



Repatriation and assistance:

The case Filipino migrant domestic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic



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Abstract

Crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have a disproportionate impact on migrants. Filipino migrant domestic workers (MDWs) were among the first migrants to lose their job during the COVID-19 pandemic, which often resulted in them requesting repatriation. This has drawn attention to the Philippine government's approach to assisting impacted overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and facilitating repatriation. Drawing on in-depth interviews with repatriated Filipino MDWs and government agencies, this research aimed to provide insight into the assistance received by Filipino MDWs during their repatriation amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This research examines the reasons for repatriation, how capital impacts the assistance requested and provided, and how the assistance addresses the capital and agency of MDWs. This research finds that there are various reasons for repatriation, which often depends on the agency of the MDW and impacts their capital. These reasons for repatriation often also impact the assistance that MDWs require and request. In addition, the capital of the government agencies impacts the assistance they can provide. This research concludes that the assistance provided during each phase – pre-departure, repatriation, and post-arrival – varies in addressing the capital needs of Filipino MDWs. Most MDWs were disappointed in the assistance available in the post-arrival phase, which is deemed the most crucial phase. Therefore, while the Philippines has been commended for their comprehensive labour migration system, their return and repatriation policies, particularly during crises, remain unsustainable and limited, and should be developed further to improve overall migration governance.

Key words: migrant domestic workers, Philippines, repatriation, assistance, COVID-19, capital, agency and structure, MICIC guidelines

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List of abbreviations

DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DOLE	Department of Labour and Employment
AKAP	<i>Abot Kamay Ang Pagtulong</i>
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration
IATF-EID	Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MDWs	Migrant Domestic Workers
MICIC	Migrants in Countries in Crisis
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NRCO	National Reintegration Centre for Overseas Filipino Workers
OASIS	OFW Assistance Information System
OFWs	Overseas Filipino Workers
OWWA	Overseas Workers Welfare Administration
RAD	Repatriation Assistance Division
PHP	Philippine Peso
PNA	Philippine News Agency
POEA	Philippine Overseas Employment Administration
POLO	Philippine Overseas Labour Office
PSA	Philippine Statistics Authority
RA	Republic Act
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TESDA	Technical Education and Skills Development Authority
USD	United States Dollar

1. Introduction

The Philippines is one of the largest labour-exporting countries in the world, with an estimated 2.2 million migrant workers, better known as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) abroad (PSA, 2020). Since the 1980s, OFWs have been acknowledged as modern-day heroes for their contribution to the Philippine economy through remittances (Fernandez et al., 2020). A large proportion of OFWs are women who become domestic workers abroad. Filipino migrant domestic workers (MDWs) are driven by the better labour opportunities and higher wages abroad, which become a crucial lifeline for themselves and their families (Liao, 2020). However, they often face challenges such as abuse, distress, employment disputes, and poor working and living conditions (Saguin, 2020). Crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupt the economies and mobilities that migrants rely on with little warning. In addition, migrants become even more vulnerable to abuse, unemployment, and displacement, ultimately impacting their capital and agency (IOM, 2020a). An example is Joy who was one of the many MDWs that migrated to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) due to the higher salary prospects and the ability to financially support her family. At the onset of the COVID-19, Joy stopped receiving her salary and when she complained, her employer started threatening her. Joy was able to escape her employer and visit the Philippine Overseas Labour Office (POLO) to request repatriation. Joy arrived in the Philippines with little financial capital and since then, she joined the 8.5 million unemployed Filipinos (PSA, 2021) and has not yet received the financial assistance she requested.

Experiences like Joy's during times of crisis, reveal the level of protection provided by migration policies. Through their experience, the Philippines has been able to establish and implement well-developed policies that aim to protect migrants (Battistella, 2018). Despite these policies, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many MDWs requiring additional assistance and repatriation due to the lack of protection. MDWs also rely on assistance upon return in the Philippines to address the additional challenges they face, such as bleak employment prospects and difficulties of reintegration (IOM, 2020b). As a result, Philippine government agencies have been confronted with the need to implement structures that facilitate OFWs' agency and address their capital needs. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for the Philippines to return the favour and become the heroes that many OFWs need during the ongoing crisis.

By examining the assistance available to repatriated Filipino MDWs, this research aims to contribute to both academia and policy development. For a long time, migrant repatriation

remained an under researched aspect of migration policies. While the COVID-19 pandemic initiated an increase in studies related to the repatriation of migrants, this has mostly been limited to the Philippine government's repatriation efforts and the number of repatriated OFWs (Asis, 2020). This research aims to add to the growing literature by reflecting on the assistance provided by Philippine government agencies so that future crisis responses can replicate the successes and overcome the challenges. However, incorporating the experiences of the migrants impacted by the government's response is equally, if not more, important, as this highlights the to what extent the assistance addresses their needs. Previous research has shown that despite the Philippines' comprehensive labour migration system, their repatriation policies and programmes remain underdeveloped and do not sufficiently protect migrants (Saguin, 2020). The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also highlight the importance of protecting migrants and facilitating their mobility (during crises) to ensure their safety (Liao, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and the large-scale repatriation efforts of the Philippines allows further development of repatriation policies. This is needed to ensure that the assistance sufficiently addresses the needs of OFWs during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and future crises, as well as achieving the goals and objectives of the GCM and SDGs. In addition, adapting the policies and programmes will ensure the sustainable reintegration of repatriated migrant workers and potentially tap into their development potential (Saguin, 2020).

Moreover, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of repatriation. The unique challenges faced by OFWs who have been repatriated during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that repatriation extends beyond the flight to the Philippines and involves the pre-departure and post-arrival phases (Liao, 2020). More importantly, the pre-departure and post-arrival phases shape their repatriation experience and the assistance that is provided by the key stakeholders during these phases is crucial, especially for their reintegration. While this research is limited to MDWs who have been repatriated to the Philippines, the findings of this research may be applicable to other countries experiencing the mass repatriation of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and future crises.

1.1. Research questions and objectives

The aim of this research is to examine the assistance available to and received by Filipino MDWs throughout their repatriation amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be done by documenting the programmes and policies implemented by government agencies to address

the capital needs of repatriated OFWs. In addition, the experiences of MDWs will be examined, paying particular attention to the assistance that they have received throughout the repatriation process and how this addresses their capital needs and impacted their agency. The following research question has therefore been formulated:

To what extent are Filipino migrant domestic workers assisted during their repatriation amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

The sub questions used to answer the main research questions are as follows:

1. What are the reasons for Filipino MDWs repatriation?
2. How does the capitals of MDWs and government agencies impact the assistance requested and provided?
3. How does assistance address the capital needs of MDWs and impact their agency?

1.2. Structure of the thesis

In order to answer the research questions, the thesis has been structured as follows. The first chapter introduces the research topic, the relevance of the research, and the research aim and questions. Chapter 2 provides the basis for this research by outlining the key concepts and approaches relevant to the research and formulating the conceptual framework. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the research and Chapter 4 then provides the research context by examining repatriation in the Philippines and the existing repatriation policies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsequent chapters (5 – 7) present the results of this research. The chapters are divided into the pre-departure phase, repatriation, and the post-arrival phase, as per the conceptual framework introduced in chapter 2. Chapter 8 concludes the research and provides policy recommendations for future repatriations.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Relevant concepts

Repatriation is usually conceptualised as a form of return migration. Return migration is the return of migrants to their country of origin after living in another country for a certain period – usually at least three consecutive months (IOM, 2019). There are many different contexts in which migrants can return, which often depends on the type of migrant. It is also important to distinguish between the different forms of return, such as voluntary, involuntary, and assisted (Tharan, 2009). Battistella (2018) has conceptualised a framework (see figure 1) to recognise the complexities of return migration.

Figure 1. Return migration policies framework

Return	Voluntary	Achievement	Completion	Setback	Crisis	Involuntary
	End of migration					Before end of migration
Policy	Development	Entrepreneurship	Reintegration	Redeployment	Emergency	Assistance
	Indirect					Direct

Source: adaptation of Battistella (2018)

As portrayed in figure 1, there are four situations of return that depend on the time of return – at or before the end of the migration period – and whether the decision was voluntary or involuntary. The first situation is return of achievement, which is when a migrant has achieved their migration goals and thus returns voluntarily at the end of migration (Battistella, 2018). Return of completion occurs when the migration period or employment contract has ended despite the migrant wishing to remain abroad (Battistella, 2018). Return of setback is when the migrant voluntarily returns before the end of the migration period due to setbacks such as poor working conditions, family reasons, or contract violations (Battistella, 2018). Lastly, return of crisis is caused by conflicts and disasters, in which the host country or country of origin ‘force’ migrants to return (Battistella, 2018). This is the form of return that refers to the repatriation of (irregular) migrants and refugees (Battistella, 2018). According to Battistella (2018), each situation of return requires different policies and programmes, which vary in their purpose – either to achieve development or provide assistance – and whether it indirectly or directly provided. The framework is presented as a continuum, which acknowledges the potential overlap of situations. This is relevant for this research, as the repatriation of Filipino

MDWs cannot be easily defined as one specific type of return. Therefore, policy makers and other stakeholders must address the different types of repatriated Filipino MDWs through various policies and programmes.

As shown by Battistella (2018), return migration is a broad and complex term. This research, however, is particularly interested in repatriation due to the crisis context and the need for assistance. While repatriation is more commonly used in forced migration and refugee studies, the term can also be extended to labour migrants. Repatriation is generally defined as a process whereby countries of origin or destination assist the return of migrants to their country of origin (IOM, 2019). In the context of temporary labour migration in Asia, repatriation can refer to several situations and involves various actors. For example, repatriation can refer to the return of migrants at the (premature) end of their contract, whereby the main actors include the host country and their employer (Battistella, 2004). This type of repatriation is typically perceived as involuntary. Repatriation can also be required by distressed migrants, who actively seek assistance from recruitment agencies, non-profit organisation, and the government, and is therefore perceived as voluntary (Liao, 2020). While recognising these nuances, this research refers to repatriation as the assisted return of migrants to their country of origin during crises (IOM, 2019). Here, the line between the voluntary or involuntary nature of repatriation is blurred, as it depends on the circumstances and conditions of the MDWs' repatriation.

In the Philippines, repatriation often extends beyond the return flight to the post-arrival phase and thus is deemed a critical transition to reintegration programmes (Liao, 2020). While much of the literature regarding repatriation also refers to reintegration, this research will incorporate reintegration under the post-arrival phase. This is because many Filipino migrants engage in circular migration or only temporarily return to the Philippines (Battistella, 2018). Therefore, if they have remigration intentions after the COVID-19 pandemic, they are less likely to actively reintegrate (Saguin, 2020). This may be likely among Filipino MDWs as they may have been repatriated before the end of their migration period and are thus less likely to have achieved their migration goals (Cassarino, 2004).

2.2. Relevant approaches

2.2.1. Capital

Many frameworks, such as the sustainable livelihood framework and Bourdieu's capital framework, highlight the role of capital in achieving outcomes. For instance, many migrant

workers migrate to enhance their financial capital to support their families at home (Saguin, 2020). While there are several other capitals, the capitals most relevant to repatriated Filipino MDWs include financial, human, and social capital. Considering the capital of repatriated MDWs can help government agencies understand what type of assistance they require. The capital of the government agencies is also important as it can facilitate or hinder their ability to assist repatriated MDWs.

Financial capital refers to the financial wealth or assets that an individual has accumulated through their income (Bourdieu, 1986). The ability to accumulate more financial capital abroad is a key driver in migration but crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can reduce migrants' financial capital, ultimately increasing their vulnerability and resulting in their repatriation (Saguin, 2020; Serrat, 2017). Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills of an individual, which can be accumulated through education and provides access to better (economic) opportunities (Serrat, 2017). These capitals therefore may play a role in the repatriation decision-making process and determine the assistance migrants require.

Social capital is less tangible than financial and human capital and is therefore more challenging to define (Fine & Lapavitsas, 2004). While Fine & Lapavitsas (2004) believe social capital refers to all the resources that are not captured by other capitals, it is more generally understood as the social networks of an individual (Bourdieu, 1986). Essentially, it refers to who an individual knows or can reach out to. It is important to note that social capital can both facilitate or constrain the actions of individual agents (Fine & Lapavitsas, 2004; Coleman, 1990). In the case of Filipino MDWs, social capital may include their family and friends as well as government agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders involved in migration. Given the transnational identity of Filipino MDWs, they are believed to accrue social capital in both the Philippines and their host country (Saguin, 2020). Moreover, social capital provides access to trusted sources of information (Coleman, 1988; Utz & Muscanell, 2015). Therefore, technology, and particularly social media, are relevant aspects of social capital as they allow individuals to enhance their social capital and receive more information (Utz & Muscanell, 2015). Such information may be important in shaping MDWs' repatriation decision and the assistance they receive. Membership within social networks should not be taken for granted, as reciprocity is important in obtaining and maintaining social capital (Cassarino, 2004; Putnam, 1993). For migrants, measures taken to maintain social capital include regular visits to the country of origin, frequent communication, and sending remittances, which also helps them prepare for their eventual return (Cassarino, 2004; Saguin, 2020). Technology and social

media facilitate this, as they allow migrant to communicate and exchange of resources virtually (Vitak, 2014).

Furthermore, during unexpected situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants can adapt and address their needs due to the convertibility of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Financial capital is perceived as one of the most important capitals because of its convertibility, which allows it to be used to obtain other capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, financial capital can be used to obtain social capital through the transfer of resources, such as remittances, or can be converted into human capital as it provides access to education (Bourdieu, 1986). However, other capitals are also convertible. For instance, social capital influences financial decisions hence determine economic outcomes and enhance financial capital (Coleman, 1990). In addition, social capital assists individuals in obtaining human capital, for instance through education expectations (Coleman, 1988). Human capital may provide access to better employment opportunities and higher wages (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990).

In this research, the impact of financial, social, and human capital on Filipino MDWs' repatriation decision-making, the assistance they need and receive, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face upon return is examined. Moreover, this research will analyse how government agencies use their own capital to assist Filipino MDWs and impact their accumulation of capital during their repatriation.

2.2.2. Structure and agency

The sustainable livelihoods framework and Bourdieu's capital framework also recognise the role of structure and agency in accessing capital and achieving certain outcomes. Structure refers to the patterns of norms, beliefs, as well as institutions, such as class, gender, and networks that shape outcomes (Barker & Jane, 2016; De Haas, 2021). Agency reflects the capacity of individuals or collectives to act independently and make free choices (Barker & Jane, 2016). Agency is often operationalised as decision-making, but it can also take the form of negotiation, resistance, and reflection and in some cases can induce change in structures (Kabeer, 2001; De Haas, 2021). In addition, agency can have positive and negative connotations regarding power. For instance, an individual may have the 'power to' act independently regardless of resistance from others (Kabeer, 2001). However, others may also have 'power over' the agency of an individual through violence and threat (Kabeer, 2001). Structure and agency are therefore in constant interplay where structure both determines and is

an outcome of agency (Giddens, 1984). Thus, the accumulation of capital and outcomes are neither determined only by structure nor agency (Giddens, 1984). Given the status of MDWs, power relations within structures, such as families or employment relations, may impact the capacity of MDWs to make free choices.

Studies such as Khoo et al. (2015) have already examined the interplay of structure and agency within migration decision-making. The study shows that some migrants are able to migrate by exerting agency to shift structures while others are immobilised due to structural constraints and a lack of agency (Khoo et al., 2015). Similar use of the concepts of structure and agency within repatriation literature has been limited but may yield interesting findings. Moreover, repatriation is more commonly used in forced migration and refugee studies, whereby migrants are often portrayed as passive victims of repatriation (Battistella, 2018). However, this research recognises that Filipino MDWs exert agency within their repatriation decision although this may be constrained or facilitated by structures in the repatriation process, such as government agencies, family, and policies (Cassarino, 2004). De Haas (2021) believes that all migrants are impacted by structural constraints to varying degrees and argues that this challenges the dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary repatriation. Furthermore, studies have also shown that migrants can become agents of development when they reinvest their capital upon return (Spitzer & Piper, 2014). However, structures, including the economic climate in the country of origin may impact their ability to contribute to development. Therefore, structure and agency may shape MDWs' lives back in the Philippines by determining how MDW's utilise their capital.

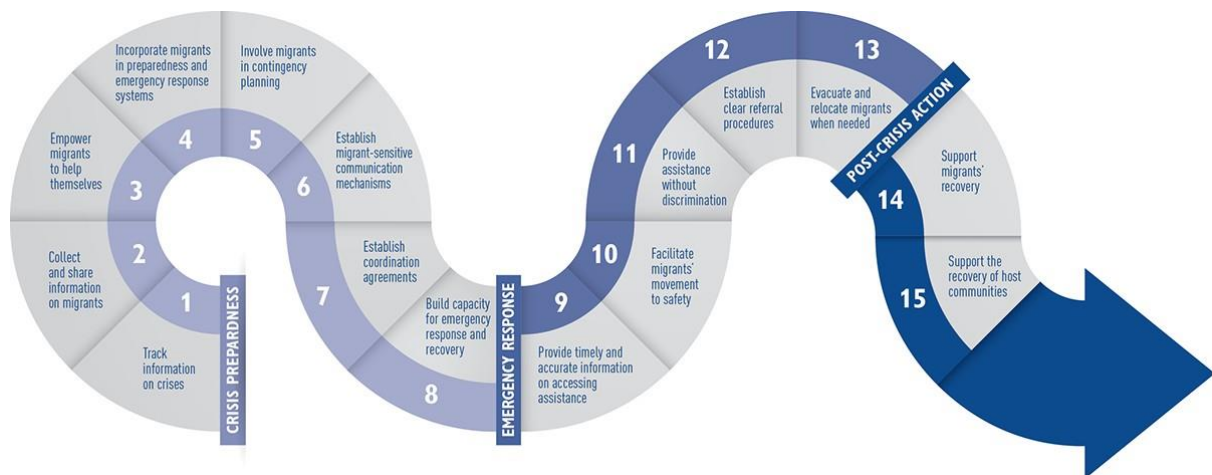
This research applies the concepts of structure and agency to examine how agency is exercised by Filipino MDWs requesting assistance with repatriation within structures of stakeholders and policies that provide or limit the assistance they receive. In addition, understanding how structure impacts MDWs' agency and the assistance they receive can lead to the improvement of policies to ensure that structures facilitate rather than constrain their agency and capital accumulation.

