



THE PATHS THAT PANDEMIC-HIT WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS TAKE FOR THEIR REINTEGRATION: A POLICY-ORIENTED CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact on international migration (including labor migration) and on migrant workers. Women migrant workers particularly felt the abrupt changes of needing to return to their home country, to safely elude the SARS-CoV-2 virus, to reunite with their families, and to move on from earning incomes overseas to maintaining a livelihood at home. On the backdrop is a migrant-origin country, the Philippines, which has assisted over-600,000 repatriated and returnee overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who were displaced by the pandemic. This qualitative case study research documents the lived experiences of 11 Filipino women returnee migrant workers on their repatriation, return migration and reintegration. It was found that these women returnees trekked different reintegration paths in the Philippines, as government assistance for thousands of returnees faced both extensive outreach efficiencies and logistical challenges. This study puts forward recommendations that can help make reintegration smooth for individual returnees and more efficient for migration-related government agencies.

Keywords Repatriation, return migration, women overseas workers, COVID-19 pandemic reintegration, The Philippines.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact on international migration (including labor migration). The resulting economic recessions, community quarantines and mobility restrictions have led to business closures, massive job and income cuts and even spillages of viral transmissions (Gamlen, 2020). The situation affected migrants and migrant workers in host countries, which try to stem the tide of infections. Unfortunately, many migrant workers had to either repatriate or have decided to come home (Asis, 2020).

These global developments have tested the capacity and resilience of all states worldwide, including one of the top migrant-origin countries with a highly organized migration system: the Philippines. Suddenly, the Philippine government put forward an elaborate return migration and reintegration “system” to address the growing concerns of returning temporary migrant workers.

Returnees’ economic activities and social protection emerged as needed, and migrant reintegration suddenly became a paramount need beside the pandemic. With over-600,000 repatriated migrant workers coming home as of July 2021, these Filipino workers may have to be given local employment facilitation services, or even entrepreneurial training and credit. Note that the Philippine government has mostly shouldered these workers’ repatriation, quarantine and return to their home

communities. On top of these, government gave affected migrant workers US\$200 or PhP10,000 both in host countries and in the Philippines as cash aid (Asis, 2020; Opiniano, 2021b).

With international travel mostly grounded (except for a few countries), and with host countries perhaps having constricted demand for foreign labor at this time, many migrant workers cannot easily repeat their overseas work. For the meantime, they may have to eke out a living in their residential or birthplace communities. This begs the question if these migrant workers, particularly women, access and avail of economic and social services that can support their reintegration in some way. This research not only contributes to determining the policy measures to make migrant reintegration a priority, or the personal and familial approaches of returnees to move on with their lives. Research and theoretical analyses on return migration and migrant reintegration may also deserve a second look; the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured the return migration dynamic since all types of pre-pandemic return migration (Battistella, 2004; Dustmann & Weiss, 2007) may have altered the types of return (voluntary and forced), the reasons for returning, and the reintegration services that may have to be accorded to returning migrants.

Research Aim and Questions

This research aims to determine the paths that pandemic-hit returnee Filipino women migrant workers journeyed thus far during their repatriation and reintegration in the Philippines. Lessons from these experiences seek to inform current policy and programmatic efforts at helping returnee overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) whose jobs and incomes got affected by COVID-19, and their future, prospective migration sorties disrupted. This research sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How were the jobs, incomes and health conditions of women migrant worker returnees affected by COVID-19 prior and during their repatriation and return to the Philippines?
2. What efforts did the women migrant worker returnees do weeks or months after their return to their origin communities?
3. To what extent have women migrant worker returnees accessed the social and economic services of migration-oriented government agencies, financial institutions (banks, cooperatives, microfinance institutions), recruitment agencies, non-government organizations and other groups for their ongoing reintegration?

Literature Review

Migration management during this pandemic. The Philippines has perhaps the most sophisticated state-run bureaucracy to handle the needs of overseas migrants in all stages of the migration process, including return (International Organization for Migration, 2005). Yet for years, the Philippines' migration management system has yet to figure a workable approach to migrant reintegration. In 2018, the Philippine government formulated a national reintegration strategy to cover the economic and social needs of returnees. That strategy even produced "reintegration handbooks" so that stakeholders across the country know how to approach the needs of returning overseas Filipino workers (IOM, 2018a; 2018b).

The COVID-19 pandemic saw migrant workers' reintegration escalated as a paramount issue the Philippine government needed to address. With repatriations not abetting (more so given the current surge of new COVID-19 variants and on-and-off country and area-level lockdowns), the national government had called on relevant agencies (including government-run financial institutions) to assist in the reintegration of OFWs.

Upon returning to the country, affected OFWs became eligible for some P10,000 / US\$200 in cash assistance through the *Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong* (AKAP) program. AKAP aid is not the only source of assistance for repatriated and returnee OFWs. A dedicated office for reintegration, the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), has been deputized the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA, the mother

agency) to roll out various programs for returnees. These programs include entrepreneurial support for returning female domestic workers (*Balik 'Pinas, Balik Hanapbuhay*), and livelihood development assistance for numerous returnees (Asis, 2020). Psychosocial services for returnees were also rolled out with the help of community-based OFW family groups nationwide (Cacdac, 2021). NRCO launched an online entrepreneurial training course for aspiring returnee-entrepreneurs, and OWWA had set up an online portal (OASIS) to register repatriated workers and determine their employment needs (Asis, 2020). Returnees who applied for AKAP aid can monitor the status of their applications online.

