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Abstract

According to the International Migration Report of 2019 conducted by the United Nations, about 272 million people are estimated to be international migrants worldwide in 2019. Among the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, the largest sending countries of the region during 2000-2020 were China, Philippines, Myanmar, and Indonesia, while the largest receiving countries were Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia. Existing research on return migration and reintegration have shown how countries in Southeast Asia including Philippines are dealing with the return of migrant workers using governments' efforts to reintegrate returnees into their community. However, while programs for returning migrant workers are evident in different studies, the issue of its efficacy during the ongoing health crisis remains a mystery. Using a narrative research design under qualitative research methodology, the researchers conducted in-depth interview from seven returned migrants. The study aims to explore the experiences of return migrant workers during this current and ongoing global pandemic. Specifically, it answer the questions such as the challenges encountered by OFWs during repatriation and upon their arrival in the country and the government support towards returned migrants. From the narratives gathered on the participants, the study found a relevant connection between the pandemic and the livelihood capability, emotional well-being, as well as problematic social relations due to the stigma attached to migrant workers. Still, despite these challenges, having a positive outlook and hope help the returned migrants to navigate though their problems and current scenarios. During the repatriation, the study also highlighted rigorous process experienced by migrant workers before and upon their return in the country mandated by the Philippine Government to restrain Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) transmission. In terms of reintegration, various government programs are also identified to address the needs of migrant workers. Nevertheless, the study found out that there are factors that affect successful implementation of government programs which include uninformed and misinformed returnees, lack of information dissemination, and limited funds of the government.

Keywords: *migration, COVID-19 pandemic, returned migrants, reintegration policy, livelihood, emotional/ psychological effect*

Introduction

It has been over a year now since the first case of '*pneumonia of unknown cause*,' which was later known as SARS-COV 2 virus infection, was first identified in Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020). This outbreak quickly escalated, and on March 11, 2020, the WHO declared the novel coronavirus (COVID 19) outbreak as a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). However, more than just a public health concern, COVID 19 Pandemic also has severe economic repercussions. In many countries, massive repatriation of migrant workers has been witnessed. Many of these migrants were caught up in a travel ban and lack of transportation due to the existing quarantine regulations, while some had lost their jobs and livelihood (Asis, 2020; Bernal, 2020; İçduygu, 2020). In the Philippines, the number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who worked abroad between the periods of April to September 2019 was estimated to be at 2.2 million based on the results of the PSA 2019 Survey on Overseas Filipinos. About 96.8 percent of the total OFWs during the said period were Overseas Contract Employees (OCWs) or those with existing work contracts while the remaining 3.2 percent worked even without a contract overseas. Among these numbers, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) reported that about 327,511 overseas Filipinos had been repatriated in 2020 (DFA, 2021). Of the overall figures, 231,537 or 70.7 percent are land-based returnees, coming from at least 90 countries worldwide and the remaining 29.3%, or 95,974 include seafarers.

This paper explores narratives about the lives of returned migrant workers during this current and ongoing global pandemic focusing on the Philippines as the largest labor sending country in Southeast Asia (Hugo, 2012). Specifically, it will answer the research questions below:

1. What are the challenges faced by the OFWs during the repatriation and upon their arrival in the country?
2. How did COVID-19 Pandemic affect the lives of returned migrant workers?
3. What government support has been done to mitigate the queries of OFWs?

The effects of migration on development have been strongly acknowledged and discussed on an ongoing basis, especially concerning the magnitude of remittances to reduce poverty. However, not many studies are available to discuss return migration (Wickramasekara, 2019) especially in response towards the ongoing health crisis. This study focuses on this literature gap. The study will be a significant addition in understanding the connection of return migration and COVID-19 in the Philippines. It will also be beneficial to policymakers because reintegration programs are often initiated by the government. The attempt to link reintegration policies with COVID-19 Pandemic is a vital endeavor to address what will happen next after migrant workers return to their country. As per limitation, the study will focus only on the repatriation, challenges of returned migrants, and identifying reintegration programs in mitigating repercussions brought by COVID-19. It will not delve into an in-depth analysis of each government policy and will not include other sectors affected by the pandemic.