2.2.3. The MICIC guidelines

Another useful approach for this research is the Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) Guidelines, portrayed in figure 2. The MICIC Initiative is an effort led by the United States and Philippine governments with support from the IOM and was prompted by migrants affected by the Libyan uprising in 2011 as well as the floods in Thailand and Hurricane Sandy in 2012 (IOM, 2021b). The MICIC Initiative specify 10 principles, 15 guidelines, and a set of effective

practices to protect and address the vulnerability of migrants, and to improve the responses of stakeholders during crises (IOM, 2021b). The stakeholders, such as States, international organisations, the private sector, and civil society, can refer to the MICIC guidelines to address the key aspects of the crisis cycle, namely crisis preparedness, emergency response, and post-crisis action (MICIC Initiative, 2016). This suggests that each stage of crisis requires different responses and actions.

Figure 2. The MICIC guidelines



Source: MICIC Initiative, 2016

While the guidelines were initially developed for migrants in countries experiencing a conflict of natural disaster, the relevance of the guidelines has become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Labovitz, 2020). For example, obstacles such as mobility restrictions, language barriers, migration status, and discrimination have reinforced the vulnerability of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic and should therefore be addressed by the relevant stakeholders (Labovitz, 2020). The guidelines also aim to include migrants in crisis response and recovery efforts to address their vulnerability. The guidelines link to the concepts of capital, structure, and agency, as migrants exert agency to mobilise their capitals within crisis response that may provide limited assistance.

The MICIC guidelines have been used in extant literature, such as Bravi's et al. (2017) analysis of the impact of floods on migrants in Thailand and Hendow's et al., (2018) study of how migrants remain resilient despite adversity in various crises. The studies found that migrants caught in crises were often left unattended, which hindered their ability to recover. As a result, migrants respond to the crises themselves by making use of their capitals, thereby demonstrating their agency. For instance, in Thailand, migrants with more social capital were

able to find safe shelter with friends and family during the floods (Bravi et al., 2017). The studies also refer to return migration. Some migrants had to remain in the host country as there was limited support available to return home, demonstrating how the structures constrain their agency and determine outcomes (Bravi et al., 2017). In addition, for those who were able to return, their reintegration and remigration prospects were conditional– they depended on what they return with and how their return was perceived by themselves and other stakeholders (Hendow et al., 2018). They conclude that the MICIC guidelines are not always considered by the government, which limits the effectiveness of their response and the assistance available to migrants during crises. Similar applications of the MICIC guidelines have been limited to conflict and natural disasters. Therefore, applying the guidelines to a health crisis can contribute new findings and demonstrate the relevance of the MICIC guidelines.

In this research, the guidelines are used to analyse the effectiveness of Philippine government agencies' response to Filipino MDWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, also incorporating the perspective of Filipino MDWs provides a better and contextualised understanding of migrants' experiences, as they are impacted by the response of the government. Thus, by examining how coordination among government agencies, communication with migrants, and the provision of assistance address the migrants' needs reveals the effectiveness of their response. As each stage of a crisis requires different responses and actions, the phases of repatriation - pre-departure, repatriation, and post-arrival - also require different forms of assistance. As a result, the analysis of this research is organised according to these three phases of repatriation. This will uncover the gaps in their response and repatriation policies in each phase. Accordingly, the guidelines can also be used to form recommendations to improve the response of the Philippine government in future crises that adhere to the objectives and goals of the GCM and SDGs.

2.3. Literature review

2.3.1. Repatriation of MDWs

Despite the abundance of literature regarding return migration of (Filipino) MDWs, few studies focus explicitly on the repatriation of MDWs. Rather, studies discussing repatriation tend to focus on the protection and welfare of MDWs. For example, Battistella et al. (2011) examined the impact of the Philippine government policies on the status of Filipino MDWs, by analysing how these policies protect them and impact their experiences abroad. As repatriation is part of the Philippine government policies, this is discussed from the perspective

of both key informants and Filipino MDWs who have been repatriated due to distress or medical issues. In this study, the key informants focus primarily on the policies and the repatriation process, discussing the repatriation responsibilities and the assistance available, such as shelter and counselling (Battistella et al., 2011). Among the MDW participants, the assistance received was limited to shelter prior to their repatriation as well as in OWWA's halfway house after arrival (Battistella et al., 2011). This was largely due to the gaps in the policies and the MDWs' lack of awareness of government policies and programmes. However, the study was published in 2011, shortly after the implementation of RA10022 and thus the introduction of the National Reintegration Centre for OFWs (NRCO), which means there were fewer return, repatriation, and reintegration policies at the time.

Nevertheless, Saguin (2020), while focusing more on return migration and reintegration, also concluded that Filipino MDWs felt the programmes available upon return do not align with their needs or expectations of return. This is largely due to the perception of migrants as drivers of development and the focus of reintegration programmes on entrepreneurship, which many MDWs do not have the capital for when returning to the Philippines. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to analyse repatriation and reintegration policies and programmes and help develop them further, especially as many OFWs are being repatriated, who all have different needs. Saguin (2020) also highlights the role of the family in return migration. Not only do families influence MDWs' decisions to return, Filipino MDWs also prepare for their return by maintaining and investing in their familial relations through frequent communication, visits, and remittances. For some MDWs, the (social) protection provided by their family is depended on more than the government's programmes (Saguin, 2020). This suggests that MDWs' social capital, such as family, plays a role in return migration or repatriation.

While Saguin (2020) discusses return migration among Filipino MDWs who voluntarily returned and did not necessarily require much assistance, many of the challenges faced by them can be extended to repatriation. However, due to the sudden nature or unstable context of repatriation, the challenges tend to be more pronounced. For instance, Grzelka (2020) examined repatriation among Filipino MDWs in Kuwait, where many of MDWs suffer maltreatment from their employers, which may lead them to 'run away'. However, due to the employment sponsorship system in Kuwait, running away causes them to become 'illegal', ultimately resulting in their repatriation (Grzelka, 2020). This is similar to other studies on repatriation, where employment disputes and personal distress led to the premature end of employment contracts, without which the MDWs cannot legally remain in the host country

(Liao, 2020). Grzelka (2020) argues, however, that oftentimes such cases, where MDWs are offered to avail the voluntary repatriation programme, are deportation in disguise. It is therefore interesting to examine how repatriation is managed, experienced, and conceptualised during a crisis context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3.2. Repatriation during crises

There has also been research conducted on repatriation and return migration during crises. For instance, Battistella et al. (2011) examine the challenges surrounding the repatriation of MDWs due to conflict and the global financial crisis in Lebanon in 2006 and 2008 - 2009, respectively. The key informants in the study discuss the assistance available to the migrants, such as evacuation centres offering shelters, repatriation flights, as well as loans to OFWs impacted by the crisis (Battistella et al., 2011). However, these loans required recipients to follow courses and training on starting a business, which many were not interested in.

Similarly, Spitzer and Piper (2014) examine Filipino repatriates during the global financial crisis, with a particular focus on the government programmes. They argue that due to the heroic view of OFWs, they are often seen as ‘agents of development’ (Spitzer & Piper, 2014). As a result, much of the assistance provided to repatriated OFWs is limited to reintegration programmes focusing on entrepreneurship. However, many OFWs reported that they did not have the sufficient capital to successfully engage in entrepreneurship (Spitzer & Piper, 2014), which echoes the findings of Saguin (2020). This again shows that the reintegration programmes are often misaligned with the needs of repatriated OFWs and highlights the need to further develop the programmes available to repatriated OFWs. Moreover, they found that repatriates tend to rely on informal and kin-based networks rather than the Philippine government for support resources upon return, which illustrates the relevance of social capital (Spitzer & Piper, 2014).

Asis (2014) researched the repatriation of OFWs from Libya and Syria in 2011. The research highlights the differences across host countries, genders, and perceptions. For instance, the repatriation of OFWs from Libya was deemed more successful due to effective coordination while the repatriation of OFWs from Syria was more challenging due to the lack of information regarding the OFWs residing there (Asis, 2014). A key difference between the countries is that Libya mainly hosts male, skilled and legal migrants whereas Syria hosts many female, low-skilled and often undocumented MDWs (Asis, 2014). This shows how MDWs tend to have a more pronounced challenge of repatriation. In addition, key stakeholders, such

as representations of government agencies and NGOs, perceived the repatriation from Libya as successful and recognised difficulties in Syria. However, OFWs tended to be less satisfied, especially with regards to their reintegration (Asis, 2014). This shows the importance of including the perspective of both key stakeholders, such as government agencies, and the OFWs themselves when assessing the success of repatriation efforts. Furthermore, it is interesting to examine how experience with previous crises has been used to enhance the repatriation process or has led to improved crisis preparedness and management during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially since the introduction of the MICIC guidelines in 2016.

2.3.3. Repatriation during the COVID-19 pandemic

The repatriation of OFWs amid the COVID-19 pandemic has remained mostly limited to the efforts of the Philippine government and the number of repatriated OFWs. Asis (2020), for instance, outlines the policies regarding repatriation that have been developed since the first repatriation efforts during the Gulf War. Despite the experience that the Philippine government has, this pandemic has brought new challenges, such as limited flights and strict health protocols, that hinder their repatriation efforts (Asis, 2020). Asis (2020) briefly mentions that anxiety levels have increased among OFWs due to the time spent waiting throughout the repatriation process and due to the stigmatisation faced when arriving in the Philippines but does not discuss the repatriation experiences among OFWs extensively.

Liao (2020) also focuses on the efforts of the key stakeholders involved in the repatriation of OFWs. The repatriation and reintegration policies and previous experiences of repatriation are outlined as well as the number of reported repatriated OFWs. Similar to Asis (2020), Liao (2020) discusses the challenges of limited flights and resources, the dependence on various government agencies and the resulting coordination lapses among these agencies. Again, the experience of the OFWs is limited to the extensive waiting time in quarantine facilities, which has caused distress and anxiety among repatriates (Liao, 2020). Liao (2020) concludes that the Philippines still prioritises the labour export system, thereby neglecting further development of repatriation and reintegration policies, particularly regarding the post-arrival phase. This has impacted the success of their repatriation and reintegration programmes amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, examining the policies and programmes aimed at assisting OFWs during crises can lead to policy development.

Other literature has also discussed the shifting identities and stigmatisation of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Almendral (2020) argues that despite the

perception of OFWs as heroes and drivers of the Philippine economy, they have still been neglected and treated as disposable resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is precisely during the COVID-19 pandemic that OFWs need additional assistance. This is highlighted by the MICIC guidelines that put migrants at the centre of crisis response and management. Similarly, Fernandez et al. (2020) state that OFWs have been stigmatised as carriers of the virus, which has led to hesitancy among many local governments to allow migrants waiting in Manila to return their home provinces due to fears of COVID-19 transmission (Fernandez et al., 2020). Stigmatisation may also affect other forms of assistance available to repatriated OFWs and the challenges they face upon return. Therefore, it is important to also incorporate the perspective of OFWs themselves.

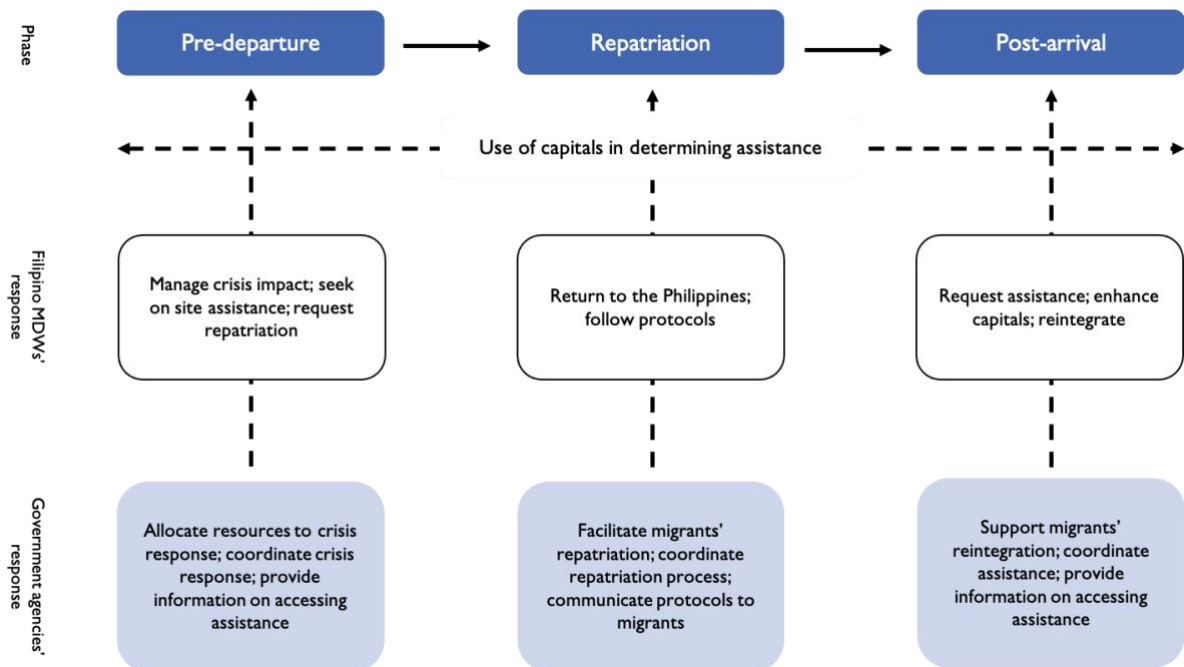
One of the few studies examining the experiences of repatriated OFWs, is the IOM's (2021a) 'COVID-19 Impact Assessment on Returned Overseas Filipino Workers'. The quantitative study is based on land- and sea-based OFWs who returned during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the study refers to returned OFWs, it still largely focuses on repatriation, such as the repatriation support received and the access to government assistance, which shows the conceptual difficulties surrounding return migration. The IOM found that 20 percent of female OFWs paid for their return and were less likely to receive repatriation support compared to male OFWs (IOM, 2021a). The study also acknowledges that repatriation extends to the post-arrival phase, by examining the challenges upon return as well as the assistance received. The main challenge OFWs faced was finding employment or generating income (IOM, 2021a). As a result of the challenges they face, 48 percent of OFWs have remigration intentions (IOM, 2021a). While the IOM's study provides an overview of returned OFWs, the quantitative nature of their study limits the in-depth understanding of repatriated OFWs' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further qualitative research on the experiences of repatriated OFWs can thus yield new and insightful findings.

2.4. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework portrayed in figure 3 refers to capital, structure, and agency and incorporates aspects of the MICIC guidelines. It highlights each phase of the repatriation process, namely the pre-departure, repatriation, and post-arrival phase and outlines the response of Filipino MDWs and government agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the Filipino MDWs, their response mostly includes seeking assistance and exercising agency to manage and limit the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their capital. For the government

agencies, they must ensure that they have the capacity, such as funds and resources, to be able to respond to and assist migrants impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This also requires putting structures in place to facilitate migrants' repatriation. In addition, they must coordinate with other government agencies and communicate the assistance available with migrants to ensure the timely and effective provision of assistance. The government agencies' response therefore impacts the Filipino MDWs' response and the assistance they receive. Lastly, the use of capital by Filipino MDWs and government agencies is important, as it may impact the assistance MDWs require, their awareness of the assistance available, and ultimately the assistance they receive.

Figure 3. Conceptual framework



3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and methods

Data for this research was mostly obtained using qualitative research methods. Qualitative research allows participants to share their experiences in more detail, thereby providing more personal, in-depth, and contextual understandings of the research topic, which aligns well with the aim of the research (Hennink et al., 2020a). Moreover, as difficult, and personal experiences, such as abuse, have been reported among Filipino MDWs, adopting qualitative methods is more suitable for these sensitive topics (Hennink et al., 2020a).

In-depth interviews were conducted with Filipino MDWs who were repatriated to the Philippines from various host countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews examine how the Philippine government has assisted and responded to the needs of OFWs, particularly MDWs, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of the interviews was therefore on the assistance that the participants received during the repatriation process. However, their lives as MDWs, how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their migration experience and ultimately led to their repatriation was also discussed to understand other factors that may have shaped their repatriation experience.

Key informants, which included members of various government agencies involved in the repatriation of OFWs, were also consulted. The key informant interviews provided further understanding of the repatriation process and policies, the approach adopted by the government agencies, and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the provision of assistance. Through the interviews with the repatriated Filipino MDWs, it became clear that there was a gap between the assistance available according to the policies and media reports and the assistance received by the MDWs. Therefore, the key informant interviews focused on the implementation of the repatriation policies and programmes as well as the opportunities and challenges faced in assisting repatriated OFWs. These interviews offered a different perspective and provided further insights into the repatriation process; particularly as up-to-date information was limited online. It should be noted that the key informant interviews referred to the repatriation process for all OFWs, as it was not possible to solely focus on MDWs.

The interviews were semi-structured, which ensured that the key topics were covered while also providing the opportunity for the participants to direct the interview as well as accommodate unexpected findings (Hennink et al., 2020a). Therefore, interview guides (see appendix A and B) were prepared prior to the interviews, which included questions related to the key topics. In addition, participants were sent a consent form (see appendix C) prior to the

interview, to which they provided verbal or written consent. The interviews with the Filipino MDWs lasted, on average, one and a half hours. As difficulties in recruiting participants arose due to the language requirement, some interviews were conducted with a translator, who was arranged by one of the gatekeepers. The interviews with the government agencies lasted around one hour. Three interviews with the government agencies were conducted through a questionnaire as per the agencies request. These questionnaires only included open-ended questions retrieved from the interview guide to ensure that the data collected was comparable to the interviews and allowed the government agencies to provide detailed responses. In addition, using questionnaires was only suitable for the government agencies as the information is less sensitive compared to the Filipino MDWs. All the data was collected from a distance, due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the interviews were conducted online, through (video) calling platforms such as Zoom and Facebook Messenger.