DOLE and OWWA have also collaborated with other relevant government agencies to extend the range of government's reintegration efforts. The Departments of Trade and Industry, Agriculture and Social Welfare and Development have offered entrepreneurial training and loan packages for returnees (Opiniano, 2021a). The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) offered free online training courses for workers, including some 86,100 overseas workers and returnees, to obtain national certifications (NCs) for various skill-development courses (TESDA, 2021). Some government-run financial institutions, such as the Landbank of the Philippines, the Development Bank of the Philippines, the Overseas Filipino Bank, and the Agricultural Credit Policy Council, have rolled out loan programs for current and returning overseas workers, especially those wishing to embark on agricultural ventures (Arcalas & Opiniano, 2021). All these current efforts by the Philippine government may have overturned previous observations on the country's reintegration program: it being the

“weakest link” in the migration management system (Go, 2012). There are also concerns that government seems to struggle in handling the needs of returnees (Liao, 2020).

The paths returnees take. What begs to be asked is who returns and what reintegration paths do they take. A 2016 survey by Jhemarie Christine Bernas of the Institute for Labor Studies gives us five “types” of returning migrant workers. We first have returnees “struggling to be reintegrated,” such as household service workers (HSWs), and with low levels of preparedness to return. Another type is returnees who are “disengaged to be reintegrated.” Their preparedness levels are insufficient though they may be willing to stay home for good. We also have returnees seen to be “undecided to be reintegrated.” These “somewhat prepared” returnees like to go back abroad even if they are “temporarily engaged” in salaried work or in entrepreneurship. We also have returnees who are “engaged to be reintegrated:” they are highly prepared to stay back home for good. There is a fifth group of returnees —“undocumented workers”— whose return was not only forced but they came from harrowing situations overseas (Bernas, 2016).

These types of returning migrant workers can give us cues how returning overseas Filipino workers approach their current reintegration, and if they access services or not from the Philippine government and other stakeholders. Salient findings from non-probability survey by the International Organization for Migration (N = 8,332 respondents) enumerated some of these realities by returning migrant workers:

- a) *Return migration reasons:* About 45 percent of returnees surveyed had their contract ended and not renewed, while 24 percent were told to leave the country. About 20 percent lost their jobs and 11 percent went home because they were worried about contracting Covid-19 (IOM, 2021).
- b) *Accessing return migration and reintegration assistance.* About 46 percent of respondents did not register or did not access available government programs and interventions that can aid in their reintegration. Meanwhile, some 26 percent of respondents received reintegration assistance; the striking finding here is that males filed and received more assistance than females, owing perhaps to the number of seafarers who have returned. Unsurprisingly, three-fourths of respondents want cash assistance. That is even if these returnees have received the assistance from DOLE's AKAP program. Finally, eight of ten respondents think finding an income source is the most challenging issue for them while reintegrating in the country (IOM, 2021).

The survey results from IOM (2021) thus deserve further introspections of why returnees avail or not avail reintegration-related assistance. If the Philippines is already employing a whole-of-government approach to reintegration, then why almost half of surveyed returnees (IOM, 2021) did not register and/or avail these forms of assistance? This research project seeks to know some answers based on the lived experiences of currently-reintegrating repatriated migrants.

Analytical Framework

Knowing the lived experiences of returnees on addressing their reintegration-related needs will provide policy insights, issues and realities to not just government and stakeholder implementers of reintegration programs. These lived experiences also strike at the hearts of the thousands of returnee OFWs who reintegrate beside the pandemic.

As an analytical lens, the researchers utilized a conceptual framework on accommodating the different return migration situations. This framework, by Scalabrinian priest Dr. Graziano Battistella, CS (2004; also in Battistella, 2018), takes note of returnees' time to return and the decision to return. Time pertains here to either end or before the end of returnee's migration sorties, while decision here can be voluntary or involuntary (Battistella, 2018). On this score, four situations happen:

- *Return of achievement.* On her/his volition at the end of migration (or overseas work contract), the migrant here has achieved the purpose/s for which s/he went abroad.
- *Return of completion.* Upon the completion of a contract, the migrant returns to the home country voluntarily because of prospects to return abroad for another migrant work sortie or to prolong the overseas stay somewhat.
- *Return of setback.* Before ending her/his migration sortie, the migrant voluntarily returns home due to numerous reasons: personal, familial, work

related (e.g. episodes of worker abuse) or migration-related (e.g. overseas trafficking). Return migration here sees the migrant escape the setback/s from her/his migration experience.

- *Return of crisis (forced return)*: Involuntary return migration here is triggered by natural or human causes (e.g. natural disaster, civil strife, unstable political conditions in the host country), and the migrant’s security mattered more than prolonging the stay abroad. Irregular migrants’ situations and conditions can be covered by this type of return.

These “types” of returns by Battistella (2018; 2004) match in many ways to the “types of returnees” by Bernas (2016). That being said, there may be tailored responses and possibly reintegration policies for certain types of returnees. Battistella illustrates [see *Figure 1*] how this assistance and policy configuration may look like (in IOM and Scalabrini Migration Center, 2013). This framework also allows us to see which form of government assistance fits returnees while a public health pandemic rages on.

RETURN Decision	VOLUNTARY	INVOLUNTARY	
Time			
END OF CONTRACT	Achievement	Completion	
	Entrepreneurship	Economic Reintegration	DEVELOPMENT
BEFORE END OF CONTRACT	Setback	Crisis	
	Reintegration Redeployment	Emergency Initiatives	ASSISTANCE
			Type
	INDIRECT	DIRECT	Action
			POLICIES

Figure 1 **Types of return migrations and their policies – An analytical framework**
(in Battistella 2004: p. 213; in IOM and SMC, 2013: p. 135).

