must be addressed by the LGUs.

Need for Empowerment

Being subjected to inhumane treatment and poor living conditions, migrant domestic workers suffer brokenness and develop feelings of hopelessness. As a consequence, they manifest an attitude of helplessness, unworthiness and the lack of confidence which eventually lead them to embrace temporary migration as a way of life despite its self-degrading nature. They were made to believe that they were left with no other choice but to work abroad as the only way to free themselves from poverty and hardships.

There is a need for migrant domestic workers to change their outlook in life. They need opportunities for personal, social and economic development.

Need for Financial Security and Economic Stability

The primary reason why Filipinos work abroad is poverty and the lack of employment opportunities in the Philippines. To entice returning overseas Filipinos (ROFs) to stay home for good, the need for financial security and economic stability must be addressed. Migrant domestic workers must have opportunities for decent work where they can earn enough to sustain a good life. One way to help migrant domestic workers achieve financial security and economic stability is thru a financial literacy program.

Impact of Covid – 19 to Migrant Domestic Workers from BARMM

The International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) spelled out the impact of Covid-19 to migrant domestic workers (MDWs). Similarly, MDWs from BARMM have experienced what IDWF reported:

- Due to physical distancing domestic workers were confined and an increase in excessive load of work and forced labor became inevitable. Foreign employers had the opportunity to push domestic workers to forced labor under the lockdown as the workplace is a “private” household. The respondents reported being asked to work for long hours and to do tasks more than they can carry for a day’s work.
- MDWs were left jobless as their contracts are terminated because of suspected or feared and non-confirmed infection.
- MDWs who asked to be repatriated, found themselves jobless and locked within the host country staying in Foreign Recruitment Agencies (FRAs) and embassies under unfavorable living conditions. While staying in a FRA, some of the respondents were threatened and forced to work.
- MDWs were stuck with their employers and prevented from going home, passports confiscated and they were denied of their earnings.
- Employers took advantage of MDWs to rob them of their earned wages or force them to work in unsafe conditions, often under threat of deportation.
- The Covid-19 has also greatly impacted MDWs’ psychosocial and mental well-being. The respondents claim to have been depressed and severely anxious.

CONCLUSION

The study found that the most urgent needs of migrant domestic workers are social protection, mental health and psychosocial support services, empowerment, and financial security and economic stability. Aside from experiencing financial crisis and social injustices, MDWs were mostly impacted by Covid-19 in terms of their psychosocial and mental well-being. LGUs implement mandated regular programs but no specific programs and services are designed for OFWs and their families. However, there are government efforts to help promote the welfare and protect the rights of Migrant Domestic Workers.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations of Migrant Domestic Workers:

1. Develop a livelihood program that can help build MDWs' self-reliance
2. Come up with youth development programs for OFWs' children left-behind
3. Scholarship grants and educational programs where criteria or qualification is not selective but inclusive of all
4. Establishment of OFW Help Desk for each LGU/barangay
5. Offer long-term employment programs
6. Create temporary or gap jobs for OFWs waiting to be deployed
7. Design and implement capability-building and entrepreneurship programs
8. Financial Literacy and recovery/intervention programs
9. Institutionalize Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Services for OFWs
10. Offer psychosocial development programs for OFWs

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