Aside from the interviews, policy documents from official government sources were examined to identify the policies and programmes related to the assistance of OFWs, particularly their repatriation amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy documents included Philippine Republic Acts (RAs), as well as issuances from relevant government agencies, such as the DFA, DOLE, IATF-EID, and POEA. In addition, media reports published between March 2020 and May 2021 were reviewed. These media reports were related to the situation of repatriated OFWs and the government's response to OFWs' needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main search terms included repatriation, return, COVID-19, OFWs, and domestic workers on the online platforms of the Philippine News Agency (PNA), Manila Bulletin, and the Rappler. These platforms were selected as they vary significantly in perspectives – while PNA is an official government news outlet, focusing on the government efforts, the Rappler is more community based, thus incorporating the perspective and opinions of OFWs themselves. The policy documents and media reports were not formally analysed. Rather, they were used as an exploratory research phase to become more familiar with the research context. This proved to be useful, especially since the research was conducted from a distance. Fortunately, almost all policy documents and media reports are published online and in English.

3.1.1. Data analysis

With consent from the participants, the interviews were recorded, which allowed for the interviews to be transcribed verbatim and then coded using NVivo. The interviews with the Filipino MDWs and the key informants were coded together, as the codes were quite similar,

and this would allow for easy comparison of the two perspectives. The policy documents and media reports were also imported into NVivo and then coded accordingly. Initially, a combination of inductive and deductive coding was adopted, with the majority being inductive codes. However, as the interview guide was adapted after the initial interviews, the codes became more deductive. This was expected because as more participants are interviewed, data becomes more saturated and thus it is less likely to find new information (Hennink et al, 2020b).

3.2. Research participants

The main research participants are migrant domestic workers. The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention (C189) defines domestic workers as people engaged in domestic work – work performed in or from a household – within an employment relationship (ILO, 2018). The common tasks carried out by domestic workers include cleaning, cooking, and taking care of young and elderly family members (ILO, 2018). MDWs were chosen as cases, as they are one of the largest occupation groups of OFWs and they have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the temporal nature of domestic work. Since repatriation experiences depend on certain characteristics, this research aims to achieve maximum diversity, while remaining representative, by incorporating MDWs from different social groups located in a variety of regions across the Philippines and who worked in various host countries. Ensuring diversity is important for this research, as certain characteristics may impact the assistance that the MDWs received due to how and by who assistance is distributed.

In total, twenty repatriated Filipino MDWs participated in this research¹. The sample size is smaller than the initial objective. However, there is still sufficient diversity among the Filipino MDWs. In addition, the smaller sample size was also suitable for the research, as it aims to identify broad issues in the provision of assistance to repatriated Filipino MDWs. Moreover, towards the end of data collection, fewer to no new issues were identified, signifying data saturation.

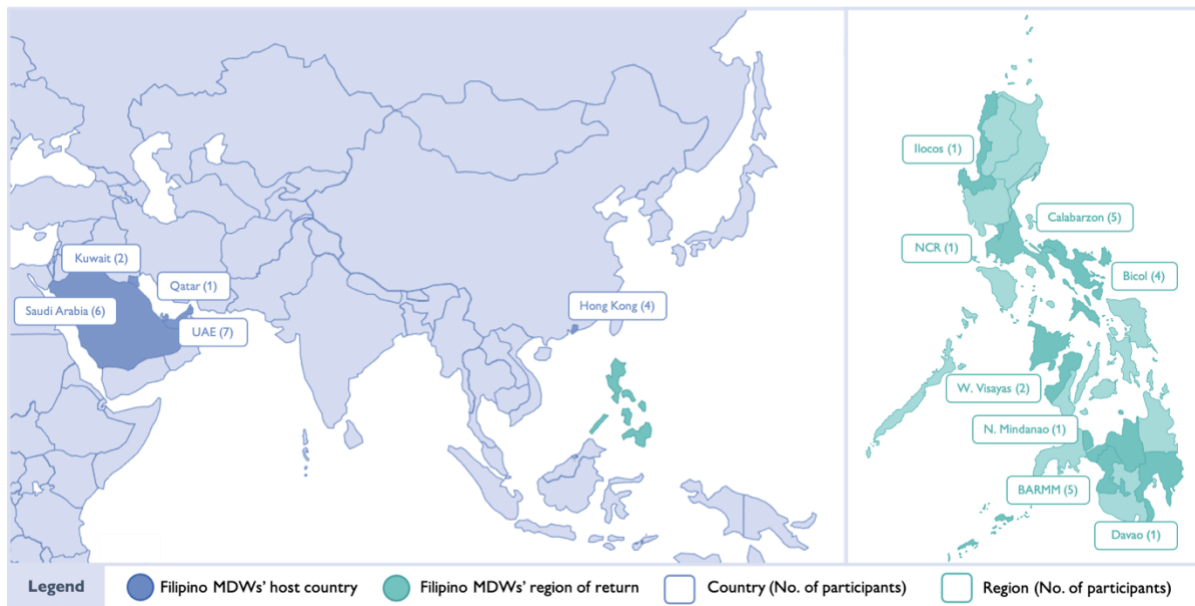
The host countries and return regions of the Filipino MDWs² are portrayed in figure 4. The most common host country among the Filipino MDWs was the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (7). Other Filipino MDWs worked in Saudi Arabia (6), Hong Kong (4), Kuwait (2), and Qatar (1). This is representative of the Filipino MDW population, where Saudi Arabia, UAE,

¹ A complete overview of the characteristics of the participating Filipino MDWs can be found in appendix D

² In this research, '(Filipino) MDWs' refers to the 20 Filipino MDWs who participated in this research

and Hong Kong are the most popular destinations. In addition, the most common regions they returned to were Calabarzon (5) and Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) (5), followed by Bicol Region (4), and Western Visayas (2). Other Filipino MDWs returned to the National Capital Region (NCR) (1), Northern Mindanao (1), Ilocos Region (1), and Davao Region (1). While this is less representative of the home regions of the OFW population, it has allowed for significant diversity (in ethnicities) among the participants.

Figure 4. Host countries and return regions of participating Filipino MDWs



Note: Template retrieved from www.yourfreetemplates.com

Philippine government agencies were also approached for this research, as they can provide further insights into the policies implemented and assistance provided during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seven relevant government agencies participated in this research, the distribution of which is shown in table 1. Data saturation was achieved among the small sample size as the findings from each government agencies were very similar.

Table 1. Participating government agencies

Region	Government agencies interviewed
Philippines	OWWA (1), TESDA (1)
Asia Pacific	Consulate (1), OWWA (1)
Middle East	Consulate (1), Embassy (1), POLO (1)

Most of the government agencies interviewed are located in migrant host countries. These government agencies include Philippine Embassies, Philippine Consulates, Philippine Overseas Labour Offices (POLOs), and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) posts. While these government agencies are located abroad, they are attached to larger agencies in the Philippines, such as the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) or the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) and are therefore able to provide insights into the assistance in the various phases. Two government agencies operate in the Philippines, one of which focuses only on reintegration. With consent from the participating government agencies, the name of government agencies will be used in this research, but the agent interviewed will remain anonymous.

3.2.1. Participant recruitment strategies

The main participant recruitment strategy adopted for the Filipino MDWs was gatekeepers, namely non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating within the migrant community in the Philippines and migrant host countries. The use of gatekeepers was necessary for this research as the participants were harder to reach than initially expected. As the gatekeepers were already extending assistance to repatriated OFWs during the pandemic, they had many contacts who they could approach on behalf of the researcher. Four gatekeepers were used in this research, providing different forms of assistance. While most gatekeepers directly recruited the participants, other gatekeepers shared a sift questionnaire within their network or provided other resources related to the research. The eligibility criteria given to the gatekeepers was concise yet limited - potential participants included any Filipino MDWs who were repatriated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, convenience sampling was mostly used, which tends to limit diversity among participants. However, the use of various gatekeepers allowed a larger population to be reached and allowed for sufficient diversity. Nevertheless, the participants were often limited to their ability to speak English and whether they had a stable internet connection. Once the gatekeepers provided the contact details of potential participants, they were contacted via Facebook messenger, text, or email. Some of the contacts provided did not respond when contacted or were not available within the research timeframe.

Other participant recruitment strategies, such as snowballing, informal or personal networks, and advertisements, were also used but were less successful. For instance, only one participant was recruited through a personal contact in the Philippines and one participant was recruited through snowball sampling, as many participants referred back to the gatekeeper when asked about other repatriated Filipino MDWs that would be willing to participate.

Advertisements were also placed in OFW related Facebook groups. However, the group members who responded to the advertisements tended not to be eligible for the research and thus the response was very low among the study population. This is a common occurrence with the use of advertisements, particularly as it was not possible to provide a strong incentive for potential participants in this research (Hennink et al., 2020b).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit government agencies. The government agencies were selected based on their responsibilities and location; all government agencies play a role in the repatriation or reintegration of OFWs, and the government agencies located in migrant host countries were selected based on the popular host countries of Filipino MDWs. This allowed for information-rich participants who can provide an in-depth understanding on the research topic (Hennink et al., 2020b). The government agencies were approached through email. Many government agencies did not respond to the request, and some felt they were not suited for the research due to their limited experience with repatriation.

3.3. Operationalisation of concepts

The concepts used in this research are operationalised based on the most used definitions, according to the research context or literature. Firstly, repatriation is defined as a process whereby migrants are assisted in their return to their country of origin. This therefore goes beyond the physical return flight but also refers to the assistance that they may also receive from various stakeholders, including the government, civil society, or their family and friends in the pre-departure phase and the post-arrival phase. The assistance in the pre-departure phase includes the organising of flights, organising an exit visa if necessary, and other services to support migrants preparing to return. Repatriation during the COVID-19 pandemic requires assistance during COVID-19 testing, quarantine, and transport to their home provinces. The assistance in the post-arrival phase refers to programmes and services that address the capital needs of repatriated migrants, which is related to reintegration. However, the concept of reintegration is not explicitly used in this research but captured by the post-arrival phase, as many migrants may remigrate and thus not actively reintegrate. Nevertheless, they may still require assistance for the time spent in the Philippines after their repatriation.

To identify the type of assistance needed by Filipino MDWs, questions were asked concerning their life abroad, their repatriation decision-making, and if they felt ready to return to the Philippines. Questions were also asked about how they received information regarding and requested assistance, particularly related to the use of their social capital. In addition, to

understand if the assistance addressed their capital needs sufficiently, questions were asked about the challenges they face in the Philippines and their remigration intentions. For the government agencies, the questions related more to the assistance available and provided, how OFWs are informed about the assistance, and the challenges of and key learnings from providing assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4. Reflection on subjectivity and positionality

Reflecting on the subjectivity and positionality of the researcher is an important aspect in the research process to avoid limiting the research's potential. This research was conducted with awareness on how aspects such as the appearance, accreditation and characteristics of the researcher may influence the participants' perception and their willingness to share their experience (Lune & Berg, 2017). The interviewer and interviewee were the same gender, which may have benefited the research, as participants may have felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with someone of the same gender, especially for sensitive topics. Additionally, having prior knowledge of Filipino MDWs experiences due to previous research and experience was beneficial. This allowed for the formulation of relevant interview questions, but it was important to ensure that it did not steer the interview into a certain direction that may be less applicable to the participant.

It is also important to reflect on the potential power relations during the recruitment process and interviews (Lune & Berg, 2017). The researcher was introduced as a student conducting research as part of a master's degree, which may have influenced the research, such as the ability to recruit participants. As the topic of the research is a very current and many researchers are currently interviewing Filipino MDWs, there was interview fatigue among the research population. Being a student meant the researcher did not have the same organisational support as well-accredited researchers within reputable institutions. This was particularly the case among the key informants, who may have taken the researcher less seriously and thus be less inclined to participate in the research. For the Filipino MDWs, being a student may have reduced the sense of power relations.

In addition, with the use of gatekeepers and a translator in some interviews, participants may have trusted the researcher more and felt comfortable to participate (Hennink et al., 2020b). During the interviews conducted with the translator, it was ensured that participants did not personally know the translator to ensure they were comfortable sharing their personal experience. Furthermore, the gatekeepers were able to advise on the norms of conducting

research in the Philippines, such as the need to provide load for participants. However, it may have also made MDWs more reluctant to share their personal experiences that they do not want their acquaintances to know. In addition, attending webinars hosted by migrant organisations, including those who were acting as gatekeepers in the research, was not only useful to understand more about the research context, but also helped build better relations with the migrant organisations. While this may have had a limited impact on alleviating researcher positionality, it emphasised the genuine interest in the topic and the work of migrant organisations.

3.5. Limitations of the research

There are some limitations involved in this research. Firstly, the research is not representative of all repatriated Filipino MDWs. This is not feasible as the Filipino MDW population is extremely large and have worked in a variety of host countries and return to different regions within the Philippines, some of whom are easier to reach. Moreover, most participants were recruited by a gatekeeper, which resulted in limited control on the representativeness of the sample (Hennink et al., 2020b). However, reflecting on the participants in this research, there is significant diversity. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the repatriation of Filipino MDWs, is still ongoing and the Philippine government's approach to repatriation changes regularly. Thus, no generalisations should be made based on the findings of this research.

Aside from the possible selection bias when using gatekeepers, it was also important to ensure that the participants were not coerced by the gatekeeper to participate (Hennink et al., 2020b). This possible concern was limited as the potential participants were always contacted personally by the researcher, inquiring their willingness to participate. It was also important to check that the participants recruited by the gatekeeper met the eligibility criteria for the research (Hennink et al., 2020b). For instance, one participant recruited by a gatekeeper was repatriated at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was only identified during the interview. While this did not fit the eligibility criteria, her experience still provided useful insights, as the assistance she received in the post-arrival phase was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, a small compensation was given to most of the MDW participants, in the form of load for their mobile phones. Many of the gatekeepers stated this was standard practice in the Philippines, especially when the interviews are conducted online, as participating in the

interviews meant that they had to use additional load. Thus, compensating the participants for this was fair. The participants were informed about the compensation prior to the interview, as this had to be transferred to the participants' phones. While providing compensation to participants can encourage them to participate and impact their responses, it is not likely to have much impact on this research as it mostly covered the costs incurred. The translator used for some of the interviews was also provided compensation. It is possible that the translator was financially driven, which may impact the reliability of the research.

There are also limitations related to differences in native language. While the interviews were conducted mostly in English, some participants were not fluent in English and had difficulties understanding or answering some of the interview questions. Nevertheless, with the rephrasing of questions and patience, this could be overcome. To reduce limitations arising from the use of a translator, a consultation was organised between the researcher and translator prior to the interviews to inform the translator about the research, discuss the role of the translator in the interviews, and limit potential misconceptions. However, it is still possible that the intended meaning of some responses was lost in translation, which reduces the reliability of the research. Language was less limiting in the key informant interviews, as the participants were fluent in English, as well as in the policy documents and media reports, as these are also published in English.

There are, however, some other limitations related to the key informant interviews, such as a potential conflict of interest. From the interviews with the Filipino MDWs, which were conducted before the key informant interviews, the frustration towards the government response was evident. This was identified as an interesting aspect to discuss. However, it was important to ensure that the key informants did not feel scrutinised for their COVID-19 response. In addition, as the key informants were still employed at the government agency, it is possible that this impacted their responses. For some key informants, it was challenging to get precise details on the assistance provided and the challenges they faced. To limit this, the consent form clearly stated that there was no conflict of interest and that the reputation of the government agencies and agents would be protected by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, the quality of responses may be reduced for the government agencies who requested questionnaires rather than interviews, as it was not possible to ask follow-up questions, explain questions if necessary, or motivate them to elaborate (Hennink et al., 2020a). However, it does allow them to provide more hard data, such as the number of assisted migrants, which participants often could not recall during interviews and it did not require transcription, which can be time consuming.

Lastly, there are some limitations related to conducting interviews from a distance and online. The main limitation was bad internet connection, which meant that some interviews were disrupted, or the connection distorted the audio, meaning some important points may not have been understood correctly. In addition, the use of internet may exclude participants that do use or have access to the internet or who do not have a strong enough internet connection to participate. Conducting interviews online also made it more difficult to build rapport, particularly with the participants who could not turn on their video, as it was difficult to read their body language (Hennink et al., 2020a).

4. Research context

4.1. The Philippines

The Philippines is a middle-income archipelagic country in Southeast Asia. The country shares maritime borders with China, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Palau, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The capital of the Philippines, Manila, is located on the largest island of the Philippines, Luzon. As portrayed in figure 5, the Philippines is divided into 17 regions, consisting of various provinces.

Figure 5. Map of the Philippines



Note: Template retrieved from www.yourfreetemplates.com

The total population in the Philippines is approximately 110.8 million, making it the thirteenth most populated country in the world (CIA, 2021). The Philippines is an ethnically diverse country, with many ethnicities having their own dialect. However, the official languages spoken in the Philippines are Filipino (based on Tagalog) and English (CIA, 2021).

Their competence in English also makes Filipinos popular and desired migrant workers (Barber, 2009).

The economy of the Philippines is largely driven by household consumption and is less dependent on exports. As household consumption is supported by the large influx of remittances and their role as insurance, the economy has also become relatively resilient to economic shocks (CIA, 2021). As a result, the Philippines has only experienced a decline in remittances of 0.8 percent since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (IOM, 2021c). Remittances, alongside the 21.6 percent of the population below the poverty line and the 6.8 percent unemployment rate, therefore, remain key drivers of migration (CIA, 2021; Saguin, 2020).

4.2. Migration in the Philippines

The Philippines is one of the largest labour-exporting countries and has a highly developed labour migration system that administers and encourages migration (Battistella, 2018). The large population of migrant workers, or Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), are often referred to as *bagong bayani* (modern-day heroes) for their contribution to the Philippine economy through their remittances (Fernandez et al., 2020). In 2019, remittances sent to the Philippines reached USD33.5 billion, which was a 3.9 percent increase from 2018 (PSA, 2020). With remittances estimated to account for 9.3 percent of the total GDP, the Philippines became the fourth largest remittance receiving country (IOM, 2020c).

Literature identifies three waves of migration in the Philippines. During the first wave – from 1900 to the early 1940s – Filipinos started migrating to the United States for the purpose of working in labour markets, such as the agriculture, food processing, and service sectors (Barber, 2009; Tharan, 2009). This wave saw the introduction of English based education in the Philippines, increasing their competence in English and ultimately shaping their migration destinations and privileging above other Asian migrants (Barber, 2009). The independence of the Philippines in 1946 sparked a second wave of migration, whereby highly skilled Filipinos began to migrate to the United States to work in the military and as medical professionals and technicians (Tharan, 2009). In the mid 1970s, the oil crisis prompted a third wave, whereby there was an increase in the demand for low-skilled labour migrants in many Gulf countries (Barber, 2009). This demand for low-skilled labour migrants also contributed to the feminisation of labour migration whereby Filipino women started engaging in domestic work

abroad (Battistella et al., 2011). In 2019, 56 percent of the total number of OFWs were female, most of whom are engaged in domestic work (PSA, 2020).