Materials & Methods

The study utilized a narrative research design under qualitative research methodology which focuses on explaining the life and experiences of returned migrant workers in the Philippines due to the effect of the COVID-19 virus. The study was conducted in the province of Bulacan from December 2020

to January 2021. All participants are at least 1-year international migrant workers and returned to the Philippines during the pandemic. In general, seven returned OFWs were selected through purposive sampling based on the objectives of the research. Four of them are male, while three are female belonging in the age bracket of 24-41 covering different occupations and returned to the country from May 2020 to November 2020. However, given the sample size of participants, the results of this study cannot be generalized as an embodiment of all experiences of returned migrant workers in the Philippines. Nonetheless, the study aim to pave way in deeper understanding of repatriation during the pandemic. The data are collected through phone calls and actual interviews using semi-structured interview questions. After seeking consent from the participants, all discussions were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. The accounts of returned migrant workers were analyzed, retold, and organized through identified themes or narrative segments. To present the patterns and meanings behind the experiences of repatriated OFWs, the study uses a thematic approach. According to King, as cited by Nowell *et al.* (2017), thematic analysis is a useful method examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights.

Results and Discussion

Challenges faced by OFWs during Repatriation and upon Arrival to the Country

The sudden cessation of the world brought by the pandemic resulted in disruptions on the lives of many people around the world. Among those who are severely affected are the OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) who are left with no choice but to end the journey that they started abroad. According to Liao (2020), repatriation during the COVID-19 pandemic is much more complicated compared to other repatriation causes. The process of coming back home is an exhausting cycle. An article written by Venuz Zoleta in 2020 elaborated the repatriation process that migrant workers should follow upon their return in the Philippines. The steps include securing a repatriation flight by inquiring with the Philippine Embassy, booking hotel facilities accredited by DOH, and staying in quarantine facilities upon their return while waiting for the swab test result. Also, under the command of IATF, all returning Filipino migrants, regardless of transportation mode, are required to undergo a 14-day quarantine (PCG, 2020). According to the participants in the study, the strict health protocols in the repatriation process does not just start upon the arrival of the returned migrants. Some of them are already quarantined abroad, like Participant 01, who had spent five days in a quarantine facility in Equatorial Guinea, West Africa, before returning home. To ensure that OFWs will get proper assistance and accommodation when they arrive in the country, participants are also instructed to fill out online registration forms to different Philippine agencies such as e-CIF (Electronic Case Investigation Form from Philippine Red Cross) and OASIS (OFW Assistance Information System) to be eligible for the benefits from OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) which include payment for airlines, swab test, and hotel accommodation. Nevertheless, this lengthy migration process is not just exclusive in the Philippines. In ASEAN, all countries established quarantine centers and guidelines in accommodating returning migrants in accordance with health protocols (ILO, 2021). For instance, Cambodia mandated a 14-day quarantine and established an estimated 75 state-supervised quarantine facilities while across Myanmar, over 10,000 quarantine facilities were established (ILO, 2021). As the second country with the highest number of migrant workers in Southeast Asia after the Philippines, Indonesian government also mandated that international migrant workers as well as foreign nationals entering their country to be treated in accordance with safety guidelines. Hence, returning migrants must undergo the COVID-19 screening procedure upon arrival

which include interview, temperature check, oxygen saturation check as well as rapid test and/or PCR examination. When symptoms like coughing and high fever are detected, they will be referred in a government-approved health facility in the local area by applying the infectious disease referral protocol (Anaf, Ibnu, Romdiati, & Noveria, 2022; Indonesia.go.id, 2020).

However, despite the meticulous policies set for returning migrants, there are still issues that need to be addressed. In terms of the length of stay in quarantine facilities, the study noted that though there is a 14-days quarantine protocol in the Philippines, returned OFWs experienced different quarantine periods due to the prolonged swab test result. The failure to provide immediate swab test results of returned OFWs lead to inadequacy of quarantine centers. As emphasized by the participants, the government is having a difficulty to cope up with the huge number of returning migrants due to the unavailability of isolation facilities. Some also experienced staying in their service bus for almost twenty-four hours just because hotels that are serving as quarantine facilities are fully occupied. Regarding the health guidelines, all the participants stressed the need to observe basic protocols such as wearing of face mask, face shield, and staying in their respective hotel rooms. Unfortunately, husband and wife, Participant 04 & Participant 05 emphasized their frustration by the lack of physical distance on the airlines before arriving in their designated quarantine facility.

