

# Filipino Women Migrant Workers

## Fact Sheet

### *Situation of Filipino women migrant workers (WMWs)*

- The Philippines is one of the world's top migrant-sending countries. Currently, the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) estimates that there are 10.4 million<sup>1</sup> Filipinos abroad who are permanent, temporary, or irregular migrants<sup>2</sup>, located in more than 200 countries and territories around the world.
- Migrants send annual remittances amounting to eight to ten per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP). Thus, such huge money transfers make the Philippines among the top three remittance-recipient countries in the world (World Bank 2014, 4). Remittances likewise provided the much-needed cushion to the economy during the recent global financial crisis (DOLE 2011, 13). In 2014 alone, Overseas Filipinos (OFs)<sup>3</sup> sent USD24.3 billion in cash remittances<sup>4</sup> (BSP 2014).
- Feminization of migration is another important characteristic of this out-migration trend. Nicola Piper (2008, 1292) argues that feminization of migration refers not only to the number of women working abroad but also to their huge participation in key migration routes. It can mean the marked autonomy of migrant women as workers and family breadwinners, compared to their role decades ago when they crossed borders as dependents (UN-INSTRAW 2010, 36).
- In the past two decades, an annual average of 172,000 Filipino WMWs were deployed overseas as new hires. The number of newly hired WMWs reached its peak in 2004 when women comprised about three-fourths of the total deployment

1 This is a stock estimate collected by the CFO from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), embassies, and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). POEA collects data on outflows or deployment of temporary or contract-based migrants.

2 These are categories of Filipino migrants in the CFO database. Permanent migrants are those who are already citizens of other countries; temporary migrants are those whose jobs abroad are governed by a contract; and, irregular migrants are those who did not undergo the formal channels of emigration.

3 This term collectively refers to permanent, temporary, and undocumented Filipino migrants. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) is a label generally attributed to temporary or contract-based workers.

4 Remittances coursed through banks.

of newly hired workers. Currently, WMWs still outnumber men, but their proportion of the total deployment has considerably decreased.

- Occupational sex-segregation characterizes the job categories of men and WMWs. While most male overseas Filipino workers are typically production workers, women are predominantly service workers.
- Domestic work dominates the job categories of WMWs among the low-skilled. Nurses rank first as a job category among the professionals.
- Filipino women are also leaving as marriage migrants and *au pairs*.



Photo: UN Women / Pornvit Visitoran

### *Reasons for Labor Out-Migration*

- Only 40 per cent of Filipino women are in paid employment for the past decade. The lack of decent job opportunities pushes WMWs to migrate for work. Despite this situation, there is a lack of a sustained government plan specifically detailing programs and policies for women's increased participation in paid employment.
- While economic factors may be key reasons for migration, state-sponsored overseas employment, historical legacy of women's mobility, and global economic restructuring ushered in Filipino women's migration. In addition, gender ideology and gendered practices in recruitment and deployment process in both destination countries and the Philippines likewise trigger migration.

## Destination Countries

- Filipino WMWs are primarily located in destination countries in the Middle East that are known for their restrictive policies on women and even so for WMWs. Like most destination countries, they have not acceded to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICMW) and ILO Convention 189 but are signatories to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). They also still practice the kafala system, a usual culprit in rights violations of migrants.
- Some migrant-receiving countries known for having laws promoting migrants' rights are backtracking on this commitment. For instance, a recent change in immigration policy on domestic workers which ties the latter to their employer.
- Other destination countries which do not have legal migration route for unskilled labor resort to other means to recruit Filipino WMWs. Countries with shortage of brides also become pull factors in Filipino women's migration. Marriage migration and the *au pair* system are examples of this. This could potentially result in trafficking and illegal recruitment.

## Consequences/Impact of Filipino WMWs' Labor Out-Migration

- Filipino WMWs are responding to the care deficit in destination countries. As such, they are in jobs that are traditionally relegated to women such as domestic work, caregiving, and nursing. Domestic work and caregiving are usually precarious in nature as they are outside of government regulation in most countries.
- In a national survey, WMWs remit less money transfers compared to men. WMWs usually remit to a female member of the household, according to case studies. WMWs and their financial remittances have also been tapped for local development. However, their potential as an agent of countryside development is hampered by lack of information and access to credit, and the general lack of good business climate.
- WMWs have also contributed social and political remittances in the Philippines and in migrant destination countries.
- Return and reintegration programs are still national in scope and have generic program designs. Access to credit requires a significant amount of collateral which is beyond the access of most WMWs and migrants in general.