According to the Philippine Statistic Authority (PSA), there are 2.2 million OFWs (PSA, 2020). The largest proportion of OFWs migrate from the Calabarzon region (20.7 percent), followed by Central Luzon (13.3 percent), National Capital Region (9.7 percent) and Western Visayas (9.0 percent). As portrayed in table 2, the most popular destination is Saudi Arabia, followed by the United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong and Taiwan (PSA, 2020). Similar distributions are visible for female OFWs and thus MDWs.

Table 2. Distribution of overseas Filipino workers by place of work and sex

Place of work	%		
	Both sexes	Male	Female
Africa	1.0	1.9	0.3
Asia	81.1	68.6	91.0
East Asia	21.7	21.2	22.1
Hong Kong	7.5	1.1	12.5
Japan	3.8	5.8	2.3
Taiwan	6.7	8.2	5.5
Other countries	3.7	6.1	1.8
Southeast and South-Central Asia	8.0	7.1	8.8
Malaysia	2.1	1.8	2.4
Singapore	4.1	3.0	4.9
Other countries	1.8	2.4	1.7
Middle East	51.4	40.2	60.2
Kuwait	6.2	2.0	9.5
Qatar	5.6	5.5	5.7
Saudi Arabia	22.4	22.1	22.7
United Arab Emirates	13.2	9.2	16.4
Other countries	4.0	1.5	5.9
Australia	2.1	3.6	0.9
Europe	7.7	12.9	3.6
North and South America	8.1	13.1	4.2

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (2020)

While this only represents the host countries of migrants, it also provides an indication of where many of the repatriated migrants are coming from, as they are temporary migrants.

The Philippines, like most countries, has limited data on return and repatriated migrants, especially regarding the reasons for return, the characteristics of return migrants, and their re-migration intentions (Go, 2012). This is largely due to the lack of a comprehensive OFW data collection system (Saguin, 2020).

4.2.1. Repatriation in the Philippines

Migration disruptions, including conflict, disasters and economic crises disproportionately impact migrants, resulting in the loss of employment and displacement (IOM-SMC, 2013). In these cases, OFWs seek assistance, such as in obtaining documents to remain in the host country, in securing an exit visa to leave the host country, or in accessing financial support, shelter, and transportation assistance to return to the Philippines (Liao, 2020). The Philippines has carried out several large-scale repatriations, most of which were carried out by the OWWA, often in collaboration with the DFA, the IOM, or host countries (Liao, 2020). Table 3 portrays the estimated number of repatriated OFWs from notable crises requiring large-scale repatriation.

Table 3. Estimated number of repatriated OFWs during crises

Time period	Region of repatriation	Repatriated OFWs
1990 - 1990	Kuwait, Egypt (Gulf War)	30,000
2006	Lebanon (conflict)	6,000 - 7,000
2011	Libya	10,000
	Syria	3,000 – 4,000
2013	Syria (civil war)	1,699
	Egypt (civil disturbance)	148
	Sabah (Lahad Datu stand-off)	7,068
2014	Libya, Gaza Strip, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon	6,806
2015	Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen	2,349

Sources: Battistella (2004); IOM-SMC (2013); Jureidini (2019); Sevilla (2013); DFA (2014-2017)

Table 3 illustrates that most crises requiring repatriation are conflict driven. However, repatriation has also occurred during financial crises, such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2008 global economic crisis (Liao, 2020). Health crises, such as the SARS, Ebola, and MERS-CoV epidemics, have also resulted in displaced OFWs and thus repatriation. However, the impacts of these health crises were often confined to specific host countries whereas the

COVID-19 pandemic has a global impact (Asis, 2020). As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the largest Philippine repatriation effort. The first repatriation occurred on 9 February 2020 from Wuhan, China (DFA, 2021). Since then, the Philippines has continuously repatriated OFWs. As of July 2021, the Philippines has repatriated 640,133 OFWs, with the country still logging 1,000 OFW arrivals a day (OWWA, 2021b; Nepomuceno, 2021). 67 percent of repatriated OFWs are land-based migrants (OWWA, 2021b), who were mostly working in the Middle East (69.89 percent) or Asia Pacific region (11.26 percent) (DFA, 2021). Around 60,000 more OFWs are expected to be repatriated to the Philippines this year (Nepomuceno, 2021).

4.3. The institutionalisation of migration

With the Philippine economy largely being driven by remittances from OFWs, the government encourages and facilitates labour migration. As a result, the Philippines has been able to develop a comprehensive migration governance system by implementing policies and agencies that facilitate the deployment of and assist OFWs abroad (Liao, 2020). This section will mainly focus on the repatriation policies and agencies involved, which arguably remain underdeveloped compared to other migration policies in the Philippines.

4.3.1. Government agencies

There are several departments of the Philippine government, such as the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE), that have divisions focusing on Filipino migrants. The DFA is mandated to assist all overseas Filipinos (OFs) through Philippine Embassies and Consulates (RA8042, 1995). The DOLE is mandated to assist overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and is also responsible for formulating policies and implementing programmes and services related to labour and employment for local and overseas Filipino workers (DOLE, 2018). To fulfil its mandate, the DOLE has several overseas posts, bureaus, and attached agencies (DOLE, 2018). The main agencies assisting and protecting the welfare of OFWs include the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), the Overseas Workers Welfare Association (OWWA), and the Philippine Overseas Labour Offices (POLOs) (DOLE, 2018). While these agencies have similar responsibilities, each focuses on different aspects of assisting and protecting OFWs.

The POEA primarily focuses on the deployment of OFWs by facilitating the generation and preservation of decent jobs abroad, but they are also responsible for protecting migrants'

welfare through their registered recruitment agencies (POEA, 2021). OWWA is a member-based institution, which is responsible for protecting the welfare of OFWs and their families (RA10801, 2015). OWWA has several divisions, regional offices, and foreign service posts, which are mandated to provide shelter, medicine, and counselling services to distressed OFWs, regardless of their OWWA membership status (Go, 2012). The programmes and services provided by OWWA include Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars (PDOS), social benefits, education and training, welfare, legal assistance, repatriation, and reintegration (OWWA, 2021a). Similarly, the 34 POLOs also protect the rights and promote the welfare of OFWs (DOLE, 2013). However, they serve as the overseas operating arm of DOLE and thus their primary focus is implementing Philippine labour policies and programmes rather than delivering services (DOLE, 2013).

In many host countries, the government agencies are housed in the same building as the Philippine Embassy or Consulate. In addition, not all host countries have an OWWA post or a POLO. In these cases, either the Philippine Embassy, Consulate or a post located in a neighbouring country will assist the OFWs. As a result, tasks are often carried out by OWWA posts and POLOs in coordination with the Assistance to Nationals (ATN) unit of the Philippine Embassy or Consulate (DOLE, 2013). This is pursuant to the One-Country Team Approach (OCTA), which was adopted in 1993, as per Executive Order No. 74. The executive order states that “all officers, representatives, and personnel of the Philippine government posted abroad [...] shall, on a per country basis, act as one-country team with a mission under the leadership of the Ambassador, who shall act as team leader” (President of the Philippines, 1993, §1a). In line with the OCTA, the Joint Manual of Operations in Providing Assistance to Migrant Workers and Other Filipinos Overseas also outlines each government agency’s specific services to overseas Filipinos (POEA, 2015). This is to ensure the efficient and effective provision of assistance to overseas Filipinos and improve their awareness of the responsibility of each agency (POEA, 2015).

There are also bureaus and agencies under DOLE who are responsible for the reintegration of OFWs, namely the National Reintegration Centre for OFWs (NRCO) and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), who cooperate with other agencies, including OWWA. The NRCO serves “as a promotion house for [return migrants] local employment and tap their skills and potentials for national development” (RA10022, 2009, §14). The key reintegration programmes and services provided by the NRCO include job referral, entrepreneurship and enterprise assistance, training and capability building, and counselling (for distressed OFWs) (Battistella, 2018). TESDA offers programmes and services

to all Filipinos, including OFWs during all phases of migration (TESDA, 2021). However, to assist in the reintegration of returning and repatriated OFWs, TESDA offers similar services to the NRCO but focuses more on technical education and skills development (TESDA, 2021).

4.3.2. Migration policies in the Philippines

Despite the primarily labour export approach of the Philippines, they have also developed policies regarding the protection and welfare of OFWs (Liao, 2020). The policies cover all stages of the migration cycle, from pre-departure to return, repatriation, and reintegration. This section will focus mostly on the policies related to return, repatriation, and reintegration, as these are the most relevant for this research.

Initial migration policies in the Philippines did not explicitly refer to repatriation (Liao, 2020). However, with the execution of an OFW in Singapore in 1995, the Philippines' adapted its migration policies to grant further protection of the welfare of OFWs (Battistella, 2012). This also led to the formation of the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995 (RA8042), which is the basis of the Philippine labour migration system (Battistella, 2018; Go, 2012). RA8042 was later amended by RA10022 to include provisions such as mandatory (health) insurance and the introduction of the NRCO (IOM-SMC, 2013). RA8042 addresses repatriation and the responsibility of different stakeholders involved: "the repatriation of the worker [...] shall be the primary responsibility of the agency which recruited or deployed the worker overseas" (1995, §15). However, "in cases where the termination of employment is solely the fault of the worker, the principal/ employer or agency shall not in any matter be responsible for the repatriation" (RA8042, 1995, §15). In addition, "in cases of war, epidemic, disaster or calamities, natural or man-made, and other similar events, the OWWA, in coordination with appropriate international agencies, undertake the repatriation of workers" (RA8042, 1995, §15). Despite this suggesting OWWA as the key agency responsible for emergency repatriation, the DFA remains a prominent agency in emergency repatriations, including during the COVID-19 pandemic (Liao, 2020). This may be because OWWA is "more focused on the members of OWWA because they have a stake in [the] agency due to their contribution" (OWWA Singapore) and thus the DFA responds to non-OWWA members when necessary.

The cost of the repatriation of OFWs may be shouldered by various agencies or individuals, depending on the situation but in line with the responsibilities outlined above. In most cases, the employer or recruitment agency shoulders the repatriation costs unless "the termination of employment is due solely to the fault of the worker" (RA8042, 1995, §15).

However, “in cases where the principal/ employer or recruitment agency cannot be identified, all costs attendant to repatriation shall be borne by the OWWA” (RA8042, 1995, §15). For such cases, OWWA’s emergency repatriation fund of PHP 100 million covers repatriation costs, as well as food, shelter, airport assistance, and transportation (RA8042, 1995; IOM-SMC, 2013).

Despite the developed Philippine migration system, it has also been criticised, particularly with regards to repatriation. Despite the OCTA, a lack of coordination remains a challenge and causes confusion regarding which agency migrants requiring assistance should contact (Asis, 2020; Liao, 2020). Policies are also not always implemented and monitored well, which has allowed for recruitment agencies to disobey government policies (Battistella, 2012; Spitzer & Piper, 2014). In addition, the reintegration programmes are on a voluntary basis, one-size-fits-all, and are often difficult to reach for migrants returning to rural regions in the Philippines (Battistella, 2018). These challenges ultimately impact the assistance repatriated MDWs request and receive.

4.3.3. Policies during the COVID-19 pandemic

In March 2020, the Philippine government introduced the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act (also known as the Bayanihan Act or RA11469), which was renewed in September 2020 through the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act (also known as Bayanihan 2 or RA11494), to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Both acts authorise the President “to exercise powers that are necessary and proper to undertake and implement [...] COVID-19 response and recovery interventions” (RA11469, 2020, §4) and allocate the funding needed for their COVID-19 response. Bayanihan 2 explicitly outlines the measures related to OFWs, such as financial and livelihood assistance, skills, and training programmes, as well as employment opportunities. In line with the implementation of these acts, the different government agencies devised various programmes in accordance with their mandates in combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

The responsibilities of the government agencies have largely remained the same, yet it remains unclear which agency is primarily responsible for the repatriation of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Philippine media has mostly reported on the DFA’s repatriation flights where OWWA’s repatriation efforts refer to the assistance provided upon arrival (Liao, 2020). However, the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infection Diseases (IATF-EID) has also played a key role, as they are responsible for advising government agencies involved in the repatriation. The IATF-EID’s advisories are usually related to the travel restrictions and requirements as well as the quarantine protocols. Moreover,

while there have also been some additional programmes implemented by the Philippine government during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the programmes outlined above remain relevant but have been expanded. Further information regarding the specific policies, programmes, and responsibilities of government agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic is provided in the subsequent chapters.

5. Analysis: Pre-departure phase

5.1. Philippine government's experience

5.1.1. Preparing for the COVID-19 pandemic

Most government agencies in the Philippines started responding to COVID-19 in January 2020, when the first batch of OFWs were repatriated. However, it was not until March that the number of returning OFWs increased drastically and by that time “there was really no time to adjust, we just had to change our system to adjust to the needed resources, find people” (OWWA RAD). For the government agencies located abroad, most did not prepare for the pandemic until there was an outbreak in the host country. Once this was reported, the government agencies started drafting their crisis management plans. For example, POLO Bahrain stated that after the lockdown was announced “POLO started reporting to DOLE what is happening at the post. Then, DOLE responded accordingly, instructed us to submit our plan of action with proposed budget in combatting the pandemic”. Other government agencies stated that they already had a crisis management plan due to their previous experience with crises. However, the impacts of previous crises were mostly limited to the host countries and “this is the first time it’s a health-related pandemic, it’s the whole world” (OWWA Singapore). Most government agencies in the Middle East had experience with conflict-related repatriation. For instance, POLO Bahrain mentioned that with the tension in Middle East in 2019 “DOLE required POLO offices to submit a repatriation plan which included the repatriation budget, in case the war might happen so with this emergency situation, we were faced with the challenge of developing a contingency plan”. The government agencies in Dubai, Hong Kong, and Singapore also mentioned that they had previous experience with SARS and MERS-CoV, which meant they, along with the host government, already knew how to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that crisis response and management strategies used in previous crises are to an extent operable. However, full preparedness was not attainable due the distinct nature and unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic also impacts the operations of all government agencies, as many work from home, have alternative work schemes, or shortened their in-person transaction hours to prevent COVID-19 transmission. Therefore, face-to-face assistance was usually by appointment only. A lack of capacity, particularly personnel and funds, was also mentioned by most government agencies: “POLO’s service of response to requests for assistance is quite overwhelming, considering the POLO’s limited manpower component and limited resources” (POLO Bahrain). This affects the robustness of government agencies’ responses (MICIC

Initiative, 2016). In addition, their response is further impacted by personnel who contracted COVID-19 or had been exposed to individuals infected with COVID-19, which meant that they had to work from home to sanitise the office. The Philippine Embassy in Riyadh had to temporarily suspend their Embassy-on-Wheels due to infected personnel. Despite this, most government agencies believed that it did not impact the assistance they were able to provide, as “they can call the hotline 24/7, they have access to social media where we do respond to them immediately” (OWWA Singapore). However, these digital communication channels do not account for MDWs who do not have access to a mobile phone or the internet, which limits their ability to inform government agencies of their needs (MICIC Initiative, 2016). Nevertheless, the use of social media demonstrates how they use social capital to assist OFWs.

5.1.2. Preparing for repatriation

The government agencies located in the host countries were the primary agencies involved in preparing for repatriation. In line with the OCTA and Joint Manual, “when there are OFWs that need to be repatriated they go to the welfare officer at the Embassy [...] who inform the Administrator of the need to repatriate these workers. The administrator would then instruct us at the division to facilitate the funding meaning to prepare the documents necessary to transmit the funds for that repatriation” (OWWA RAD). This links to the MICIC guidelines, that believe establishing coordination agreements among government agencies maximises resources thus improving the effectiveness of crisis responses (MICIC Initiative, 2016). However, preparing for repatriation is more challenging when there are no Philippine government agencies located in the host country. For example, “in Cambodia, there’s no welfare officer there, so the one taking care of that is in Singapore. There’s a clamour for repatriation of OFWs but we are finding it difficult to prepare for that. There are no flights, we cannot do interviews to check which of the OFWs are ready for the repatriation” (OWWA RAD). The government agencies therefore use their social capital to coordinate with other stakeholder and allow them to assist migrants in certain countries (MICIC Initiative, 2016).

The DOLE also implemented an online OFW tracking system called the OFW Assistance Information System (OASIS) in June 2020 (POEA, 2020). The platform allows OFWs intending to return to the Philippines to register and submit their details at least 5 days before returning to the Philippines (POEA, 2020). OASIS “can facilitate the identification and classification of arriving OFWs and substantially help in streamlining arrivals [...], as well as ensure the conduct of an organised system of health protocols for returning OFWs” (Gonzales,

2020, p. 2). While recognising that the tracking system provides useful information, the OWWA RAD favoured other tracking portals, such as *BalikPinas.ph*, which acts as a One-Stop Shop (OSS). The *BalikPinas.ph* portal also concerns the personal information of the OFWs, such as the home province they are returning to, and is also a registration tool for the mandatory COVID-19 testing. OWWA RAD believed the *BalikPinas.ph* provided more accurate information, as OASIS is voluntarily and completed by the OFW prior to their repatriation, whereas they are able to validate the information in *BalikPinas.ph* once they arrive in the Philippines. Most government agencies stated that the tracking portals were used to project the number of arrivals as well as to facilitate them with COVID-19 testing, quarantine, and transport. Therefore, collecting information on migrants provides government agencies with the human capital necessary to allocate sufficient resources, ultimately improving their crisis response (MICIC Initiative, 2016). However, there are some discrepancies with the data collected, which is largely due to the underreporting of repatriated OFWs. Thus, dependence on these systems can result in the under allocation of resources, thereby reducing the assistance available to OFWs.

Regarding the assistance available abroad, the government agencies stated that this mostly includes financial assistance and relief, such as food packs. Financial assistance worth PHP 10,000 (USD 200) is provided by OWWA to OFWs who have tested positive for COVID-19. The emphasis on financial assistance links to perceptions of financial capital as the most important and convertible capital (Bourdieu, 1986), as it the first capital that government agencies aim to restore and is used to enhance human capital. In some host countries, the government agencies distributed food packs with the assistance of members from the Filipino community. The assistance available to OFWs awaiting repatriation was mostly limited to providing shelter. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the capacity of these shelters was limited further, and stricter COVID-19 restrictions were implemented. For instance, OWWA Singapore mentioned that they can only accommodate 10 OFWs thus if their shelter is full, they refer the OFWs to church organisations or NGOs who are able to accommodate more OFWs, usually for free. This portrays how government agencies also tap into the services available within their social networks to be able to assist more OFWs.