Participant 04: "It was said that there will be social distancing in airlines but there is none. When we arrived at the airport, we slept on the bus for 24 hours because the hotels were full. Because of the situation, everyone is complaining." (Bale sa airlines, sabi may social distancing pero wala din. Bale pagdating namin ng airport, natulog kami sa bus kasi walang available na hotel. 24 hours kami nasa bus kasi nga puno daw yung mga hotel tapos ayun nga sa dami namin doon eh lahat nag rereklamo.)

Aside from the difficulties stated above, further problems in terms of transportation and drop off are also mentioned. Although transportation restriction to majority of Philippine vehicles was lifted on June 24, 2020 after almost four months of strict lockdown due to the pandemic, Martin Delgra, LTFRB Chief, announced that only 8% out of 74,000 jeepneys are back to the road due to the strict reopening of only 49 out of 900 existing jeepney routes in Manila as of July 13, 2020 (Beltran, 2020). Even if the returned OFWs can somehow managed to find way to go back to their hometowns, there are still reports that some LGUs (Local Government Units) barred the return of OFWs for fear that they might be carriers of the coronavirus (Asis, 2020; Tomacruz, 2020). As a response, the Philippine government strictly warned LGUs to accept returning migrants to avoid legal ramifications ("DILG to issue show cause order", 2020).

Despite the issues faced in repatriation, it is also worthy to note the positive effort made by ASEAN to discuss support for migrant workers through the 13th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML) hosted by Viet Nam. Some of the recommendations discussed are ensuring accessibility in health care, income support, and social protection; strengthening migrant workers' return and reintegration programs with adequate resources; maximizing technology in processing migrant workers' immigration and employment documents to limit physical contact; and increasing collaboration of different sectors to strengthen national policy framework for protection of migrant workers in time of pandemic (ILO, 2020). In line with this, Asis (2020) has commended the Philippines for its satisfactory practices in dealing with repatriated OFWs which include establishing partnership between Philippine government institutions and recruitment agencies, utilizing online platforms to provide information and support to repatriated Filipino migrant

workers, and developing the OFW Assistance Information System as a tracking structure to facilitate orderly repatriation and assistance to the vast number of returning OFWs.

Effects of Pandemic on the Lives of Returned Migrant Workers: Stories of Hope and Struggle amidst the Pandemic

COVID 19 has huge political, health, social, and economic repercussions around the world including the Philippines. Among the most vulnerable sectors in the country affected by economic downfall are the OFWs abroad who are forced to return to the country. The narratives below answer the second research question of the study which focuses on determining the extent of the Pandemic's effect on the lives of migrant workers upon their arrival.

Father's grief behind the luxury

The sacrifice in West Africa by Participant 01 ended unexpectedly in 3 months due to the COVID-19 impact that resulted in the contract's termination as a welder in a power plant. Participant 01 went back to the Philippines on November 19, 2020 with no other choices left and with nothing but himself. Despite his unexpected retrenchment, he is thankful for the help given by the OWWA for facilitating repatriation free of charge. During his five-day stay in a hotel in Makati, he is in awe because of its extravagance and the comfort that he experienced.

“OWWA is doing a good job. We have designated hotel rooms and then they monitor us from time to time to see if you have a fever, feel bad, have a cough, or have a cold. They visit and call us in our room. As long as you are honest with your health, there will be no problem.” (Maganda po ang palakad na ito ng OWWA. Sa hotel po ay isa-isa kami ng room tapos minomonitor po kami maya't maya kung ikaw ba ay nilalagnat, masama ang pakiramdam, inuubo, sinisipon. Binibisita at tinatawagan po kami sa kwarto namin, basta maging tapat lang po sa nararamdaman ay wala po magiging problema.)