- Migrant NGOs have targeted return and reintegration programs for WMWs. However, some government-initiated livelihood programs (e.g. manicure, pedicure) reify traditional gender roles which can hardly empower women.
- Abuse and exploitation, illegal recruitment, contract substitution and debt bondage continue to be experienced by WMWs, especially domestic workers. There are also violations of sexual and reproductive health due to discriminatory laws in migrant-receiving countries.
- Nurses also experience discrimination when their skills are not recognized in destination countries. Illegal recruitment, contract substitution and racialized discrimination in terms of wages have also been reported.
- While the discourse of social cost is dominant, empirical evidence is mixed. A number of studies suggest that families and children who remain have been relatively resilient in coping with the absence of WMWs at home. Research has also documented that fathers, grandmothers, and the network of families and kinship in the Philippines provide care for children left behind. The evidence of social cost is also difficult to empirically validate on a national level due to a lack of government data indicating whether WMWs have children left behind.
- De-skilling which occurs when government data do not account for the educational qualifications of WMWs is a silent 'abuse'. Without accurate data from the POEA, there is little information on the extent to which registered nurses or teachers for instance, leave the countries as domestic workers or care givers.
- There have been successful cases that are inspiring and are stories of liberation and empowerment. They can balance the dominance of the victimization discourse and can potentially result in more policies that highlight the complex consequences of the migration experience.



Photo: UN Women / Pornvit Visitoran

## Policy Analysis and International Commitments

- The Philippines is considered a 'model' in migration management. It has a huge government bureaucracy which assists migrants from pre-employment to reintegration.
- The gender audit conducted by the DOLE, DFA and POEA is also laudable. However, little is known to what extent this has shaped migration programs in these agencies.
- The government's pre-employment orientation seminar (PEOS) has been recently scaled up and expanded via social media and mobile application. Potentially, this can prevent illegal recruitment and trafficking and result in informed decisions to migrate.
- The pre-departure orientation seminar (PDOS) and post-arrival orientation programs need to be improved. The government is currently working on this to enhance such programs. However, post-arrival orientation is not compulsory and is often not undertaken. Hence, it needs the consent of the destination countries and the cooperation of migrants.
- The government has also actively participated in international treaty processes such as the CEDAW, ICMW, the ILO Convention 189 and various regional and international fora.
- Republic Act 8042 or the Migrant Workers' Act mandates a gender-sensitive criterion for programs and policies on overseas employment. However, some provisions of the law and programs in its pursuit are not consistent with CEDAW GR 26 such as age requirement and deployment ban. Such bans have reportedly resulted in increased irregular migration and trafficking cases causing undue harm to WMWs.
- Insufficient budgetary support has resulted in a lack of enough human resources in key government agencies handling migration. This situation seriously undermines their capacities to assist WMWs, especially in destination countries.
- CSO/NGO participation in governance is enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution and RA 8042 as amended by RA 10022. Migrant NGOs representing WMWs are represented in government agencies concerned with migration.
- During treaty processes and monitoring, fund allocation and lack of information on the process prevent the active participation of CSOs/NGOs.
- CSOs/NGOs have little information as to the extent to which their recommendations are tackled in international migration processes.
- The voices of WMWs themselves are rarely heard in international processes on labor out-migration.



## Potential areas of collaboration / interventions for the protection and promotion of Filipino WMW rights

- Creation of an enabling environment to generate decent jobs for women and improve labor market conditions conducive to the entry of women in paid employment.
- CEDAW GR 26 as basis for the pre-employment to reintegration programs and practices.
- More binding discussions in bilateral agreements with regard to legal assistance provision, social security, and shelters funded by destination countries.
- Sustained training and capability-building on gender-responsive governance of labor out-migration.
- Promotion of ethical recruitment practices for both professionals and low-skilled workers.
- Forging and monitoring and evaluation of bilateral agreements which guarantee safe and ethical recruitment, non-payment of fees, and rights protection.
- Additional financial and human resources for government agencies dealing with migration to cope with welfare cases and daily assistance to overseas Filipinos.
- Decentralization of return and reintegration programs to accommodate local community's realities to which WMWs return.
- Gender-sensitive data collection and mechanisms such as the Overseas Filipinos Information System (OFIS) and the Shared Government Information System for Migration (SGISM).
- Inclusion of WMWs' voices and concerns in policy and program consultations.
- Use of CEDAW reporting mechanism as a venue through which migrants, CSOs, and transnational labor unions<sup>1</sup> can seek redress for violations of WMWs' rights including reforms in the kafala system.
- Government transparency during international and regional processes, as well as in negotiations of bilateral agreements.
- Continued advocacy by the Philippines in urging governments to ratify the ILO Convention 189, as well advocacy for ILO Convention 97 (urges countries to make policies that prevent non-discrimination of migrants in terms of wages, unionism, benefits and social security) and ILO Convention 143 (urges member countries to

1 Although union organizing is limited in the Gulf Cooperation Council.

stop abusive conditions of migrants and promote equal treatment and opportunity for them).

- Ratification of ILO Convention 181, which deals with private recruitment agencies and primarily establishes international standards for private employment agencies to protect workers against unethical practices such as charging of fees.
- Funding support for CSO capability-training, monitoring and participation / attendance in treaty reporting processes.

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