5.1.3. Coordination

Most government agencies were satisfied with the coordination among government agencies during the pre-departure phase. The government agencies tend to be “housed in the

Embassy so it's OWWA and the POLO in coordination with the Assistance to Nationals Unit of the Embassy" (Embassy Riyadh) that assist OFWs needing repatriation. This close coordination allows their social capital to be maintained easily. In addition, they communicate with their home offices daily regarding how to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and the number of OFWs requiring repatriation. The number of OFWs requesting repatriation was especially important because it allowed them "to prepare the documents necessary to transmit the funds for that repatriation [and] provide the assistance necessary on the day of their arrival based on their cases that we would know beforehand" (OWWA RAD). The coordination is facilitated by digital services, such as Zoom; "we can communicate easier because there is Zoom. Meetings with overseas people and regional people can easily be set up" (OWWA Singapore). However, coordination is also hindered due to infected personnel "sometimes it would take a while for a certain document to be approved" (OWWA Singapore). This shows that government agencies have established clear channels of communication, which allowed them to prepare for the repatriation of OFWs and assist them despite hinderances (MICIC Initiative, 2016).

The government agencies also highlighted the importance of coordination with the host countries and commended those who incorporated migrants into their COVID-19 response. Coordination seemed to be stronger with the host countries who had already experienced a crisis, as they were able to collect and share information on migrants. Such information enables government agencies to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs and allocate the necessary resources. For example, in Hong Kong, the government provided information regarding OFWs immediately and while the Singaporean government also provides advisories, they implement a stricter privacy ordinance, whereby only the case numbers rather than names of infected OFWs are provided. This shows that while the MICIC guidelines state that this information is "subject to privacy, confidentiality, and the security and safety of migrants" (MICIC Initiative, 2016, p. 10), data privacy laws and structures hinder the provision of assistance, as it means the host government cannot provide the personal information of infected OFWs. In such cases, it becomes the OFWs responsibility to report to the government agency if they require assistance. However, usually the OFWs "don't know that we provide financial assistance" (OWWA Singapore) and therefore do not contact the government agencies, indicating that migrants are not sufficiently informed on how to access assistance.

5.1.4. Communicating with OFWs

There are several ways that the government agencies communicate with OFWs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government agencies were confronted with the challenge of “[devising] ways on how we can communicate [...] without having to risk everyone’s safety” (POLO Riyadh). This led to the digitalisation of a lot of communication, with most having “a 24/ 7 quick response to OFWs routine queries either by phone, email, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media” (POLO Bahrain). The government agencies also maximise the use of social media to disseminate information regarding COVID-19 policies, data, and available assistance, such as repatriation flights. This was usually published on the government agencies’ dedicated Facebook pages. Other Facebook pages, such as OWWA Quarantine Operations and OFW Help, were also launched by OWWA and the DFA. Both pages serve as (emergency) help pages for distressed OFWs and are dedicated to sharing advisories and answering queries from OFWs. This concurs with previous findings on the role of technology and social media as a source of information (Coleman, 1988; Utz & Muscanell, 2015). However, this is not relevant to all migrants, particularly MDWs, due to the isolated nature of domestic work, whereby some MDWs may not have access to a mobile phone or internet.

5.2. Filipino MDWs’ experience

5.2.1. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Domestic workers are among the most vulnerable migrant populations, which is largely due to the lack of social protection for MDWs (Begum, 2020). Their vulnerability is also heightened by the many host countries of Filipino MDWs who have not ratified the Domestic Workers Convention (C189) (ILO, n.d.) as well as the *kafala* system implemented in most Middle Eastern host countries (Begum, 2020). This results in the working and living conditions being determined by the benevolence of employers (Begum, 2020). Such structures often constrain MDWs’ agency.

Aside from one, all MDWs had signed a written contract, which specified their wage, day off, along with other working conditions. However, some MDWs mentioned that their employers did not follow the contract. For example, Rosamine³ said that her employer “didn’t give me a day off or a rest day, even though it was stated in the contract”. Joy, who had not seen a written contract, also stated that she was unaware of her working conditions, including her wage rate. In addition, when “I complained about my situation, my employer said that I

³ All the MDWs’ names used are pseudo names

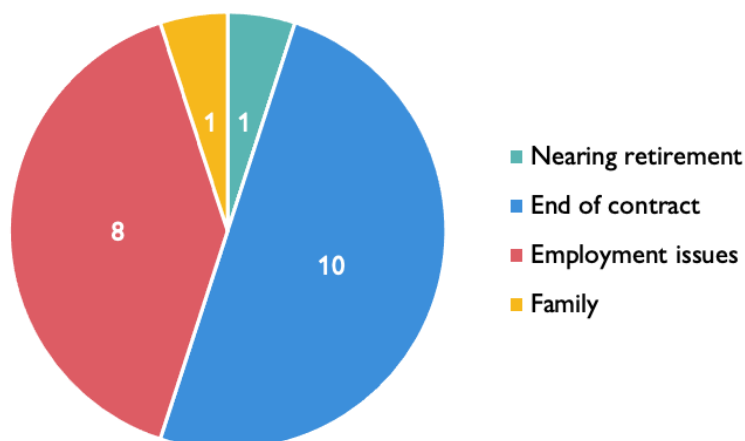
will be sold to other employers” (Joy). Thus, Joy’s employers threaten to sell her to other employers to demonstrate their power over her and constrain her agency. Such situations are possible due to the nature of domestic work and the lack of regulation, which allows employers to breach the contract (Begum, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic further enhanced the vulnerability of many MDWs, with some experiencing worsening working and living conditions. Hiezel explained “when the virus gets near us, I feel that my employer is building the housework [...] I feel that it’s hard to manage because they are very demanding”. Some MDWs were given more tasks, such as helping the children with their online school as well as additional household chores. These additional tasks meant they “got sick” (Michelle) or “lost a lot of weight” (Hiezel), which increases their risk of contracting COVID-19. When Analyn contracted COVID-19, she explained “I was almost hurt by my employer [...] I was infected by them but they’re insulting me like how can you go home you don’t have enough money?”, which highlights the role of financial capital in enabling MDWs to make free choices. For most MDWs, these worsening working and living conditions, among other reasons, led to their repatriation.

5.2.2. Reasons for repatriation

The decision to be repatriated to the Philippines is based on varying motivations, which are portrayed in figure 6. Most MDWs would have been able to return without assistance if there were no travel restrictions, indicating that structures constrain the agency of all MDWs. In addition, despite all MDWs choosing to return or request repatriation, some mentioned that they would have remained abroad if the conditions were more favourable. This relates to De Haas’ (2021) argument that all migrants are impacted by structural constraints to a certain degree hence the distinction between voluntary and involuntary repatriation is less clear.

Figure 6. Primary reason for repatriation



As shown in figure 6, the most common reason for repatriation was the end of the employment contract, which includes MDWs who decided to cut or not renew their contracts as well as employers who shortened MDWs' contracts. This shows that MDWs have varying levels of agency, as some are able to independently end the contract while others have no choice. The end of the contract reduces their financial capital, as they no longer have an income. Some MDWs tried to find a new employer while abroad. For example, Hiezel stated that "after the termination of my contract it's very hard to get another job because some employers need [a worker] a little bit younger than me" and Sara said "I stayed there without a job, trying to find a new employer but because of COVID it is hard [...] and then my aunt also lost her job and was going back to the Philippines so I decided I will also go with her". This relates to Battistella's (2018) 'return of completion', whereby the employment contract has ended despite some MDWs wishing to remain abroad. It is the structures, such as the temporary nature of migration and the visa requirements determining legal status, that constrain their agency and thus limit their options to remain in the host country.

Another common reason for repatriation was employment issues, such as contract violations, poor working conditions, non-payment of wages, and abuse from employers, prior to or at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This links to 'return of setback', as the MDWs are returning before the end of the migration period due to these setbacks. Many of the MDWs who experienced maltreatment first informed their family, who often encouraged or requested their repatriation. For example, Remy's "husband just begged me to come home because of the mistreatment that happened to me". Angeline stated that "I wanted to find a new employer, but family decided repatriation for me immediately". Thus, while MDWs exert some agency in their repatriation decision, their decision is heavily influenced by their family.

Furthermore, Marisol, Erica, and Maria had wanted to return or considered returning to the Philippines several years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and took it as an opportunity to finally return. Marisol and Maria had both considered returning after the end of their previous contracts but had decided to extend it. When their host country announced available flights, they decided to plan their repatriation. Erica explained that due to her work responsibilities at a migrant organisation alongside her domestic work, she was not able to return until she had trained someone to take over her job. When she was finally able to leave, COVID-19 had already spread to her host country. As a result, she was not able to fly back to the Philippines until the end of 2020. These reasons for repatriation can be linked to 'return of achievement' as they voluntarily wanted to return as they no longer felt the need to remain abroad. These reasons also demonstrate that structures can facilitate and constrain their agency (Fine &

Lapavitsas, 2004). For Marisol and Maria, the availability of flights allowed them to exercise their agency by using COVID-19 as an opportunity to return to the Philippines. For Erica, structures, such as her employer or COVID-19 restrictions, limited her agency.

It should be noted that for most MDWs, there were multiple reasons for repatriation. For instance, Gabrielle mentioned that while she was planning to retire and return soon, it was ultimately her shortened contract that resulted in her repatriation. Rosamine also listed multiple reasons for her repatriation, including “lack of food, lack of rest, over working or delay of salary, and then also physical abuse”. It is therefore difficult to distinguish the different types of return, as attempted by Battistella (2018). Moreover, their need for and context of their repatriation indicates that their return should be classified as ‘return of crisis’. However, Battistella (2018) implies that this is involuntary, as migrants are forced to leave. While this is the case for other crises, such as the conflicts discussed by Asis (2014), this is not the case for the MDWs. Rather, the MDWs’ reasons for repatriation are similar those cited in literature regarding other return and repatriation situations (Spitzer & Piper, 2014; Go, 2012). This shows that the conceptualisation of repatriation varies depending on the situation and challenges the dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary nature of repatriation (De Haas, 2021).

5.2.3. Preparing for repatriation

Whether MDWs’ felt prepared to return to the Philippines largely depended on their financial capital. On the one hand, MDWs who had worked abroad for a longer period felt prepared to come home, as they had been able to gain financial capital over a longer period or had elevated their family’s capitals. On the other hand, MDWs who had only worked abroad for a shorter period, felt they were less prepared, as they had been sending most of their salary to their families in the Philippines. For example, Bennelyn said “I feel that I’m not ready. I’m at my lowest. I don’t have anything to bring. I don’t have money”. Sara “thought I’m ready because I saved money and my salary but when I came to the Philippines, I feel it’s not enough”. Thus, the unexpected nature of the repatriation of many MDWs meant they had not accumulated enough financial capital to feel prepared. This links to the Battistella’s (2018) framework, in which migrants who return before the end of the migration period have not achieved their migration goals, such as enhancing financial capital.

Furthermore, many MDWs indirectly prepared for their return by maintaining social capital through regular visits to the Philippines, frequent communication, and by sending remittances, which has been recognised by extant literature (Saguin, 2020). For instance, most migrants were able to visit the Philippines at the end of each contract period and spoke to their

family every day. The temporary nature of their migration and the maintenance of social capital in the Philippines, meant many felt that Philippines was still their home and didn't feel the need to be fully prepared. Maria, for example, said "Philippines was always and will always be my home [...] whichever country I go, it's just a place of work and [the Philippines] is always my home". Marisol also stated that, although "financially wise it's not 100%" prepared, she was ready to go home "to spend more quality time with my kids". Thus, while Bourdieu (1986) emphasises the importance of financial capital, these sentiments are not shared by all MDWs.

5.2.4. Assistance prior to repatriation

When requesting repatriation, MDWs contacted various people, depending on their situation. Most MDWs first informed their employers. While many employers were understanding of the situation, some employers, did not agree to ending the contract. For example, when asking her employer if she could end her contract early, Marisol mentioned "during my first attempt to ask approval she said no". Similarly, Airine said "my boss tells us we can't go home yet because they don't have any worker to help with their household". This shows that their employer's agency is being exercised in the form of resistance and allows them to have power over the MDWs (Kabeer, 2001). Marisol, however, was able to exercise her agency through negotiation: "when I explained that what will I do there if they if we don't have any flight and that I'd rather go back to the Philippines to spend my time with my kids [...], she said okay". However, this was renegotiated by her employer as "if there's any expenses [...], we will not provide it" (Marisol). Other MDWs may have had limited agency and were therefore not able to negotiate. This was the case for Analyn, who stated that "when I went home to the Philippines, they didn't give me half of my salary. I even paid for my ticket". In these cases, their employers can be seen as structures that impact the MDWs' agency.

Other MDWs contacted their recruitment agency or government agencies to assist them with repatriation when their employers did not assist them. This shows that the MDWs are aware on who to contact during crises. Some MDWs were informed and assisted quickly whereas others did not receive assistance until their issue was escalated. For example, Gloria "contacted OWWA after my agency ignored me" and when Joy discussed her situation with a POLO officer, they "said just to accept my fate because I let some scammers do that to me". This indicates that the government agencies constrain the agency of MDWs, despite the policies aiming to protect the welfare of migrants.

Moreover, Rosamine asked her parents to request her repatriation at the POEA. However, her request was not processed until it reached the POLO in her host country after her

situation went viral on social media. She explained that “a group of organisations contacted me on Facebook [...] who helped me to make my situation viral” (Rosamine). She believed that without the help of the organisations, her repatriation would have taken much longer “because of that issue the POLO and my agency got panicked so that’s why they rescued me easily” (Rosamine). Rosamine’s experience portrays the role of social media in obtaining social capital and extending networks to inform government agencies of their needs and access assistance (Vitak, 2014; MICIC Initiative, 2016).

Some MDWs also discussed the available assistance for OFWs abroad. For instance, Anlyn said she had applied for the OWWA assistance of PHP 10,000 for OFWs who contracted COVID-19 while still abroad but she did not receive the assistance, as by the time they had processed her application, she had been repatriated. Gabrielle also said that some government agencies provided relief like food packs but “it seems that the limited resources mean the posts less actively reach out to OFWs”. This shows that the limited preparation and thus capacity of government agencies delays or limits the assistance received by MDWs. Therefore, for most MDWs, the assistance from government agencies was limited to administrative assistance. Erica expressed her frustrations regarding the lack of assistance from the government and how they “just refer the cases to the NGOs”. As mentioned previously, OWWA Singapore explained that they refer OFWs to NGOs due to the limited capacity of the government agencies. However, Erica’s frustrations indicate that this reasoning is not communicated effectively and that the MDWs are not supported by the government agencies when requesting assistance from NGOs.

MDWs’ social capital also played a role in the assistance they received prior to their repatriation. For example, Remy said “my employer forbid me to use the gadget even if I wanted to call OWWA and POLO [...] so other Filipino colleagues did was contact for me so I can go home”. Similarly, Rosamine mentioned that “I told [my friends] to tell their parents to request to have them repatriated” because they were unaware of how to request their repatriation. In addition, Hiezel’s friend was able to find shelter for her through a local family that was helping migrant workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that MDWs’ social capital and their agency within a migrant collective allowed them to request and receive assistance, which they may have faced difficulties with otherwise.

6. Analysis: Repatriation

6.1. Philippine government's experience

6.1.1. Assistance

During repatriation, OWWA provides FAST Assistance, which includes food, airport assistance, temporary shelter, and transport assistance for OFWs (OWWA, 2020b). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, all returning OFWs must undergo a total of 14 days in quarantine, whereby most spend a few days in a government-approved facility in Manila until they receive their COVID-19 test results. Once they test negative, OFWs are transported to their home province, where they must quarantine for the remainder of the 14-day period (IATF-EID, 2020). However, this assistance was impacted by the large influx of repatriated OFWs, travel restrictions, and health protocols, which resulted in the Philippine government imposing a moratorium on incoming flights in May. At the time, the airport in Manila was overwhelmed in their testing capacity and quarantine facilities, which left 24,000 OFWs stranded in Manila waiting to return to their home provinces. This prompted the President to order the government agencies to send home all OFWs who tested negative within a week and urged local government units (LGUs) to accept returning OFWs. This put additional pressure on the government agencies who also depended on other key stakeholders, as OWWA RAD explained “we had to send home 24,000 OFWs back to their provinces so we had to look for contacts and find airlines who will allow us to do flights on credit and just do the administrative requirements afterwards so there was really no time to adjust, we just had to change our system to adjust to the needed resources, find people. It was quite difficult”. Therefore, repatriation amid the COVID-19 pandemic is distinct to previous crisis repatriations and requires more capacity, which the government agencies were not able to prepare for.

Ultimately, the government implemented an arrival quota to ensure they could attend to the repatriated OFWs (Cervantes, 2020). However, the arrival quota has caused many flight cancellations and increases the waiting period for OFWs awaiting repatriation. In addition, many government agencies believed they still had a lack of personnel, which meant they “resorted to hiring job orders, but these job order personnel, since it is outsourced, they are not that protected” (OWWA Singapore). These job order personnel also are not as well trained and thus have limited human capital to assist repatriated OFWs. OWWA RAD also stated that “if there was an increase in the number of arrivals, we would need more hotels, we would need more people”. This demonstrates how the lack of capacity limits the government’s ability to

assist OFWs in a timely manner, which means they must wait longer and could cause further distress for OFWs in vulnerable situations.

The government also limited the number of quarantine days in Manila to avoid congestion in quarantine facilities, which is determined by the IATF-EID (Aurelio, 2020). However, OWWA RAD mentioned that “the quarantine protocols have not really been in our favour [...] every time there’s a meeting, there’s a new policy that we need to comply with and implement”. Therefore, these changes make it difficult to implement a fixed plan, particularly regarding the budget. As a result, “the resources will easily be gone in a few months if the number of quarantine days will be extended” (OWWA RAD). It also makes it challenging to inform OFWs on the quarantine protocols, as they may change by the time they arrive in the Philippines. Thus, while they must follow the IATF-EID protocols, this hinders their ability to effectively manage repatriated OFWs.