However, behind the luxury, reality comes in.

"The hotel is nice, our food is clean but I don't have any income to support my family." (Maganda po ang hotel, ang pagkain po namin ay malinis kaya lang wala naman akong income pang suporta sa pamilya ko.)

Participant 01 has two children, and he shared that he does not have a stable job that can sustain his family, making him thankful for his wife's efforts to make both ends meet. He also added that his children rely on learning modules because they do not have the capacity to access an internet connection. Despite his struggle, Participant 01 still maintains a positive outlook that they can survive every passing day in their lives through God.

Burden of the Pandemic on Married Couples

Compared to the 'normal lives' that people had before, the pandemic brought even more piles of burden, especially to the married couple. Participant 02, a former domestic helper, found her way to the Philippines after more than two years of working in Saudi Arabia due to an unexpected termination of contract. When asked about the challenges she faced during the repatriation process, she stated,

"Honestly, I didn't receive any help from them [government agencies]. It is just my employer who helped me get home here. [Philippines]." (Sa totoo lang, wala akong tulong na natanggap sa kanila [ahensya ng gobyerno]. Tanging ang employer ko lang ang tumulong sa akin upang makauwi ako dito [Pilipinas].)

The problems that she encountered do not end after she arrives in the country. It escalates even in their source of income. At present, she is working as a cook in a small canteen near their house and is earning 250 Php a day. She admitted that she is losing hope due to the present situation and the hardship of taking care of her children and nieces and working alone as her husband also lost his job.

"I feel hopeless because my husband doesn't have a job. It's also difficult because I'm the only one providing for us." (Nawawalan ako ng pag-asa dahil wala ng trabaho ang Mister ko. Mahirap din kasi ako lang ang kumakayod sa amin.)

Negative stigma towards returned migrant

Never in the wildest imagination of a 27-year-old bachelor and marine engineer from San Jose del Monte, Bulacan that he will experience discrimination after coming home from Europe in September 2020 after he finished his two-month extension in a ship sailing to countries in Europe. In general, Participant 03 did not encounter any particular problems and had a comfortable stay during his quarantine period in Cebu City. Nonetheless, he observed significant changes in his work schedule.

"Now because of the pandemic, my work schedule has become uncertain. There is no assurance that we could go back to our employer... Supposedly, I should be at work by January or February but because of the situation it was moved to June." (Ngayon kasi dahil sa pandemic, hindi na certain yung araw o buwan ng alis ko eh... Supposedly ang alis ko dapat ay January or February pero namo-move kaya binigyan ulit ako ng sunod na alis ng June.)

In terms of his financial status, he has no worries because he is earning from the stock market and his siblings are equipped with stable jobs. However, his dilemma lies in his emotional well-being and how he was perceived and discriminated by his neighbors. To make a stand for himself, Participant 03 utilized social media to spread the awareness that he is not ill and not a carrier of the virus.

The existing challenges brought by the pandemic also make him realize the importance of being prepared for unexpected crises.

"I avail insurance because I realize that it would be difficult to go home infected by the virus. It will worry my family so, upon my arrival, I make sure that I am already insured in order to protect my family and myself in case of an unexpected health problem." (Kumuha ako ng insurance kasi naisip ko na mahirap umuwi ng may virus. Mag-aalala ang pamilya ko kaya pagkarating ko agad, sinigurado kong insured na ako para maprotektahan ang pamilya ko at ang sarili ko mula sa mga di inaasahang sakit.)

Changing lifestyle and adapting to “new normal”

Dubai, UAE, is an answered prayer for the married couple, Participant 04 and 05 where they live a prosperous life for 13 years as an IT Manager and a Property Administrator/Executive Assistant in the prominent companies in Dubai. However, everything changed as the pandemic hit Dubai, resulting in Participant 04's termination of contract and the early resignation of Participant 05.