Research Design and Methods

Design. This qualitative research project employed a *case study design* to determine the lived experiences of returnee, land-based women migrant workers in their repatriation and reintegration, and in availing / not availing reintegration assistance.

Study subjects. The researchers interviewed 11 returnee women migrant workers through online conferencing, using Zoom. Majority of target research participants have availed (N= 9) of any form of assistance (e.g., loans, donations, business training, etc.) from either government, private sector, NGO or financial stakeholders. The remaining two respondents did not receive any form of reintegration assistance.

Respondents were recruited through referral sampling, starting with the NGO and government networks of the Development Action for Women Network (DAWN), and from personal referrals. Them being directly affected by the pandemic and them either availing any reintegration assistance or not were not the only eligibility criteria. These land-based returnees were interviewed regardless of their occupations abroad and their destination countries. In summary, here are the demographic, migration and repatriation-related profiles of respondents [see *Table 1*]. Mean age is around 37 years old; respondents are mostly Roman Catholic, single, reside in Metro Manila (the Philippines' capital region), and had worked overseas from one to two years.

Table 1: Profile of research participants

Age	
- Mean age	36.82 years
Religion	
- Roman Catholic	9
- Baptist	1
- Evangelical Christian	1
Civil status	
- Single	8
- Married	2
- Widow	1
Country of work	
- Saudi Arabia	4
- Hong Kong SAR	3
- United Arab Emirates	2
- Qatar	1
- Kuwait	1
Region of residence in the Philippines	
- Metro Manila	8
- Calabarzon region	1
- Cagayan Valley region	1
- Central Visayas region	1
Repatriation dates	
- Year 2020	7
- Year 2021	4
Quarantine duration (including hospitalization, for some cases)	
- 0 to 3 days	5
- 4 to 8 days	4
- 9 to 14 days	1
- Over-14 days	1
Duration of work in host country prior to repatriation	
- Less than a year	2
- 1 to 2 years	6
- 3 to 5 years	1
- 6 to 9 years	1
- 10 years and above	1
Type of repatriation	
- Voluntary	7
- Forced	4
Reasons for deciding to repatriate (Multiple answers)	
- Lost job	6
- Got sick	1
- Feared for my life	2
- I want to see my family	1
- Other reasons (employers migrated)	2
- Other reasons (employers feared for their safety)	1

Source: Robotfoto (respondents' profile sheets)

About ten of 11 respondents were domestic workers, with the remaining respondent being a former flight attendant and personal assistant. Four of these women had worked in Saudi Arabia, while three of them had worked in Hong Kong SAR (these two countries being the leading destinations by Filipinos for domestic work). In terms of their repatriation: a) Some two-thirds of respondents were repatriated in the year 2020; b) A third of respondents underwent mandatory quarantine within four-to-eight days; c) Seven respondents voluntarily returned and repatriated; and d) Just above half of respondents got repatriated because they had lost their jobs.

With almost all returnees being domestic workers, this paper presents the limitation that findings here largely reflect the domestic work experience. Without being asked by interviewers, research participants even bared that they endured work-related abuses even during this pandemic. These forms of abuse range from extended working hours, no free meals, scolding by employers (some of which were observed to be “moody”), threats to their immigration status, and even some physical advances by locals.

Instruments. The researchers implemented a two-part questionnaire. The first part, a respondent’s profile sheet (or the *robotfoto*, a sketch of the respondent’s profile), captured the basic demographic and return migration profiles of research participants [refer to Table 1]. The second part was the actual interview guide (or the *aide memoire*), containing items that answered the research questions earlier posed. These are: 1) The work, income and health conditions of women migrant returnees that were affected by the pandemic; 2) Their preparedness to return or to be repatriated to the Philippines

because of the pandemic; 3) Reintegration-related efforts by returnee women migrant returnees weeks or months after their arrival; and 4) (Not) Availing / accessing reintegration-related assistance from government agencies, financial institutions (banks, cooperatives, microfinance institutions), recruitment agencies, NGOs and other groups.

Data collection procedures. Given mobility restrictions and real threats posed by the Delta variant (at the time this research was conducted), researchers had conducted online key informant interviews via Zoom. Before data collection began, researchers gave interviewees a participant information sheet and an informed consent form. The interviews were conducted in a blend of English and Filipino.

Ethical considerations. This research received ethics clearance from the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC; approval number CE-21-25). All Zoom interview files (video and audio), accomplished informed consent forms, written transcripts of interviews, and confidentiality agreements with external transcribers were stored and encrypted on Figshare (a cloud-based storage site for researchers). That way, the confidentiality of interviews with respondents was maintained. While no adverse emotions came out during the interviews, the interviews offered the services of a social worker (coming from DAWN) should interviewees bellow out adverse emotional reactions.

Interviewees also received a humble token (US\$40 or PhP2,000). The amount considered not just the time a respondent had spent for the interview but recognizing their participation as equitable and proportionate to the burdens of women returnees' participation (Australia National Health and Medical Research Council, 2019). Given also the prevailing financial situation of Filipinos beside the pandemic, the humble token became a form of help for research participants.

External people transcribed the interviews. These transcribers were made to sign non-disclosure / confidentiality agreements; they deleted their written transcripts and audio recordings of interviews after submitting these to researchers.