Along with OWWA, the DFA also warned that the OFW repatriation funds were depleting, which raises concerns regarding their capacity to assist the continuous influx OFWs (Cervantes, 2020). The government initially allocated around PHP 11 billion for the repatriation, quarantine, transportation to home province, and other related expenses of returning OFWs (Nepomuceno, 2021). An additional P5.2 billion fund was later approved to continue the repatriation efforts (Patinio, 2021). However, OWWA RAD explained that “we’ve already spent billions of pesos [...] all our services depend on the availability of those resources” thus “if the national government does not give us enough funds, we will not be able to continue this assistance for any longer”. This highlights the importance of sufficient financial capital among government agencies in the assistance of OFWs. Thus, although government agencies prepared for the repatriations, their financial capital was not sufficient to sustain the number of OFWs requiring repatriation.

6.1.2. Coordination

While OWWA remains the primary government agency responsible for the repatriation of OFWs, there are many other government agencies involved. For repatriation flights, some government agencies were able to coordinate with the host government to facilitate repatriations. For example, the POLO in Kuwait was also able to repatriate OFWs due to a programme initiated by the Kuwaiti government, through which OFWs were repatriated at no cost to the Philippine government. Similarly, the POLO in Riyadh were negotiating repatriation flights with the Saudi government when they did not allow outbound flights. This shows how

the government agencies exert agency through negotiation with host countries to ensure that their efforts are not constrained by them.

Furthermore, there is One-Stop-Shop (OSS) at Manila airport, which includes OWWA, the Department of Health (DOH), Bureau of Quarantine (BOQ), Bureau of Immigration (BI), the Department of Tourism (DOT) and of Transportation (DOTr), and the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) (DOTr, 2020; IATF-EID, 2020). The DOH and BOQ, with support from the PCG and Red Cross, are the agencies responsible for the COVID-19 testing (DOTr, 2020). The PCG is responsible for security during the quarantine and the DOT and DOTr take care of transportation but also distribute care kits to OFWs on arrival (DOTr, 2020). Initially, the efforts of these government agencies were less coordinated. As not all the government agencies are migration related, they did not understand their role within the migration and repatriation process. However, after the “realisation that OWWA cannot do it by [them]selves” (OWWA RAD), guidelines were introduced to outline the specific tasks, depending on the mandate of the government agency. As a result, “there’s more appreciation of what repatriation is, it’s not simply putting someone in a hotel or waiting for them to complete the 10 days, but it’s really taking care of the person” (OWWA RAD). This concurs with the argument of Liao (2020) that repatriation requires assistance beyond the physical repatriation. In addition, “everyone understands what kind of responsibility they have, in terms of assisting returning OFWs [...] we have a more seamless process in terms of repatriation here in Manila” (OWWA RAD). This indicates that the government agencies have established coordination agreements and become a collective to maximise capital and leverage the strengths of each agency when assisting repatriated OFWs (MICIC Initiative, 2016).

However, the repatriation process is less coordinated with the LGUs, as they have been reluctant to accept repatriated OFWs because they could be possible COVID-19 carriers (Parrocha, 2020). In addition, the LGUs have enough autonomy and agency to implement their own policies in terms of quarantine, which means in some provinces OFWs also undergo quarantine in a government facility. Moreover, LGUs are less prepared or do not have enough resources to assist OFWs and thus depend on other government agencies. The government agencies also recognise this and are therefore trying to replicate the strong coordination in the provinces to prevent the duplication of quarantine and decongest Manila. This indicates that the government agencies coordinate to enhance social capital and thereby mitigate the effects of a lack of financial and human capital (Coleman, 1988).

6.1.3. Communication with OFWs

As mentioned before, it is challenging to communicate the quarantine protocols to OFWs, especially as it changes frequently: “there’s a struggle of trying to communicate why there's no policy for [...] why they have to stay in quarantine, why they can’t go home to their families right away” (OWWA RAD). While in quarantine, OWWA communicates with the OFWs in several ways. Firstly, they have ‘house parents’, who are OWWA representatives working in the quarantine facilities. This communication is usually done through their online forum, *Uwian Na*, whereby OWWA can inform OFWs on the changes to protocols and OFWs can provide feedback while in quarantine. In addition, they are also able to communicate through the Philippine Recruitment Agencies (PRAs) and social media. This illustrates the use of various communication channels to reach more OFWs and identify their needs. However, most government agencies believed “the best way for us is to really talk directly to the OFWs so they can also get clarification as to their specific concerns” (OWWA RAD). Thus, some of the (online) communication channels used are less appropriate for OFWs, which should be taken into consideration (MICIC Initiative, 2016).

Moreover, OFWs may use these communication channels, particularly social media, to share complaints regarding the repatriation process and quarantine facilities, such as the type of hotel they are placed in, the food provided, cleanliness, and internet issues. These complaints are possible as “although our people check, the turnover is really fast so they cannot really attend to the needs of everyone” (OWWA Singapore). Nevertheless, OWWA tries to address these concerns immediately. Social media and the digitalisation of feedback mechanisms therefore play an important role in informing government agencies on common complaints, which in turn allows them to address these and improve the assistance provided. Thus, OFWs are using their agency to induce change in a structure (De Haas, 2021).

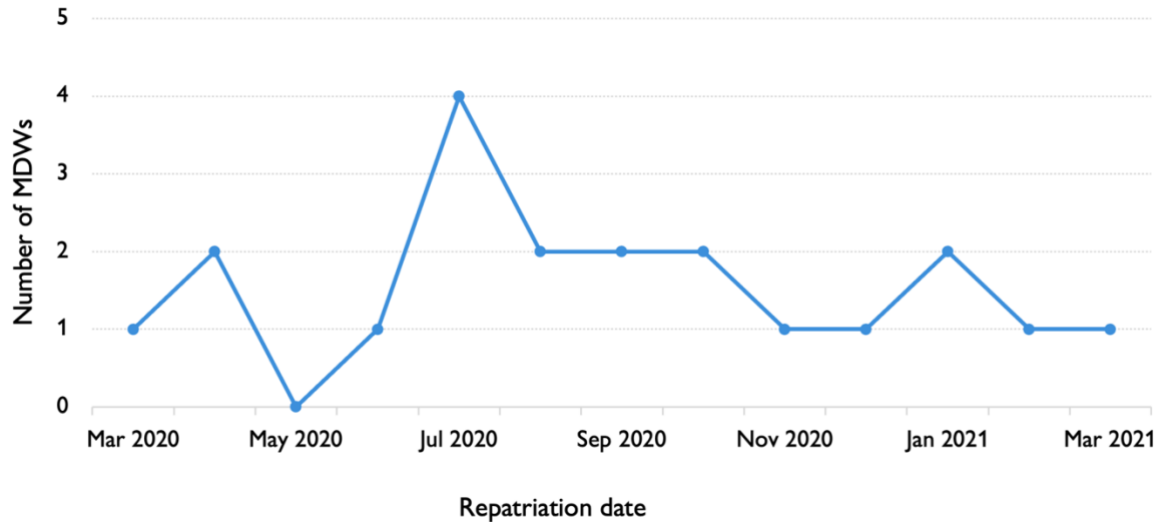
6.2. Filipino MDWs’ experience

6.2.1. Repatriation process and assistance

The return dates of the repatriated Filipino MDWs are portrayed in figure 7. The Filipino MDWs were repatriated between March 2020 and March 2021, with the no MDWs repatriated in May 2020 and the highest number of MDWs (4) repatriated in July 2020. This is likely due to the moratorium on incoming flights in May 2020. While four MDWs were able to make use of the government repatriation flights, most were booked onto commercial flights

with the assistance of the Philippine Embassy, POLO, or, most often, their employers, who also shouldered the flight costs. Only one MDW had to pay for her own repatriation flight.

Figure 7. The number of MDWs per month of repatriation



Upon arrival in Manila, all MDWs had to do a COVID-19 test and some received a care kit. They were then transferred to a hotel for their quarantine period, which was organised by OWWA. The hotel quarantine experience varies, as the MDWs were booked into different types of hotels. Erica, for example, was “very lucky [she] was booked into a five-star hotel” whereas Hiezel and Gloria were placed in very simple quarantine facilities. The length of the quarantine in Manila ranged from two to fourteen days for the MDWs, depending on when they received their swab test results. These differences were caused by changes in testing capacity and protocols set by the IATF-EID, which resulted in MDWs being unaware of how long their quarantine would be.

Many MDWs stated that they were able to endure the quarantine due the prospects of reuniting with their family. This shows that family is often the locus of their repatriation, which is consistent with the role their families play in the repatriation decision-making process. For instance, Rosa said that “it was a relief. I may not be able to hug my family but at least I can see them from afar”. Similarly, Amelia said “when I was still in quarantine, my family used to visit me to say hello”. However, as Jessica explains, quarantine delays family reunification: “it's very hard because I used to be with my family after only one day during normal time, now you have to wait long and there are many tests to pass before you can go home”. For some MDWs, this waiting period aggravates anxiety and distress. This was the case for Grace, who

requested repatriation due her mother's accident: "[OWWA] extended the swab test so I had to wait longer. I said if they could just take me first during that time because my mum is in the hospital. They didn't allow me because of the protocol". As a result, she was not able to see her mother before she passed away. This portrays the strong familial relations among MDWs, which impacts how they envision their repatriation.

After their quarantine in Manila, most participants were provided transportation to their home provinces, which is funded by OWWA. Two MDWs, however, decided to use private transportation to their home province because they did not want to wait or risk contracting COVID-19. This demonstrates that MDWs' agency allows them to make their own decisions. However, the ability to exert agency depends on their financial capital, as many MDWs mentioned they could not afford private transport. Only Rosamine did not return to her home province until 5 months after her repatriation, as she was awaiting further assistance from OWWA regarding her traumatic experience and was also trying to find a job in Manila. However, after not receiving any assistance or being able to find a job, she decided to return to her home province. She was still able to make use of the *Balik Probinsya* (back to the province) programme that assisted people residing in Manila to return to their home province. Some MDWs also had to quarantine for 14 days or opted to self-isolate for a few days in their home province. This depended on their provinces' policies or own decision, which demonstrates how structures can determine agency. Analyn, for example, explained that "I was going to finish the quarantine at my house, but I was put in the quarantine facility in the province because they detected that I had COVID before". Therefore, her agency to make free choices was constrained by her province's protocols.

6.2.2. Opinion on repatriation process

Overall, all OFWs were satisfied with the repatriation and quarantine process and were especially thankful that the government assisted them in their repatriation and covered the costs. Only 11 MDWs were active OWWA members but they all received similar assistance during their repatriation. Therefore, despite Cassarino (2004) claiming that social capital must be maintained to guarantee the flow of resources, this was not the case for the MDWs. Rather, non-OWWA members, such as Amelia stated that "OWWA is always attentive to OFWs, they do not neglect us, they help us with everything", which indicates that OWWA incorporated all OFWs in their COVID-19 response regardless of their membership status.

Most OFWs also thought the quarantine was well-organised but some felt that some aspects of the process were redundant as they had to do it both in the host country and in the

Philippines. For instance, Michelle felt that “there’s no need to a swab test again here in the Philippines because before you leave Qatar, they will have a swab test”. Similarly, Airine said “in Kuwait a lot of our documents are being sought from us such as swab test. Then in the Philippines, there are a lot of papers that we need to fill out also”. Stronger partnerships between the Philippines and host countries can improve collective responses and prevent the duplication of testing and administration (MICIC Initiative, 2016). Others also mentioned the waiting periods: Erica said, “I had to wait for three hours before our turn to get the swab test”, Airine’s bus “was delayed many times”, and Grace had to “wait for others at the bus terminal for more than 2 and half hours” before being able to return to her home province. These delays are linked to the lack the capacity to manage repatriated OFWs. Nevertheless, the MDWs understood this was due to the large number of OFWs returning and protocols set by the government.

7. Analysis: Post-arrival phase

7.1. Philippine government's experience

7.1.1. Assistance

While the main government agency responsible for the reintegration of repatriated OFWs is the NRCO (RA10022, 2009), they have not implemented many programmes or provided assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, the TESDA has been more active in assisting OFWs in the post-arrival phase. One of their popular reintegration programmes is OFW Re-integration through Skills and Entrepreneurship programme (OFW RISE), which provides online training on entrepreneurship, business coaching, livelihood assistance, and other microfinancing programs (Majan, 2020). These free skills-upgrading programmes are deemed useful for OFWs to sustain a livelihood and restore their income in the Philippines (MICIC Initiative, 2016). This shows that the government agencies acknowledge that a lack of financial capital hinders the accumulation of other capitals while human capital can provide access to more financial capital (Coleman, 1990). Moreover, these entrepreneurial programmes allow “capital coming from OFWs to flow back to the country” (POLO Riyadh), which shows that the government hopes that OFWs will reinvest their capital in the Philippines and contribute to development. This links to Spitzer and Piper’s (2014) and Saguin’s (2020) arguments that the perception of OFWs as agents of development results in the focus of entrepreneurship in reintegration programmes. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these reintegration programmes are mostly provided online, showing that digitalisation allows assistance to still be provided. However, this also limits the reach of these programmes to repatriated OFWs that have access to internet. In addition, OWWA Singapore said “we don’t know the impact of doing webinars, if it’s really effective to the OFWs”. This suggests that the government agencies do not sufficiently monitor or evaluate the programmes, thereby making it unclear whether they are effective in addressing the needs of OFWs (MICIC Initiative, 2016).

Aside from these agencies focusing on reintegration, OWWA and DOLE, among others, also provide financial and educational support (RA10022, 2009). During the COVID-19 pandemic, they have introduced new forms of assistance, mostly financial assistance, to address the immediate needs of repatriated OFWs. The focus on financial assistance illustrates that the government agencies share Bourdieu’s (1986) sentiments of financial capital being the most important capital. The most popular assistance is DOLE’s *Abot Kamay Ang Pagtulong* (DOLE-AKAP), which was implemented in April 2020 by Department Order (DO) No. 212. The DOLE-AKAP programme provides a one-time financial assistance worth PHP 10,000

(USD 200) to OFWs impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, both in host countries and the Philippines (DOLE, 2020). OFWs who qualify and have not received assistance from the host country or their employers, can submit their application online and receive the assistance through online remittances (DOLE, 2020). Initially, the programme sought to assist 150,000 OFWs but received over 200,000 requests in the first month and as of April 2021, provided PHP5.04 billion to 496,122 OFWs (Medenilla, 2020; Depasupil, 2021). Thus, although tracking systems, such as OASIS, have been used to project the number of OFWs requiring assistance, there are discrepancies in the data due to the underreporting of repatriated OFWs. As a result, the government agencies were not prepared and did not allocate enough funds to approve all applications, hence necessitating additional funding. The funding for DOLE-AKAP, and other financial assistance, is provided by the Bayanihan funds (RA11494, 2020). The government agencies also mentioned the depleting DOLE-AKAP funds, stating that “there’s two tranches already and we are waiting for a third tranche. Hopefully, that will allow us to extend this kind of assistance until the end of the year” (OWWA RAD). This emphasises the impact of funding on the robustness of assistance, as without the passage of the Bayanihan 3 law to replenish their funds, they will not be able to assist any more OFWs. This shows that the lack of financial capital among the government agencies impacts the assistance they can provide.

OWWA also provides other forms of assistance, which is usually only available for active OWWA members. Therefore, specific types of social capital, such as being part of a particular network, is needed to obtain certain forms of assistance. Many OWWA posts stated that their previous programmes are also still running, including their *Balik Pinas! Balik Hanapbuhay!* livelihood grant worth PHP 20,000 (USD 400) and the Enterprise Development and Loan Programme (OFW-EDLP), which provides business loans between PHP 100,000 and PHP 2 million for those who want to start a business (OWWA, 2021a). However, they also have “stock up measures to address the concerns of the workers and their families” (OWWA Singapore). For dependents of OFWs impacted by COVID-19, OWWA provides scholarships and educational assistance through Project EASE, which provides PHP 10,000 per year for a maximum of 4 years to a qualified OFW dependent, and *Tabang OFWs*, which is a one-time tertiary education subsidy worth PHP 30,000 for dependents of repatriated OFWs (OWWA, 2020a). Through this, the government agencies hope that providing financial capital can facilitate OFWs’ dependents to obtain human capital.

Some government agencies recognised that the assistance available does not address the needs of all repatriated OFWs, which links to Battistella’s (2018) arguments that migrants

require repatriation for varying reasons and thus different policies and programmes to address these. For example, when discussing DOLE-AKAP, OWWA RAD explained that it is “only one time so if, they came home last year and they received that and by this time they still have not gone abroad or they failed to find employment again, they need another sort of financial assistance or make it easier for them to access funds for them to maybe restart something”. This financial assistance is therefore unsustainable, especially during crises. In addition, most of OWWA’s loans and grants are intended for OFWs who wish to start a business in the Philippines but “not everyone is cut out for business” (OWWA Singapore). This ties in with Battistella’s (2018) framework whereby entrepreneurship is suited more towards migrants who have achieved their migration goals. Due to the unexpected nature of repatriation during the COVID-19 pandemic, many OFWs have not achieved their migration goals hence entrepreneurship is less appropriate in addressing their needs. Furthermore, a critical aspect of repatriation is psychosocial assistance, which OWWA RAD believes was “one aspect that we failed, and we should address [...] because it is really badly needed by OFWs”. Psychosocial assistance is usually provided by specialised NGOs. However, many NGOs closed during the COVID-19 pandemic and were thus unable to provide the assistance. Therefore, while they recognise the different needs of OFWs, they lack the capacity to address these needs. These findings concur with Liao (2020) and Spitzer and Piper (2014) who have emphasised the unsustainability of and limited options for assistance for OFWs.

7.1.2. Coordination

Most of the financial assistance in the post-arrival phase is dispersed through regional offices, which requires coordination among the main and regional offices of government agencies. For instance, if an OFW is requesting the status of their application or “if the assistance has not been granted yet, we just follow up with the region if there [are] additional documents that they need to provide” (OWWA Singapore). Such coordination between offices is needed to ensure the timely provision of assistance. In addition, the regional offices tend to have fewer resources and funds. Therefore, OWWA complements their staff and strengthen their services in the regional offices, ultimately improving the assistance of OFWs (MICIC Initiative, 2016).