Participant 04: “The Company closed because of COVID-19. Our main branch in the US also shut down so we don't have a chance to find another job again. We tried looking for 5 months [work] but many companies closed down so, we [husband and wife] decided to go home [in the Philippines].” (Nag close yung company dahil sa COVID-19. Yung pinaka main branch namin sa US ay nag shutdown din kaya wala kaming chance na makahanap ulit. Nag-try kami ng 5 months na [maghanap ng trabaho], pero maraming company ang nag sara kaya ayon nag decide kami [mag-asawa] umuwi [Pilipinas].)

Participant 05: “In my case, I resigned when the company informed us of its potential bankruptcy. Since he [husband] lost his job, we decided to return to the country.” (Sa akin naman, nagresign ako noong sinabi ng kumpanya namin na maari sila magsara dahil sa bankruptcy. Dahil nawalan sya [mister] ng trabaho, nag desisyon kami na umuwi sa bansa.)

After more than five months of battling and adjusting to their life in *new normal*, they confessed that they are still experiencing a great deal of stress and uncertainty. Participant 04 also sympathized with the situation of their fellow OFWs that remain abroad. “*We still have family friends in UAE but they are also in a difficult situation of finding a source of income to sustain their needs.*” (Marami kaming kaibigan sa UAE pero ayun mahirap din sitwasyon nila doon dahil naghahanap pa rin sila ng pagkakakitaan para sa pang araw-araw nila.) Participant 04 and 05 affirmed that the present situation affected their outlook in life. They also stressed the importance of saving money. When asked if they will return to UAE after the pandemic ends, they affirmed that they would.

Unfulfilled Dreams in times of Pandemic

Participant 06 is a 24-year-old OFW who came to Singapore to chase his dream to have a better future for himself and his family. He worked as hotel personnel in Singapore for 8 months and plans to extend for another 2 years. However, because of the closures of business establishments and retrenchment of workers in Singapore, his dream to stay longer in the country has been put to an end. When asked about the economic impact of the Pandemic to him, he explained how challenging it is for him to come back to the Philippines when he realized that he will not have the opportunity to extend his stay in Singapore and pay back the loan that he used to go abroad. This problem coupled up by uncertainties of livelihood upon his return contributes to the stress he experienced.

“Personally, I experienced not just stress but depression. It is very difficult for me to start again. I worked abroad to fulfill my dreams but because of the pandemic everything seems to disappear.” (Ako, naka-experience ako hindi lang stress kung hindi depresyon. Napakahirap para sa akin na magsimula ulit. Nagtrabaho ako sa abroad para matupad ang mga pangarap ko pero dahil sa pandemic parang naglaho na lahat.)

However, despite the difficulties, Participant 06 still continues to be a dreamer by emphasizing that in life, everything is possible. It is also important to note that in the narrative of Participant 06, Filipinos still view migration abroad as a ticket for a good life aligned with the study conducted by Asis (2006), stating that the penchant of Filipinos for working abroad could be understood in light of their desire to provide a better life for their families.

Online Business as a means to sustain livelihood

The advent of the pandemic brought significant changes in everyday activities and the nature of livelihood today. OFW participants shared how the pandemic affected their income. To adapt to the pressing circumstances, three out of seven participants in this study started an online business. For instance, Participant 05, together with her husband, Participant 04 started an online business in computer services. Participant 07, a 41-year-old single mother and former caregiver in Riyadh, began selling foods online.

In terms of the challenges regarding online business, Participant 07 expressed her unawareness of government programs and financial support. On the other hand, Participants 04 & 05 elaborated on the changes they encountered in starting a new normal business. Among these changes includes the shift of advertisement and service from physical to online platforms. Participant 05 claimed that it is impractical to rent a physical store. Her husband, Participant 04 supported this claim by saying, *"It is not practical to rent a place for business. Usually consumers are afraid to go out so, we shift the marketing strategy using social media."* (Hindi praktikal na mag renta ng lugar para sa negosyo. Yung mga customer, takot lumabas kaya pinalitan namin ang marketing strategy namin gamit ang social media.) Regarding their present financial status in relation to their expenses, Participant 07 stated that her income is not enough to support her daughters especially because she is a single mother and a breadwinner of the family. In contrast, Participant 04 & 05 stated that they have enough income but still emphasized on the need of alternative means for comfortable living.