Data analysis. The researchers employed thematic analysis to make sense of the interview answers given. Thematic analysis saw researchers familiarize themselves with the interviews and stories; generate initial codes; and search, refine, define and finally label themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the process of doing thematic analysis, some tools were employed. A *within, cross-case analysis table* was used to determine the similarities and differences of interviewees' return migration and reintegration experiences. The researchers also employed a *repertory grid instrument* to understand the worldview of an individual. Repertory grids help make the patterns of thinking that individuals do apparent (Blagden et al., 2014), covering how people provide their own meanings and understandings to their experiences. Coding and thematizing were done manually, and researchers

employed *dendrogramming* (i.e., a tree diagram-like method of grouping similar, related and different answers from respondents when making codes, sub-themes and themes).

Preliminary findings were also shared in a policy webinar, organized by DAWN, last December 1, 2021. Comments from the said webinar (as a form of a *critical friend* data validation technique) were accounted in this paper.

Findings

The stories of returnee, land-based women OFWs are to be presented here in three “phases:” first, prior to being repatriated; second, during the quarantine and early reintegration periods; and third, months after reintegrating and seeking external help for their economic situations.

Pre-repatriation situations. Research participants experienced varied work conditions prior to their voluntary and forced repatriation and return migration [see *Table 2*]. Some were lucky to have received salaries until their final contracts ceased, while others experienced salary cuts or delayed salaries. Some respondents were also asked by their employers if they wish to return to the Philippines because the latter went elsewhere as a precautionary measure. Others volunteered the information that they had experienced workplace-related issues such as extended working hours, physical advances, verbal abuse, and some legal threats.

Table 2: Pre-return migration conditions of interviewees

Respondent	Country worker came from	Migration-related circumstances prior to repatriation
M1	Saudi Arabia	Employer paid for salary until last day; Voluntarily returned home
M2	Saudi Arabia	Worked for an employer with two mansions; experienced workplace-related issues; Voluntarily repatriated
M3	Saudi Arabia	Worked for employers who are teachers; Voluntarily returned home to see her family; Finished after 27 months but extended for some 1.5 months prior to repatriation
M4	Qatar	Previously in Saudi Arabia for six years; Employer ended contract because son came from Thailand, exercising precaution
M5	Hong Kong	Had cancer, underwent medical consultations there; due to consultations, she got 80 percent of salary prior to coming home
M6	Hong Kong	After a year in Hong Kong, employer asked respondent if she wants to return home as employer set to return to China
M7	Hong Kong	Salary 'not affected' during pandemic; Filipino-born employers (now with new citizenships) returned to Canada
M8	United Arab Emirates	After previously being placed in a deportation prison, worked in UAE until contract ended
M9	Kuwait	Experienced delayed salaries since employers' incomes got hit
M10	Saudi Arabia	Only stayed for a week with employer (grandmother also died during overseas stint) and two months abroad; stayed in employment agency's offices but experienced workplace-related issues
M11	United Arab Emirates	Was under husband's visa who is a pilot; previously a flight attendant and personal assistant; was pregnant during return

At least two-thirds of respondents were able to bring home some of their personal savings during their return journey. Some two respondents also got their final salaries while two others were given pocket money or allowance by their employers. These amounts brought home mattered since their return to the Philippines meant a sudden loss of income and, more importantly, a major transition to try and continue earning incomes back home beyond remittances. At least nine of 11 interviews said to have remitted at least P10,000 monthly [see *Table 3*].

Table 3: Money brought home during the return journey

Respondent	Savings / brought home?	Final salary?	Other forms of financial assistance received from abroad?	Remittances sent to the Philippines
M1	-	-	-	P20,000 / monthly
M2	P40,000	-	-	P20,000 / every other month
M3	P50,000	-	SR 700 pocket money	P30,000 / every other month
M4	-	One month (no amount disclosed)	SR 200 allowance	P10,000 / month
M5	No amount disclosed	-	-	P10,000 / month
M6	P30,000	-	-	Did not mention
M7		Two months (no amount disclosed)	-	P10,000 / month
M8	P30,000	-	-	P15,000 / month
M9	No amount disclosed	-	-	P10,000 / month
M10	-	-	-	Wasn't able to remit; worked only for a week with employer
M11	"Not a whole lot"	-	-	Occasional remittance of P10,000 during celebrations

Not surprisingly, almost all participants bared to their loved ones of their return journey, and the financial implications of returning home in the coming while the pandemic continues. Around two respondents claimed to have “surprised” their loved ones and did not tell them immediately that they will return to, or they have arrived in, the Philippines.

With these stories emerging, the respondents felt the COVID-19 pandemic had **diminishes the gains** received from overseas work. These women OFWs immediately felt the impact of the pandemic. Physically, they stayed inside their residences and work stations. The domestic workers interviewed did their usual work and only took a day’s rest as part of their normal routines overseas. These routines prevailed until they were

either asked by employers to return home (and their contracts ended), and until the women migrant workers felt the mental stresses of being away from the families vis-à-vis continued global threats of viral infection.

Two sets of themes emerged from interview answers surrounding their pre-repatriation conditions. One theme is that respondents felt their **repatriation came abruptly**. Some of them were left unaware of SARS-CoV-2 lurking around because before their repatriation, things like salary and rest days remained relatively the same [example: respondents M2, M3 and M4] and some of their employers did not mention the pandemic. However, there were already mobility restrictions outside, like no going out in groups as well as group gatherings. Some of these interviewees and their employers were still allowed to go out to stock up essential needs, to send remittances, and to avail their days off [respondents M5, M7 and M4].