The training and skills-upgrading programmes provided by OWWA and TESDA are also provided in partnership with different government agencies, depending on the focus of the programme. For example, if the programme is related to agriculture or business, OFWs are referred to the Department of Agriculture (DA) or Department of Trade and Industry (DTI),

respectively. The OFW RISE programme implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic was also developed and implemented by Coca-Cola Philippines in partnership with OWWA, DOLE, TESDA, and the Philippine Trade Training Centre (PTTC) under the DTI (Majan, 2020). As acknowledged by the MICIC guidelines, these partnerships enable government agencies to enhance assistance when they lack the resources or specialised knowledge needed (MICIC Initiative, 2016).

7.1.3. Communication with OFWs

While government agencies use several communication channels, the use of social media, especially Facebook, was highlighted as the main communication tool, whereby they can inform repatriated OFWs on the assistance available, the requirements, and application process. However, some OFWs “don’t look at our social media accounts because they want to check if that’s the latest and it’s easier if they call us or go to our offices in the regions” (OWWA Singapore). Other OFWs may not have social media or do not have stable internet connection. Moreover, due to the digitalisation of applications, OFWs can track their applications through the same portal they used to apply for the assistance. This has reduced the need for government agencies to update the OFWs personally. Nevertheless, not all OFWs are adept in using these online platforms. Therefore, while social media and digital platforms may be effective communication tools, not all OFWs have sufficient social capital to obtain this information and ultimately receive assistance.

Nevertheless, this communication goes both ways for some OFWs, as they “use social media to air their grievances and complaints” (POLO Bahrain). This shows that OFWs use their social capital to inform government agencies of their needs regarding assistance. In addition, “after they’re already home, there’s no deliberate way for us to get feedback” (OWWA RAD). This suggests that the structures limit OFWs’ ability to provide feedback to governments. However, they use their social capital to overcome these constraints. Moreover, by providing feedback regarding the assistance, they can potentially induce change in the assistance available (De Haas, 2021).

7.2. Filipino MDWs’ experience

7.2.1. Assistance received

Most of the MDWs had only requested DOLE-AKAP after their arrival in the Philippines, which they had learned about from fellow OFWs or social media. The role of

social networks and media in informing MDWs about the available assistance coincides with Utz and Muscanell's (2015) argument of social capital as a source of information. However, some MDWs were not sure whether they qualified for the assistance, which implies that while social capital provides access to information, this is not always exhaustive. For example, Marisol also said that fellow MDWs had told her about DOLE-AKAP and that she "should apply in case they will give it because then it's 10,000 pesos, it's a big help for us". Rosamine believed that she was not qualified "because I have a job. Except for those who are really jobless, they can have assistance from the government", which implies that financial capital may hinder access to assistance from government agencies. Despite sixteen MDWs requesting DOLE-AKAP, only six had received it. These delays in assistance are mostly due to the lack of funds of the government.

Few MDWs received other forms of assistance. For example, Angeline was the only participant who had received a livelihood grant worth PHP 20,000, along with a business plan, to start a small business. However, as she did not have much financial capital upon return and it took several months to receive the assistance, she borrowed money from her relatives in the meantime. When she received the PHP 20,000, she had to pay back her relatives, leaving her with only enough financial capital for her basic needs. Furthermore, Rosamine had requested psychosocial assistance from OWWA and waited five months in Manila to receive it before returning to her home province. After a few months in her home province, the assistance was finally granted but due to the distance, she was no longer able to avail to it. In these cases, the delay in providing assistance meant that it was not able to be used as intended.

As mentioned previously, the programmes are mostly promoted on social media. However, when examining the response to these social media posts and discussing the assistance available with MDWs, many were disappointed in the assistance available to them. Similar to the lack of funds highlighted by the government agencies, many MDWs discussed that "there are no funds" (Erica) and that they "don't know when they will have a fund" (Hiezel). As a result, there is a lengthy waiting period: "there is also assistance 10,000 pesos you have to apply [...] to the OWWA but it takes time" (Hiezel). In addition, Gloria thought "it is difficult to apply because the papers are difficult to process". Similarly, Maria said she did not apply for DOLE-AKAP because "if you apply online then they will ask you for a lot of documents which you have to get at different government offices so that you can be able to apply for that specific assistance [...] At the end of the day I think that I don't need to bother about it because it's difficult". Erica went on to say that "it's just propaganda. It's just in papers, it's just a press release [...] the promised assistance is not happening" and that the

“government is not doing enough [...] they’re just out there to stay in power but not to serve their constituents”. Similar sentiments were shared by Maria: “they always say that we will receive these packages help from the government, but there’s nothing like that [...] it isn’t worth anything”. This disappointment is due to the contributions of OFWs to the Philippine economy are not reciprocated by the government through the assistance that they provide (Fernandez et al., 2020). Marisol explained how she thought she “was lucky because I have my little savings that I can support my family [...] but come to think of my fellow ex-OFWs that they don’t have the means, the government should support them as well, not only on the repatriation itself, but on the sustainability when they are here in the Philippines”. Thus, the assistance provided is unsustainable, especially for MDWs who has limited capital to sustain their livelihoods.

Many MDWs were unaware of other programmes and services available in the post-arrival phase, indicating the limited dissemination of information from government agencies (MICIC Initiative, 2016). When asked about their preferred form of assistance, most MDWs, particularly those who had not received any, showed preference towards financial assistance to cover their basic needs. This indicates the low financial capital among some MDWs, which suggests that these MDWs returned before the end of their migration period (Battistella, 2018) and that they perceive financial capital as very valuable (Bourdieu, 1986). Other MDWs showed preference towards training or free education so they can upgrade their skills and venture into a new career, thereby recognising the value of human capital in achieving other goals.

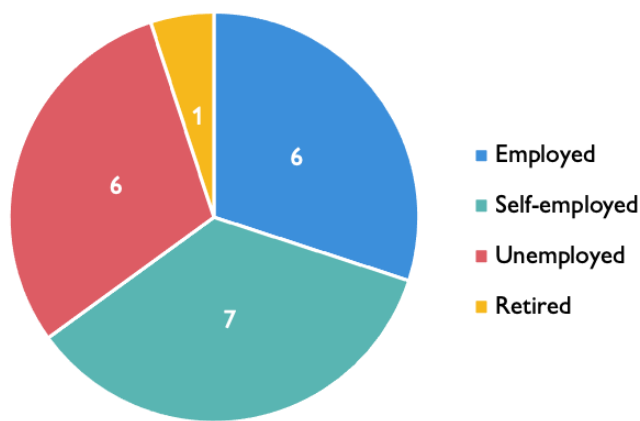
There are also other stakeholders that assist repatriated MDWs. Some MDWs mentioned the assistance, usually food, that was distributed by their LGUs. For example, Angeline had received “2 kilos rice and two or three dishes a week [...] but when your family is big, what the government gives is not enough”. Many MDWs had also received *ayuda* (relief) from NGOs, which also included food items, such as rice and eggs, and some toiletries. They were able to receive this assistance through their personal connections with the NGOs. Families were also deemed important in the post-arrival phase, with many highlighting how their siblings helped them or how their parents had provided financial and emotional support when they first arrived: “my family helped me by supporting me financially and even to recover my emotional [distress]” (Rosamine). Likewise, Maria’s “family support me in every way - financial, psychological, and moral support”, suggesting that social capital can mitigate the effects of a lack of other capital (Coleman, 1990). Moreover, this shows how MDWs

supporting their families and maintaining their social capital while abroad carves out a space in which their support was reciprocated (Saguin, 2020).

7.2.2. Sources of livelihood

Since returning to the Philippines, MDWs have sought a range of livelihood sources depending on their needs. The current employment status among the MDWs are portrayed in figure 8.

Figure 8. Employment status among Filipino MDWs



Six MDWs are unemployed, seven are self-employed, while other sources of livelihood included a (parttime) job as a private school teacher, a housekeeper, a service crew, in a salon, or at a migrant organisation. They were able to find these jobs by actively informing previous and potential employers of their willingness to work. For example, Erica explained that “when I finally decided to go home for good, I expressed my intention to continue my work” with the NGO. Maria was also able to find a job at an NGO when old friend “heard that I am in the Philippines and I’m not doing anything, they offered me the job”. This shows that social capital can provide access to employment opportunities, ultimately enhancing financial capital (Coleman, 1990).

As portrayed in figure 8, self-employment, such as a *sari-sari*⁴ store or other small business selling food, pastries, or other basic goods was a common source of livelihood. This is a common initiative among repatriated OFWs who are unable to find other jobs in the Philippines, which shows how their agency and adaptability is utilised to obtain capital despite various structural constraints. However, while some MDWs’ *sari-sari* stores were successful,

⁴ A *sari-sari* store is a small shop that sells basic goods

others only covered their basic needs. Hiezel explained that she was able to use her “little savings to start a little business to support my daily needs like food [...] and to provide the electricity bill and water bill”. She believed that because many people in her home province were unemployed, they are not able to buy the products she was selling in her store. Nevertheless, she still preferred being self-employed because “I feel more comfortable [...] because I have no employer even with little income because I have freedom and no stress” (Hiezel). This shows that she recognises how her employer constrained her agency. Rosamine’s small business selling cakes and pizza, however, was more successful as “some of the customers were able to celebrate any kinds of occasion at home then they ordered the cakes they want, and we have a delivery service as well”. Nevertheless, she had taken on a teaching job alongside her small business “because I cannot guarantee that my small business will last long so that’s why I need a stable job” (Rosamine). Therefore, MDWs’ concerns regarding limited financial capital encourages them to find additional sources of income.

As mentioned previously, the desire to support their family plays a role within MDWs’ migration and repatriation decision, with many MDWs stating that they were motivated to work hard, both abroad and in the Philippines, to support their families: “the reason why I am working hard as long as I can is for my sons to finish their studies, for them not to experience what I experienced. I want them to have a better future” (Bea). Rosa was also willing to diversify into new livelihood activities to support her family: “anything that can be a source of income, I will try it for us to survive”. However, supporting their family continues upon return, for instance, by partaking in family businesses. For example, Rosa was able to start her own *sari-sari* store as well as a *carinderia*⁵ with her husband and his parents, Rosamine shares a small business with her sister, and Gloria supports her husband with planting crops. Such support is not limited to financial support. Many MDWs had not sought employment in the Philippines because they wanted to spend time with their families. For example, Marisol explained that “money is not my priority during this time because I missed six years spending quality time with my kids”, which suggests that she may not value financial capital as the most important capital.

7.2.3. Challenges upon return

One of the main challenges faced by the MDWs was finding a job or generating sufficient income, which is exacerbated by the COVID-19 restrictions and the worsening

⁵ A *carinderia* is a food stall with a small seating area

economic climate. For instance, Erica said that “those for who are back in the Philippines there is no jobs, it is really hopeless” and because “movements are limited, you can’t go outside to find a job even if you want to apply” (Analyn). Angeline and Analyn also mentioned that they struggled to find a job because they do not have the educational background needed to qualify, proving that human capital provides access to employment opportunities (Coleman, 1990). As a result, many were depending on receiving DOLE-AKAP to financially support themselves or obtain the financial capital needed to start a *sari-sari* store. For example, Analyn said “I have no capital. If I receive assistance from the government that I applied for, I might be able to have a mini *sari-sari* store or a canteen”. Similarly, Grace would like to “have a mini store but I don’t have enough money and it’s difficult here to have a store because most of the people who live here have a store also”. This indicates that their financial capital depends on the financial assistance provided by the government as well as the financial capital of their potential customers.

The idea that repatriated OFWs had a lot of financial capital was also mentioned by a few MDWs. For instance, Gabrielle explained that “some people thought that I have lots of money and they don’t know that OFWs have no savings” and that “someone was coming to my house to borrow money and I said I don’t have a big money”. On the one hand, some MDWs felt there was an expectation to provide for their family. Grace, whose mother passed away during her repatriation, said “I spent my money on the funeral of my mom and the bills at the hospital. My other siblings they just passed it on to me because their wages at work is not enough”. Hiezel also mentioned that “it’s difficult [for her family] because before they received monthly allowance but now because I was in the Philippines, I cannot give it to them so for them is it’s hard to accept”. On the other hand, some MDWs had expected that their remittances would have been invested or saved to secure financial capital upon return. For example, Bea had “expected a lot from [my family] because I worked every day to save my salary so I can send money to them for their needs and their wants but when I got home, nothing happened. It’s sad for me because I expected that all the money I sent to them, they saved it”. Similarly, Jessica said “I only sent my husband money, and he didn’t save even a peso”. For Jessica, the lack of support from her husband caused tension, which aligns with Putnam’s (1993) argument that reciprocity is important in maintaining relations.

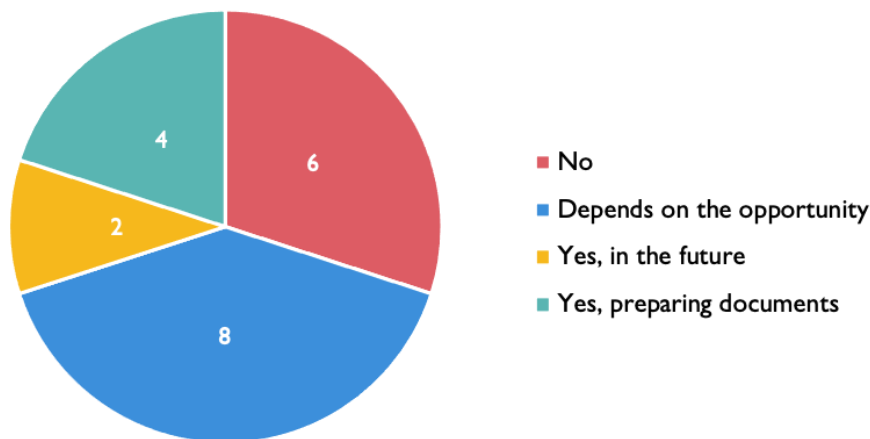
Many MDWs also mentioned how they were not able to visit their families regularly: “since I came back, I was only able to meet them three times [...] in three months’ time” (Erica) Erica went on to say that if she wanted to visit her family in other provinces, she would have to take private transport, which was too expensive. These transportation issues were also

mentioned by Marisol, who said “if you don’t have a private vehicle, it’s not easy to go. Here, we have the local transportation like the tricycle. Only for the long drive, we don’t have that due to COVID”. Despite these family-related challenges, almost all MDWs stated that the best part about coming home was to be with their family. For example, Rosa stated that “I am still happy I am near my family, they may not be together physically, but I feel safer”. Moreover, they were still able to maintain their relations through social media: “we have Zoom and [Facebook] Messenger so we can always contact each other and video call but of course that’s different” (Erica). Therefore, while MDWs hoped to utilise social capital, particularly family, to overcome the challenges resulting from their repatriation, the COVID-19 restricts limit their ability to visit and depend on their family.

7.2.4. Remigration intentions

The remigration intentions varied among the MDWs. Six MDWs were not planning to remigrate due to their age, their family, or their (traumatic) experience working abroad. For example, Airine said “I don’t want to go back to another country because of the threat of killings and mistreatment by employers”. Similarly, Bennelyn is “traumatised from what my employers did to me”. As portrayed in figure 9, eight MDWs were undecided regarding remigration or that it depended on the situation, for instance, whether they receive further assistance from the government: “If I get what I applied for, I will use it for my *sari-sari* store so I can stay in the Philippines” (Angeline). Two MDWs said they were likely to remigrate but not in the near future and four MDWs were already preparing their documents to remigrate. Those who had intentions to remigrate did state that they would migrate to a different country.

Figure 9. Remigration intentions among Filipino MDWs



Although many of the participating MDWs did not have definite plans to remigrate, many other OFWs do. As mentioned by some government agencies, “although they have negative experiences, they still want to work overseas because the pay is higher and it’s easier to have a fixed income” (OWWA Singapore) and “even with the pandemic, there’s still deployment” (Consulate Dubai). This is largely due to the Philippine government’s continuous labour export. As Erica mentioned, “the government does not create jobs at home, the main programme of the government is to export labour for their own interest and agenda”. Some government agencies shared a similar opinion, stating that “the government migration policy should be more of the preventive approach rather than promotional approach” (Consulate Hong Kong) and that there needs to be a “change of mind set that working abroad is just a temporary stop-gap measure and therefore, they should think an alternative livelihood project or business” (POLO Bahrain).

Remigration intentions are therefore impacted by agency and structures, such as the economy and the government. The economy of the Philippines limits MDWs in finding good employment opportunities, which is exacerbated by the government who continues to promote overseas employment. Moreover, given that family is often central within MDWs’ migration and repatriation decisions, they also impact remigration intentions. For some MDWs, their desire to support their family encourages them to seek employment abroad as this allows them to earn higher wages. For example, Amelia “wants to go back to another country so I can life my family out of poverty”. This could suggest that she was repatriated before completing her migration goal of helping her family and thus wants to remigrate to still achieve it (Cassarino, 2004). Other MDWs stated that they would like to remigrate but “my children don’t agree anymore” (Gloria), “I can’t leave my other siblings here” (Grace) or “I don’t want my kids to grow up without me” (Analyn). Jessica, however, “had no intention of going back to another country but because of my husband’s incomprehensible behaviour [...] I had no choice”. Therefore, to varying degrees, family constrains the agency of MDWs. However, many MDWs are still able to exert agency by making their own decisions regarding when or if to remigrate. For example, Michelle said “I’m going to stay here for a while because there is no age limit in working in the Middle East”. In this case, structures, such as migration policies, do not constrain agency.