The narratives presented focus on three important issues faced by migrant workers upon their return. First is the livelihood and employment issue, which was manifested by all of the returned migrants. Alongside the hardship on the process of repatriation, OFWs faced uncertain opportunities on finding a job upon their return. The recent spike on the number of unemployed Filipinos which was estimated to be at 4.5 million people in March 2020 by the PSA (de Vera, 2020) added additional complication in employment. As a means to sustain their needs, participants in the study look into online business as a source of income. However, they also emphasized that they prefer to have a stable job if the situation permits them. Second is the emotional and psychological effect of the pandemic on OFWs. Tee, M. et.al. (2020) on their study involving 1,879 completed online surveys on Filipinos gathered from March 28-April 12, 2020 examined the psychological impact of the Pandemic in the Philippines. In total, 16.3% of respondents rated psychological impact of the outbreak as moderate-to-severe; 16.9% reported moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms; 28.8% had moderate-to-severe anxiety level and 13.4% had moderate-to-severe stress level. This emotional and psychological effect is also manifested in the participants of this study who experienced stress, anxiousness and extreme worry for themselves and for their family. Lastly is the social relations of returned migrants. The problem of negative stigma attached towards OFWs as a carrier of the virus was experienced by Participant 03 even though he tested negative on his swab test result. To resolve this issue, he utilize social media as a way to inform his neighbors on the result of his swab and put an end on the discrimination he experienced.

Government Support to Returned Migrant Workers: Meaning and Purpose during the Pandemic

Return migration has often been defined simply as going back to the country of origin. However, in reality, return is not just a unilateral course of action but a diversified and complex process that takes into account the cause of return migration, success of migration goals, as well as the preparedness of institutions in the home country to cater returned migrants (Battistella, 2018). Thus, crafting an effective and sustainable reintegration policies are vital for successful return of migrant workers. In 2019, the IOM (International Organization for Migration) introduced an integrated approach that addresses three dimensions of reintegration. The dimensions include economic which covers aspects of reintegration in ensuring livelihood, social dimension which refer to accessibility of public services and facilities such as access to health, education, housing, justice, and social security, and psychosocial dimension that deals with the assimilation of returning migrants in the community. Reintegration, in this case, can only be considered sustainable when returnees have achieved levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their societies, and psychosocial well-being (IOM, 2017). When sustainable reintegration has been achieved, people are in a position to make more migration decisions as preference rather than necessity. However, attaining sustainable reintegration is not an easy task. According to Wickramasekara (2019), effective return and reintegration require that the countries of origin collaborate with destination countries to ensure the safe and dignified return of their citizens. Employers will also be expected to facilitate migrant workers' return journeys based on the contract of employment and the laws and regulations of the country of destination. Finally, the country of origin and home communities must also provide adequate reception services to returning migrant workers.

Looking in the Philippines, Republic Act no. 8042 also known as Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 described return as a policy priority for the OFWs before departure until arrival and return (Asis, 2017). The law set out return and reintegration facilities and proposed the establishment of a Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) Replacement and Monitoring Centre to promote the reintegration of migrant workers into Philippine society, facilitate the return to work, and tap the skills of returnees for nation-building. The law also established the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) role in providing social services, including the reintegration of returning workers, for the welfare and security of its overseas worker members and their families.

In 2016, OWWA was designated as a national government agency affiliated to the DOLE Overseas Workers Welfare Administration Act. Being a part of a government agency enables OWWA to perform a more active role in reintegrating returning employees as it can access government funding and migrant contributions (Wickramasekara, 2019). According to Battistella (2018), some of the Philippine reintegration services include job referrals, entrepreneurship assistance, capacity building, and counseling. Specifically, Martin (2019) offers a list of reintegration services in the Philippines which include Subsistence Development Assistance Program, Special Program for Returning Women Migrant Workers, Balik Pinas! Balik Hanapbuhay! program of livelihood support intended to provide immediate relief to returning member-OFWs (distressed/displaced), business and loan program in cooperation with the Land Bank of the Philippines and the Philippines' Development Bank, Sa 'Pinas, Ikaw Ang Ma'am/Sir which aims to win back the OFWs who have passed the Licensure Examination for Teachers, and TESDA Online Assessment Program that provide opportunities to obtain certification or recognition from TESDA based on the level of technical skills.