Respondents only fully grasped the pandemic's serious threat and effect upon the announcement of their sudden repatriation. At first, they were clueless that there was a pandemic; it all came as a surprise when their employers informed them that they were being sent home due to COVID-19. A respondent from Saudi Arabia verbalized:

"We don't have any idea that there's a pandemic because our employer only informed us that there's a virus, but we were not aware that it's COVID-19 until they told us 'pack your things, go back to the Philippines.'" [respondent M2]

The other theme that emerged from the interviews was **total disruption**. Life may have stayed the same during the initial stage of the pandemic, but days before their

repatriation, that was when most of the women OFWs felt the rapid changes virus. Some of them felt rattled to fix everything before their departure, while some even borrowed money from their friends and relatives for pocket money. Respondents from Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia narrated some of the disruptions they faced:

"I'm not used to borrowing money, but I asked help from my siblings and friends because my budget was really tight." [respondent M6]

"It was a rush for us because we had to process everything on our own, and we had to cancel a lot of things. We did a lot of errands that was impossible to finish, but we did most of the important ones, it was very difficult." [respondent M10]

Return and reintegration beside a running pandemic. All respondents have varying experiences when they were placed on quarantine. As mentioned in Table 1, nearly half of respondents quarantined themselves within zero to three days (including one who was immediately hospitalized given her immunocompromising condition: cancer). Seven respondents claimed to have volunteered themselves to be repatriated. As to the reasons for deciding to return and/or be repatriated, six said they lost their employment while two respondents feared for their lives [*refer to Table 1*].

Given the arrangements made by the Philippine government, returnee OFWs displaced by the pandemic became eligible for the P10,000 cash aid from the AKAP program. And since ten of 11 returnees did domestic work, these female returnees were also eligible for a P20,000 entrepreneurial grant from OWWA's Balik 'Pinas, Balik Hanapbuhay (BPBH) program. A respondent (M3) even refers to the BPBH aid as "*pangkabuhayan*" (livelihood).

Table 4 shows how many of interviewed returnees availed which assistance, and what they did with the cash aid received. About nine of 11 returnees engaged in some entrepreneurial venture, with the aid received becoming helpful to their start-up or prevailing enterprises. Around four returnees said they ran micro-businesses (e.g., *sari-sari* stores) but these entrepreneurial activities ceased because of limited customers. Three returnees claimed to engage in some online selling activities, two of whom doing such given the physical absence of customers. Three interviewees had also been running long-running ventures even while they were working abroad: a motor repair shop (respondent M2), barbeque grilling (respondent M6), and a retail stall in a leading public market in Metro Manila (M10).

Table 4: Financial assistance received upon return

Respondent	DOLE- AKAP (P10,000)	Balik Pinas, Balik Hanapbuhay* (P20,000)	How respondents used these forms of assistance upon their receipt?
M1	✓	-	Mini sari-sari store
M2	✓	✓	Added capital for motor repair shop; buying-and-selling of clothes
M3	✓	-	Did not elaborate details
M4	-	✓	Online selling; paid bills
M5	-	✓	Online selling of cooked meals
M6	✓	-	Added capital for barbeque business; some online selling of beauty products
M7	✓	-	Buying and selling of gadgets
M8	✓	-	Briefly-run cooking venture
M9	-	-	
M10	✓	on appeal	Sells clothes in a public market
M11	cannot remember if they got aid		Not applicable

* This program targets returning domestic workers

As the months progressed, respondents felt the financial challenges of thriving in this running pandemic. Since they were unprepared for their homecoming, the feeling of facing uncertainty and a vague tomorrow surfaced. Having an ***uncertain future*** emerged as the second major theme from the interviews. Such uncertainty stems from two sub-themes —*financial instability* and *anxious living*— which reveal the issues and thoughts that migrant workers started to face due to their repatriation.

Financial instability focused on the current financial status of returnees. Most of them expressed that they do not have savings on hand, just their last one to two months' worth of salary, because everything was remitted to their families [for example, respondents M2 and M4]. Meanwhile, some were able to save “small amounts” from their salary (*refer to Table 3*) but these amounts were not enough to sustain their needs back home; their salary overseas was what kept their family afloat to cover all basic needs [respondents M3, M1, M6 and M9]. One of the respondents (M8) even verbalized that the only money she brought home was her exact amount when she left the Philippines:

“When I left, I was bringing PhP2,000 with me, that’s the same amount of money I have when I went home.” [respondent M8].

Note also that returnees who dabbled into micro-sized businesses ran these ventures beside on-and-off lockdowns and mobility restrictions in their immediate communities. Some three respondents tried to find jobs, including some cleaning, dishwashing and waitress duties, but these jobs did not last. A few others have been hunting jobs but to no avail (including those who felt their age places them at a disadvantage over younger workers [respondent M1]).

Anxious living came out as a second sub-theme. Just the loss of some returnees' employment provided a glimpse of what is an "*anxious moment*" for some returnees (respondent M10). The pandemic and their return made respondents feel that no matter how much they wanted to keep working overseas, they were faced with no choice and no plans, making the future a complete blur. Two respondents, from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates respectively, verbalized:

"It was an anxious moment for us because it was not a good time in every way. (The situation) was very uncertain so we just trusted everything to God...We just tried to keep the hope and faith." [respondent M10]

"I didn't have any choice; I can't do anything about it even though I still want to continue working. I had no choice but to go home." [respondent M11]

Viral infection also became a source of anxiety. A respondent admitted that her immediate family got infected with SARS-CoV-2, though this was long after the return journey from abroad. Only two mentioned that they got inoculated with some COVID-19 vaccines.

The worries of some respondents even prompted them to seek applications for overseas jobs (whether in the country where they came from, or to another country). At the time of the interview, a respondent was able to fly for Singapore. Others, however, cannot return given the travel restrictions of destination countries.