8. Conclusion

This research aimed to provide insight into the assistance received by Filipino MDWs during their repatriation amid the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the reasons for repatriation, how capital impacts the assistance requested and provided, and how the assistance addresses the capital and agency of MDWs. Understanding the assistance sought by repatriated Filipino MDWs requires examination of the reasons for their repatriation. The two main reasons for repatriation included the end of the employment contract and employment issues, such as poor working conditions, contract violations, and abuse. However, most MDWs mentioned a combination of reasons, meaning that factors such as family and retirement also influenced their decision. This demonstrates that repatriation is not a homogenous phenomenon and should therefore be addressed through various policies. Furthermore, Filipino MDWs exercised varying levels of agency in the repatriation decision-making process despite structural constraints. While some MDWs demonstrated their agency by cutting their contracts due to poor working conditions, other MDWs' repatriation was requested by their family despite them wanting to remain the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a loss of livelihood among Filipino MDWs rendering many MDWs dependent on assistance to address their needs. For instance, the end of employment meant that MDWs' financial capital was reduced. Therefore, they required assistance in organising a repatriation flight. Some MDWs who were not able to be repatriated immediately due to travel restrictions also required shelter. Where these MDWs received shelter depended on their social capital. The lack of financial capital upon return was also a concern among MDWs. Thus, most MDWs showed preference towards financial assistance because it is deemed valuable and convertible. As a result, this was also the main form of assistance requested by them. Moreover, as their human capital, such as education, limit employment prospects in the Philippines, some MDWs were interested in training and skills-upgrading programmes to access employment or to venture into a new career. Upon arrival, social capital did not impact the type of assistance they needed. Rather, their social capital informed them of the assistance available and encouraged them to request it. In addition, social capital sometimes provided access to employment opportunities, which may reduce their dependence on assistance, and access to assistance from other actors, such as their family, NGOs, and LGUs. Unfortunately, the data collected in this research was insufficient to elaborate on the role of NGOs. Further research regarding the assistance OFWs receive from

NGOs as well as how NGOs advocate for more assistance from the government may yield interesting findings.

While the Philippine government facilitated over 650,000 repatriations during the COVID-19 pandemic, their limited capital, particularly financial capital, caused challenges in assisting OFWs beyond the physical repatriation. The lack of funds was highlighted as the main challenge among the government agencies. This was partly caused by the limited crisis preparation, which meant government agencies were not able to fully assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs and allocate sufficient funding. Their capability to assist OFWs therefore depends on the replenishment of funding from the national government, which has resulted in a delay of assistance. These delays were also caused by the other limited resources, such as capacity and personnel. However, the government agencies were able to overcome these challenges due to their social capital. Social capital enabled them to coordinate with other government agencies and civil society, through which they were able to maximise capital and leverage the strengths of each stakeholder. This was enhanced by those who had previous experience with crisis repatriations. Nevertheless, the lack of coordination with some stakeholders constrained the assistance they provided, as some host governments were not transparent in sharing information regarding OFWs and other non-migrant related government agencies did not comprehend what repatriation entailed. Social capital, including social media and other digital services, was also useful in informing OFWs of the assistance available. These digital services were effective in allowing government agencies to continue to assist OFWs virtually despite COVID-19 restrictions. These notable challenges and successes offer valuable lessons for future crises and repatriations.

The assistance provided by government agencies attempts to address the capital needs of repatriated OFWs. This research has shown that much of the assistance available only addresses MDWs' financial capital. The pre-departure and repatriation assistance is usually shouldered by employers or government agencies, which recognises MDWs' limited financial capital and facilitates their ability to return to the Philippines. Most of the post-arrival assistance was also financial but as it is convertible, it can also address other capitals. This is illustrated by the MDWs who were able to start a small business and thus exert agency with the assistance received. In addition, although most MDWs showed preference for financial assistance, this does not sufficiently address their long-term needs as it may deplete quickly if they are unable to find other sources of livelihoods. This may be likely among the MDWs, as the main challenge they faced was finding a job or generating sufficient income. Other forms of assistance, such as training and entrepreneurship programmes, addressing human capital are

also available, but many MDWs are unaware of these. In addition, at the time of the interview, many Filipino MDWs had not yet received any assistance. Further research should be conducted post-pandemic to better understand the factors impacting the assistance received. The delay in and lack of sustainable and suitable assistance also encourages some MDWs to remigrate, including those who prefer to remain in the Philippines. This suggests that MDWs' agency is constrained by the insufficient post-arrival assistance.

This research has shown that the Philippine government's assistance to MDWs was successful during their physical repatriation. However, assistance in the pre-departure and post-arrival phases has been hindered by the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, this assistance has been delayed, provides limited options for livelihood support and is unsustainable in addressing MDWs long-term needs. This echoes the persistent limitations of the Philippine government's repatriation and reintegration policies. However, the findings of this research are based on a rather small sample size. Therefore, it would be beneficial to conduct further research with a larger sample size. In addition, it could be interesting to incorporate other types of OFWs to further examine which factors determine the assistance they request and receive. This would allow for more reliable and general conclusions to be drawn.

8.1. Policy recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed gaps in repatriation policies but also provides an opportunity to enhance these policies both for the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and future crisis repatriations as well as return the favour to the Philippines' modern-day heroes. The following recommendations aim to support key stakeholders in further developing repatriation policies and improving migration governance. Firstly, learning from the COVID-19 repatriations will only be possible if the current crisis response is well documented. While many government agencies had previous experience with crises, these were not well documented or shared with other government agencies. Therefore, government agencies should document the structures implemented as well as the challenges and opportunities faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and incorporate these in contingency planning for all government agencies. These contingency plans, however, must account for the different countries where OFWs migrate to and should therefore provide a general plan along with country-specific guidelines. Ultimately, this will allow government agencies to be better prepared for repatriations.

As revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the limited preparation caused delays in or reduced the provision of assistance. Government agencies should therefore be sufficiently prepared and accumulate capital to facilitate the timely provision of assistance to OFWs. Moreover, the assistance should also address a larger variety of needs. This research has shown that MDWs required repatriation for a variety of reasons, which often determines the assistance they may need. Therefore, assistance should go beyond financial assistance, as this is only a stopgap measure to more pressing challenges faced by repatriated OFWs, such as unemployment. Rather, assistance should be more sustainable and facilitate OFWs' agency. In addition, providing long-term assistance and programmes that start while they are still abroad will also facilitate OFWs' reintegration. Examples include financial literacy and savings programmes, stronger social protection, and employment facilitation. A change in the Philippines' labour export approach may also contribute to better repatriation and reintegration policies.

The provision of assistance can be facilitated by the digitalisation of data collection and assistance distribution methods. Previous literature has already pointed towards the lack of data regarding return and repatriated migrants and while the Philippines has collected data through paper forms and introduced systems such as OASIS, these systems are not able to collect robust, accurate, and timely data due to the underreporting of OFWs. Further development and implementation of digital OFW tracking and data collection systems would address issues in resource allocation, needs identification, and ultimately the provision of assistance. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the feasibility and efficiency of digitalising assistance applications and distribution methods. However, digitalisation requires strengthening the digital literacy of both government agencies and OFWs and ensuring that they remain migrant-friendly.

Moreover, the lack of awareness regarding the various forms of assistance indicates a need for more information dissemination. This information should address the type of assistance available, eligibility criteria, and where and how to obtain it. Government agencies should also use various communication channels to address potential barriers to communication. For example, not all OFWs use social media or are part of Filipino communities. A combination of traditional and innovative communication channels will increase the reach of information and assistance.

Lastly, this research has shown the importance of coordination in the distribution of information and assistance to OFWs. Therefore, government agencies should continue to build partnerships with host countries, other government agencies, local government units, and

migrant organisations. This would improve needs identification, maximise capital, and leverage the strengths of each stakeholder, ultimately improving the assistance provided. In addition, coordination may facilitate the establishment of referral procedures, which provide OFWs access to the stakeholder specialised in addressing their needs.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide

Introduction

My name is Sanne and I am a masters student from Utrecht University in the Netherlands. This research aims to understand the repatriation experience of OFWs. A series of questions will be asked in relation to your experience as a migrant domestic worker and your return or repatriation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The information given in this interview will be used in my master's thesis so I would like to record the interview. However, your responses will remain confidential and anonymous. Before the interview begins, I will ask for your consent to the above. If at any time you wish to revoke your consent and no longer take part in the interview or have your information used, I will happily comply with your wishes. If you have any questions regarding the interview process, your consent or any matter at all, you can ask at any time. Do you have any questions now? Then I will start the recording

Background information

1. Could you start by introducing yourself?

Probe: Age, marital status, level of education, profession before migration, place of origin, place of residence, number of household members

Key questions

Migration trajectory

2. Where did you originally migrate to?

Probe: Why did you choose that destination? Have you moved anywhere else since you first migrated?

3. Why did you originally decide to migrate?

4. How did you find the job?

Probe: What was that transition like?

5. Could you tell me about your migration experience?

Probe: Application process, difficulties faced, length, OWWA member?

6. Could you tell me about your time abroad as a migrant worker?

Probe: Daily tasks, living and working conditions, free time, (social) protection, relations abroad

7. How did you maintain your relationships with your family in the Philippines while abroad?

Probe: How often did you visit the Philippines (if at all)? How did you stay in contact?

Repatriation

8. Could you describe your situation before you returned/ were repatriated?
Probe: Change in working conditions due to COVID
9. Did you require any assistance before your repatriation?
Probe: What type of assistance? From whom? Why?
10. Did you feel ready to return to the Philippines?
Probe: Did you have enough (financial, human) capital?
11. How long did you have to wait before you were repatriated/ able to return?
Probe: Waiting period, quarantine, pre-flight, post-flight
12. What did you do while you waited for your flight back to the Philippines?
Probe: Where did you stay?

Reason for return

13. When did you return to the Philippines?
14. Have you returned to the Philippines before?
Probe: Have you required repatriation before? When? Why?
15. Where did you return to in the Philippines (province)?
16. Why did you return to the Philippines?
Probe: Voluntary/ involuntary? Only COVID-19 related? How did you make the decision to return?

Assistance received

17. Who did you contact to ask for assistance with the repatriation?
Probe: Philippine Consulate, OWWA, POLO, recruitment agency, NGOs, etc. How did you know who to contact regarding repatriation? Where did you get information regarding the assistance available?
18. What type of assistance did you receive?
Probe: Information, financial, material, housing, food, medical, etc. and from whom?
19. If no assistance, why did you not receive or request it?
20. What is your opinion about the repatriation process?
Probe: Quarantine, testing? What could have been done better? Why?
21. What is your opinion on the assistance you received/ is available?
Probe: Is it sufficient?
22. Was your experience returning to the Philippines as you expected?
Probe: Why/ why not?

Reintegration

23. What was the transition like returning to the Philippines?

Sources of income

24. What have you been doing since you returned to the Philippines?

Probe: Economic activities/ working, spending time with family

25. If working, what kind of job are you doing?

Probe: How did you find employment? Is it related to your skills or previous work as a domestic worker? How often do you work?

26. What are the main challenges you experienced in trying to find a new job?

Probe: Acquiring new skills, new career opportunities

Assistance

27. Has anyone helped you re-establish your life in the Philippines?

Probe: Family, friends, other migrants, government, non-governmental organisations

28. Have you received any assistance from the government since your repatriation?

Probe: What type of assistance or why not? What do you feel you need the most assistance with (financial/ employment, emotional)?

29. Have you received any assistance from non-governmental organisations since your repatriation?

Probe: What type of assistance? Why did you receive it from an NGO rather than the government?

30. Are you aware of the government programmes in the Philippines regarding reintegration?

Probe: Are you making, or will you make use of them? Why/ why not? How did you find out about the programmes?

Overall reintegration

31. What is the best part about coming home?

Probe: Are you happy that you returned to the Philippines? Do you feel at home? If not, what do you feel you need to help you more?

32. What are the main difficulties about coming home/ re-integrating?

Probe: Financial, social, exclusion, government, mental wellbeing

33. How did you feel when you first came back to the Philippines compared to now, a couple months later?

Probe: Better/ worse? Uncertainties?

34. Do you feel reintegrated?

Probe: Why (not)?

35. Do you plan to re-migrate or return to your host country in the future?

Probe: Under what conditions do you think you will re-migrate? When? Why?

Closing questions

36. What are your plans for the future?

37. Would you like to add anything else?

Appendix B: Key informant interview guide

Introduction

My name is Sanne van Veen and I am a masters student from Utrecht University in the Netherlands. This research aims to understand the repatriation process during the COVID-19 pandemic. A series of questions will be asked in relation to the repatriation policies and programmes as well as the opportunities and challenges that have risen during the pandemic. The information given in this interview will be used in my master's thesis so I would like to record the interview. However, your responses will remain confidential and anonymous. Before the interview begins, I will ask for your consent to the above. If at any time you wish to revoke your consent and no longer take part in the interview or have your information used, I will happily comply with your wishes. If you have any questions regarding the interview process, your consent or any matter at all, you can ask at any time. Do you have any questions now? Then I will start the recording

Background information

1. Could you start by introducing yourself?

Probe: Job title, length of employment in the government agency, responsibilities

Key questions

Role of government agency

2. Could you tell me a bit about the government agency?

Probe: responsibilities, founding year, what type of assistance does the government agency usually provide?

3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the government agency?

Probe: Performance, responsibilities, funding, capability, relations

4. What relationship does the government agency have with migrant workers?

Probe: relationship with domestic workers in particular

5. How is the cooperation with other (government) agencies?

6. How did the government agency prepare for COVID-19 pandemic? When did the government agency start preparing for the COVID-19 pandemic?

7. How have previous crises helped prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic?

Repatriation

8. What part does the government agency play in the repatriation of migrants?

Probe: What type of assistance do you provide? financial, psychosocial

9. How many OFWs has the government agency assisted and repatriated during the COVID-19 pandemic?
10. In which sectors do most of the OFWs requesting repatriation work? Which sector is the most common?
11. What are the main reasons OFWs, particularly domestic workers, are seeking assistance/ repatriation?
12. What policies, programmes, and/or services were implemented to manage the COVID-19 pandemic?
Probe: What are the policies, programmes, and/or services related to repatriation?
13. Are the current repatriation policies, programmes, and services sufficient for managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs? Why?
14. How have the repatriation policies and programmes facilitated or hindered the government agency in performing your responsibilities?

Communication

15. How does the government agency communicate with OFWs regarding the services available to them?
Probe: Feedback
16. How is the cooperation with other Philippine (governmental and non-governmental) agencies and organisations?
17. How is the cooperation with the host country?
18. What challenges related to communication and cooperation have been encountered by the government agency during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Reintegration

19. What type of assistance have you been able to provide to repatriated migrant workers in the Philippines?
Probe: Livelihood, financial, educational
20. Do you think this assistance is sufficient?

Impact of COVID-19

21. Has the COVID-19 pandemic provided any opportunities for the government agency?
Probe: How? improvement of policies, new programmes
22. What challenges related to repatriation have been encountered by the government agency in assisting OFWs amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
Probe: How do you address these challenges?

23. What are the key learnings from the government agency's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Closing questions

24. How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the government agency's future responsibilities?

25. How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will impact migration and repatriation policies, programmes, and services in the long-run?

26. What does the future look like for the government agency?

Appendix C: Consent form

Participant initials:

Date:

This interview aims to understand the repatriation experience of domestic workers from the Philippines during COVID-19. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes and contains a series of questions regarding your repatriation experience. This consent form is to ensure that you are aware of the nature and content of this interview and your ethical rights as an interviewee. If you are happy to participate then please complete and sign the form below. Please initial the boxes below to confirm that you agree with each statement:

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, I am free to decline answering questions I do not wish to answer.

I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials and will not be identified or identifiable in the report(s) that result from the research.

I agree for this interview to be recorded. I understand that the audio recording made of this interview will be used only for analysis and that extracts from the interview, from which I cannot be personally identified, may be used in this research. I understand that no other use will be made of the recording without my written permission, and that no one outside the research team will be allowed access to the original recording.

I agree to take part in this interview.

Name of interviewee Date Signature

Name of interviewer Date Signature

Appendix D: Characteristics of participating Filipino MDWs

Name ⁶	Age	Marital status	No. of children	Level of education	Home region	Host region	Length of overseas employment ⁷	OWWA member	Reason for repatriation	Employment status	Remigration intentions
Erica	67	Widow	3	Tertiary	NCR	Hong Kong	28 years	Yes	Nearing retirement	Employed	No
Hiezel	59	Single	0	Secondary	Bicol	Hong Kong	28 years	No	Employment issues	Self-employed	No
Rosamine	35	Single	1	Tertiary	N. Mindanao	Kuwait	5 months	Yes	Employment issues	Self-employed	No
Angeline	26	Married	4	Secondary	Calabarzon	Saudi Arabia	7 months	No	Employment issues	Unemployed	Preparing documents
Michelle	29	Married	2	Secondary	Calabarzon	Qatar	2 years	Yes	End of contract	Employed	In the future
Bea	27	Separated	2	Secondary	Calabarzon	UAE	2 years, 4 months	No	End of contract	Employed	Preparing documents
Joy	58	Single	2	Secondary	Calabarzon	UAE	9 months	No	Employment issues	Unemployed	No
Marisol	45	Married	2	Tertiary	Ilocos	Hong Kong	6 years	No	Employment issues	Unemployed	Depends on opportunity
Bennelyn	32	Single	2	Secondary	Bicol	Saudi Arabia	1 year, 9 months	Yes	Employment issues	Self-employed	Depends on opportunity
Remy	40	Married	5	Tertiary	Bicol	UAE	6 months	Yes	Employment issues	Employed	Depends on opportunity
Analyn	41	Married	4	Secondary	BARMM	Saudi Arabia	3 years, 1 months	No	Employment issues	Unemployed	Depends on opportunity
Airine	39	Separated	1	Secondary	BARMM	Kuwait	2 years, 5 months	Yes	End of contract	Self-employed	No

⁶ The names have been changed to respect their confidentiality and anonymity of the participants

⁷ The length of overseas employment includes multiple employers but does not account for previous migration periods

Grace	51	Single	0	Tertiary	Bicol	Saudi Arabia	10 years	No	Family	Unemployed	Depends on opportunity
Sara	28	Single	0	Tertiary	W. Visayas	UAE	3 years	No	End of contract	Employed	In the future
Gabrielle	61	Single	0	Tertiary	W. Visayas	UAE	26 years	No	End of contract	Retired	No
Rosa	32	Married	2	Secondary	Davao	UAE	5 years	Yes	End of contract	Self-employed	Depends on opportunity
Jessica	29	Married	2	Primary	BARMM	UAE	3 years, 7 months	Yes	End of contract	Unemployed	Preparing documents
Gloria	40	Married	6	Secondary	BARMM	Saudi Arabia	2 years, 5 months	Yes	End of contract	Self-employed	Depends on opportunity
Amelia	39	Married	3	Primary	BARMM	Saudi Arabia	2 years, 6 months	Yes	End of contract	Self-employed	Preparing documents
Maria	37	Single	1	Tertiary	Calabarzon	Hong Kong	6 years	Yes	End of contract	Employed	Depends on opportunity