Respondents then reflected on *life's priorities* given their repatriation. Returnees here realized that savings are essential. More than money however, family, health, and safety

emerged as the major priorities that should be treated with greater importance. As some respondents verbalized:

“It’s hard to be away to my family. It’s okay not to earn a lot as long as you’re together... I’m just thankful that I got home alive, sane and not disabled.” [respondent M1]

“We need to prioritize our needs more than wants especially now that I have two children.” [respondent M4]

“When I told my husband that I’m coming home, he told me to just to stay in the Philippines instead of suffering overseas and not being with my child.” [respondent M6]

“My family talked about my situation and they told me to just go home so that they can take care of me...We just think of how to save my life.” [respondent M3]

Seeking assistance for their economic needs. All respondents were eligible for the P10,000 / US\$200 AKAP cash assistance from the DOLE, and the domestic workers for the P20,000 BPBH entrepreneurial start-up grant. Interestingly, in the repatriation and return journey, no interviewee mentioned that a government employee (e.g., embassy or consulate staff, receiving government personnel in international airports) has informed them about AKAP —neither through oral means or through some communication materials such as flyers.

Table 5 lists down respondents’ experiences in availing such cash aid through AKAP of DOLE, through the BPBH program of OWWA, or both. Five of them went to the regional offices of OWWA and submitted the application forms, either on their volition or through the prodding of friends. One first learned of the AKAP via Facebook and then submitted requirements to the OWWA regional office.

Table 5: Financial assistance received upon return

Respondent	How they came across the assistance from DOLE and OWWA?
M1	Went to OWWA regional office and filled up application forms
M2	Fellow repatriated OFW told respondent; got assisted by OWWA personnel
M3	Helped by a friend who knows someone from DOLE who can process forms
M4	Learned via Facebook; referred to OWWA national and regional offices
M5	Went to OWWA regional and submitted requirements
M6	Encouraged by a friend to submit application to OWWA; no feedback yet
M7	Learned from fellow Filipinos in Hong Kong; thought AKAP and BPBH are one and the same
M8	Sought a contact in Malacañang Palace to be referred to OWWA; no word yet from OWWA
M9	Told to respondent; Learned that a cousin in Kuwait received aid from DOLE
M10	Watched video on YouTube
M11	Did not know

A respondent, interestingly, even had to call the hotline of Malacañang Palace (Office of the President) so that her case may be referred to OWWA. She had filed the AKAP application, but there is no word yet from OWWA. Narrates the respondent:

“My query was quickly processed because I approached Malacañang; I asked a (referral) letter from them so that my application gets quickly done. If your savings dries up... you need that (AKAP) too. I got the AKAP in June... I do not know anybody in Malacañang. I was told by my father that you need anything or help, try out Malacañang; he had a problem before. Isn't it that if you approach someone at Malacañang, you need to know someone from the church. Malacañang will give you a letter... it will write, for example, OWWA. That's why my application was processed quickly.” [respondent M8]

For majority of respondents, however, getting the financial aid from either from DOLE's AKAP or OWWA's BPBH program took much time. The length of time took months and required going to the nearest OWWA offices or (for one respondent) filing the application online. One respondent, interestingly, expressed satisfaction at the assistance of OWWA personnel in processing her AKAP application.

What can be deciphered from the efforts of returnees to seek help? First is a **lack of awareness and knowledge** of these forms of assistance from government. Returnees interviewed were only aware of very few agencies to ask for support. OWWA and its mother agency the DOLE are the only agencies returnees knew or that their fellow overseas workers may have heard (respondent M3). Interviewees were not aware of any other agencies in which to seek help.

Second, some interviewees think the roll out of assistance programs by DOLE and OWWA reveal the provision of **unequal opportunities**. Some of the respondents also verbalized they did not receive aid from OWWA because of a lack of feedback and return calls regarding their application [e.g., respondents M4 and M11]. Some also tried to reach out to their local government units for financial assistance during the lockdown. However, they were informed that they are not eligible for the government's Special Amelioration Program (SAP) since they are categorized as OFWs (respondent M7) or the spouse has a job (respondent M6). Below are verbalizations from some respondents:

"I applied at OWWA because my friend told me about the livelihood assistance, I submitted my complete requirements, and I was waiting but no feedback from them." [respondent M6]

"I did not get assistance from OWWA. When I got here, they got my name telling me that there will be livelihood assistance but until now, I didn't receive any calls." [respondent M4]

"I just hope they (DOLE, OWWA) will be fair. Here in Cabanatuan City [Nueva Ecija], I saw online that there are those who received business capital and food carts. I'm also an OFW who's in need, I was hoping to get assistance after they got my name upon arrival but until now, I didn't receive anything." [respondent M4]

Researchers asked respondents if they sought assistance from other stakeholders, like local government units, non-government organizations and financial institutions (banks, microfinance institutions, cooperatives). All respondents did not access help through financial institutions due to lack of knowledge and capacity for bank requirements and collaterals (respondents M10 and M4). Their verbalizations below reveal their reasons for not trying out these financial institutions, such as limited assets, risk aversion, nil or limited financial capacity, and aversions with their documentary requirements:

"I only asked financial help from OWWA and DOLE. Sometimes I hear online seminars, but I'm afraid that they might be a scam." [respondent M2]

"I'm afraid to try any loans with banks." [respondent M4]

"I did not try applying for bank loans because they have a lot of requirements." [respondent M7]

"I did not access loan from those institutions because I'm afraid and I don't have the capacity." [respondent M9]

"I don't have any collaterals to show. I don't have investments like house and lot." [respondent M2]

"No, I have no idea about it, the requirements that they ask." [respondent M10]

It did not come as a surprise then that some interviewees sought family support. Some extended family members were sought for help but they were also affected by the pandemic. A respondent said a sibling still works overseas and can still send remittances to support their everyday living:

"My sister who's still in Saudi is the one supporting us because that's what we talked about. She also told me go home for now and rest." [respondent M7]

Respondents were asked what lessons the pandemic gave them. Almost all respondents realized the value of living by their means, and of saving incomes, given how the pandemic's economic impacts continue to pull downward people's opportunities to earn incomes. Some of them, if given the chance to work abroad again, vowed to save from their overseas earnings (respondents M3 and M9). Lessons also emerged such as setting aside wants (like what some of them admit doing when they were abroad) and prioritizing needs (respondents M4 and M7). Of course, the usual family-related concerns beside international migration surfaced especially since some women migrant workers are married and are single parents, with them weighing the costs of being absent while children grow up —and while they at home are also threatened by viral infection.

Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative case study research sought to determine how repatriated and reintegrating women overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) confronted the running COVID-19 pandemic and what paths they took while eking out a living back home. Eleven returnees revealed that the sudden repatriations and return migrations induced by the pandemic *diminished the gains* from their migration; *brought forth uncertain futures* on how they play themselves out while reintegrating (especially given the sudden drop of their financial incomes); and yielded reasons for their availing and non-availing of aid from government-run programs for returnees (lack or limited awareness of possible assistance, as well as unequal opportunities to access such aid).

For obvious reasons, the COVID-19 pandemic caught women migrant workers unprepared. These impacts of the pandemic provided total disruptions to their migration sorties and their finances, and left them with uncertain futures and pondered realizations and regrets (for example, on what they should have done instead with their overseas earnings). In terms of the gender dimensions of their migration and return, the tales from domestic worker respondents revealed the usual workplace-related issues that got tied to their gender: of working overextended hours given the nature of domestic work; of experiencing varied forms of maltreatment from employers and employment agencies in the host country (including physical advances), and for married and single mothers to be worried about the welfare of their young children back home. For women who met their children once again, some returnees went back to dabbling breadwinner / income earning *and* child-rearing duties at home.

Unprepared. This COVID-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-lifetime event that placed these women migrant workers (regardless of occupation) unprepared. All these returnees, perhaps the same with the hundreds of thousands of repatriated OFWs, *suddenly became distressed returnees* because viral transmission (especially happening during travels) put these returnees in a vulnerable situation. While the typology of Bernas (2016) and the framework of Battistella (2004; 2018) were helpful, these empirical and theoretical constructs were contextualized to isolated natural and man-made occurrences. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon that affected *both* all origin and receiving countries of migrants. That being said, repatriated and returnee OFWs interviewed came home either because of setbacks from the migration

experience or due to crises (Battistella, 2018). Apparently, these modes of return overlapped each other given the pandemic, thus forcing the Philippine government to simultaneously provide varied forms of assistance like reintegration and emergency initiatives (Battistella, 2018) as short-term measures. These measures are considered short-term because not only returnees' economic needs are to be prioritized.

Enterprises that some of these returnees ran got affected by limited demand from prospective customers, and income earning through entrepreneurship is not a sure thing at the moment.

In terms of return migration preparedness, all of them were caught unprepared to go home. Interviewees admittedly struggled in their return and engaged and disengaged themselves in coming home and reintegrating (Bernas, 2016). Such is why regrets and realizations from these respondents surfaced. On the overall, the COVID-19 pandemic provided the realization that return migration frameworks (e.g., Battistella 2004; Dustmann & Weiss, 2007) warrant a re-assessment in terms of theoretical conceptualization and empirical testing.

Services for returnees overlooked? The verbalizations by the 11 returnee-interviewees also affirmed some of the results of the 8,332-respondent survey of the International Organization for Migration (2021). Cessation and non-renewal of work contracts became leading drivers of respondents' return journeys.

More importantly though, the current paper provided reasons why they availed or not availed of financial aid from government-run aid programs (which IOM's survey did not provide, except for saying that 46 percent did not register or access these cash aid measures). The tales of respondents show that the dissemination of these cash aid programs *starting from the repatriation or mercy flight* may have been overlooked. The situation thus puts returnees in a situation that returnee-interviewees are left to find out for themselves about the AKAP program of DOLE and, later on, the P20,000 assistance from the Balik 'Pinas, Balik Hanapbuhay program of OWWA. We can infer that diplomatic personnel abroad, and civil servant frontliners in the international airports and the designated quarantine centers, may be focused on ensuring the safe return of repatriated migrant workers. They may have inadvertently overlooked at even providing flyers, mobile and social media messages about what returnees can expect in cash aid when they return home.

Government efficiency? Of course, government agencies have promoted their aid programs through various online and offline means prior to and during the pandemic (the latter covering AKAP). Government personnel may think OFWs are aware of these initiatives and possible forms of support.

Delays in the transmittal of expected cash aid may be expected, owing to the logistical difficulties of distributing AKAP funds in both the Philippines and in overseas countries where displaced OFWs remain. Program implementers also took note of the availability of public funds. Funds for the AKAP program were courtesy of Republic Act 11429

(*Bayanihan to Heal as One Act 1*, for the period March 25-June 24, 2020), and Republic Act 11494 (*Bayanihan to Heal as One Act 2*, for the period September 15, 2020-June 30, 2021) (Government of the Philippines, 2020a; 2020b). Note also that these two laws also guaranteed the quarantine of returning OFWs in various hotel and tourist facilities, funded also by Bayanihan 1 and 2. The enormity of the number of returnees and repatriated OFWs have put government frontliners and program implementers in a bind: *How can government ensure an efficient, responsive cash aid system for hundreds of thousands of affected migrant workers while these frontliners try to assure a virus-free return migration and quarantine?* Nevertheless, tales from these 11 returnee-interviewees (even if they have provided self-reported data) provide feedback as to how the migration-related government agencies provide pandemic-related quarantine and financial assistance.

Strikingly, while some returnees admitted to confronting workplace- and wellbeing-related issues prior their repatriation, none of them mentioned they were given mental health and psychosocial services (MHPSS). While the interviews did not surface any adverse emotional dispositions by respondents, these do not mean that MHPSS interventions do not matter in this massive return migration situation. The way some of these returnees narrated their tales of vulnerabilities may attest to their individual resilience (Garabiles et. al, 2017) to confront the work, welfare and family-related concerns as transnational migrant workers.

Changes in returnees' overall well-being. The returnees suddenly became entrepreneurs in-need. That is because a tight homeland job market remains less able to provide more opportunities for them to seek employment. This is while the differing demographic and health conditions of returnees have made them dabble into entrepreneurship. The pandemic suddenly made majority of interviewees-returnees overnight entrepreneurs —at a time when both supply (of goods and services) and demand (from customers) were both tight and hard. Even with received financial aid, returnees like the 11 interviewed will thus rely on their own (and their families') efforts to thrive beside the pandemic.

Their financial knowledge and behaviors about handling money then became important, with the pandemic providing them hard realities and lessons. While this research did not delve much on the financial behaviors of interviewees, some of their answers reveal a sense of risk aversion in simply dealing with financial institutions. Ten of 11 respondents being domestic workers may have contributed to such aversion to seek financial services such as credit.

The varied 'paths' on OFWs' return, and the role of the state. The tales from the 11 returnees show that their unprepared repatriation and return migration have led them to varied reintegration paths. In trekking these varied paths, returnee women OFWs saw their individual resolve, their financial knowledge / behaviors / practices, their problem-solving abilities, and their knowledge of accessing varied forms of support all being put to the test —and now without overseas work to rely on.

On the part of the Philippine government's migration management bureaucracy, we can sense that its *best efforts* to ensure a healthy, safe return migration by affected OFWs and other returning overseas Filipinos got challenged by the enormous number of returnees to be assisted. Government's sponsorship of repatriation flights, quarantines and swab tests, and transport services to migrants' residences and birthplaces reveal the plus points of the overall effort to manage returnees. Economic assistance then came when returnees have settled down in their homes, though these cash aids and the prevailing programs of agencies like OWWA may have to be more efficient in terms of service delivery and program rollout. The COVID-19 pandemic also put government agencies running these programs to the test, while hoping that more public funds may be made available for future droves of return migration.

Study limitations. The tales of these 11 individual returnees do not represent the gamut of experiences of the over-600,000 returnee OFWs affected by the pandemic. This fact provides one methodological limitation of this study. With almost all interviewees being domestic workers, findings here may not be entirely applicable to other returnee OFWs involved in other skilled and less-skilled occupations abroad. More qualitative respondents could have provided more dense experiences, and the difficulty of recruiting target research participants provides another limitation of this study.

Nevertheless, this current case study research has provided semblances of understanding the *lived experiences* of returnee women OFWs and their ongoing reintegration beside the pandemic. No matter the limited number of interviewees for this

study, their observations on the help provided by government agencies provide relevant *client feedback* that can prompt improved services.

Recommendations. The disbursement of AKAP cash aid and of OWWA-run assistance programs may have to be quicker and more responsive. Mental health and psychosocial services may also have to be in-place at international airports (as the first point of contact by returnees), and in various regions of origin by OFWs. Legal assistance services for returnees who endured work-related issues (and disregarded possible legal recourses of action, such as filing cases at Philippine recruitment agencies) may have to be on standby to assist future returnees. Even if the Philippine government has been implementing a “whole-of-government” approach to help returnee OFWs (Opiniano, 2021a; 2021b), expanding the range of actors who can help returnees—especially in rural areas— may broaden the options for returnees to seek help during their economic and social reintegration. Inter-agency coordination may be more necessary than ever to fulfill government’s mandate of facilitating smooth, gainful economic and social reintegration by returnee overseas workers. Individual OFWs, for their part, may have to improve their financial knowledge and behaviors, to continue solidifying their love for their families, and to learn more skills that can possibly make them entrepreneurial and more resourceful employees for future work opportunities.

Final words. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to challenge the ability of the Philippines’ migration management system to assist as many affected overseas Filipino workers. Migrant reintegration has thus pushed for the provision of visibly important

interventions, such as entrepreneurial support (not just financial capital), financial education and referral systems for local employment and for business creation, and MHPSS and legal assistance. The national government has already trained its regional, provincial and local tiers of agencies (e.g., OWWA) on how to handle returnees (IOM, 2018a; 2018b). More lessons may have to be documented so that interventions for future returning OFWs may be better placed and become more responsive.

As individual women returnee migrant workers traverse different paths in their reintegration, Philippine government agencies and partner stakeholders provide the interventions and mechanisms to somewhat smoothen the abrupt return migration experience that the pandemic wrought. The country wishes to move on to a new type of normal when the pandemic becomes an endemic, hopefully soon. Should that development happen, and if services for returnee OFWs become more efficient, economic and social reintegration may be a gainful experience for returnees and for a country that is eager to bounce back economically.

Roles of research team using the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT)

Lance Alexander Velasco: investigation; data storage.

Jhoana Paula Tuazon: formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

Jeremaiah Opiniano: instrument development; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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