During this pandemic, additional programs are launched to support returned migrants. Such programs include the Project EASE (Educational Assistance through Scholarship in Emergencies), Tabang OFW (a one-time tertiary education subsidy for dependents of repatriated, displaced or deceased OFW), DOLE-AKAP for OFWs (a 10,000 pesos financial assistance for migrant workers), and OFW RISE (Re-Integration through Skills and Entrepreneurship) Program focus on a web-based training for online entrepreneurship initiated by collaborative effort of DOLE, OWWA, TESDA, DTI, and Coca Cola Philippines. However, despite the existing plans for migrant workers, there are still problems that OFWs encounter to benefit from these initiatives. For instance, among the current programs of the government only DOLE-AKAP for OFWs are availed by Participant 01, 03, 04, 05, and 07. On the other hand, only Participant 06 and his family received an aid under SAP (Social Amelioration Program). The latter elaborated the details of the support they received from the government:

Participant 06: "First, in my case, the government provided my quarantine expenses such as food and transportation from hotel to airport. It is indeed a big help. For my relatives, they received financial assistance from local community worth PHP 6,000 every two months. In summary, I think we received around PHP 12,000. My sibling in Manila received assistance worth PHP 8,000. It is a great help to us." (Sa akin, una, sagot ng government yung quarantine, yung pagkain, yung service from airport to hotel. So malaking bagay siya. For my family, yung ayuda na nareceive from barangay. Yung 6,000 [Philippine peso] every 2 months. Siguro naka receive din kami around 12,000 [Philippine peso] sa family ko din. Then yung kapatid ko, doon sa Manila may nareceive din silang 8,000 [Philippine peso]. So malaking tulong sa amin.)

As Participant 06 emphasized the significance of the financial support they received, related studies also affirmed this claim. In the thesis of Veen (2021), although accustomed with difficulties such as delays and lack of funding, few narratives of Filipino migrant domestic workers (MDWs) declared that they received other forms of help. One participant stated that she borrowed money from a relative upon returning in the Philippines to start a small business and she was able pay her debt after being granted of a financial capital aid worth of PHP 20,000 from the government. Similarly, records from Cho and Johnson (2022) shows that SAP's first and second tranche benefitted a total of 29.3 million Filipino households.

Information dissemination of the available programs initiated by the government is a big factor for a successful reintegration process. Although this study does not embody the totality of returned migrants during the pandemic, the interviews conducted by the researchers capture the dilemmas of the OFWs in getting proper information towards assistance provided by the government. When asked about the financial support that they received, Participants 03, 04, and 07 narrated the following:

Participant 03: "I received financial assistance from DOLE amounting to PHP 10,000. That is what I only got because this is the only program that I am aware of." (Nakatanggap po ako ng financial assistance mula sa DOLE na nagkakahalaga ng 10,000 pesos. Iyon lang ang natanggap ko kasi yun lang din ang programa na aware ako.)

Participant 06: "When I was in Dubai, there is a program there called AKAP DOLE. I tried to apply and after three months, they called and I received PHP 10,000. Afterwards, I don't know any other programs. It was such a headache! (Noong nasa Dubai ako, AKAP naman doon sa DOLE. Nag

try ako, after 3 months eh tumawag – nakakuha ako ng 10,000 pesos. After noon, wala na akong alam na iba [programa]! Sakit ng ulo lang!)

Participant 07: “I do not have any idea regarding programs in our local community. I am not updated. I also did not receive SAP, I have no idea because no one is giving information. Others said that there is [program], but no one is telling me.” (Wala rin akong alam sa local program ng barangay. Di naman ako updated kasi. Kasi di naman talaga ako umaalis ng bahay. Wala ring SAP, kasi di ko naman alam kung anong gagawin doon kasi wala naman ngang nagsasabi. Sabi nung iba meron daw [programa] pero wala namang nagsabi sakin.)

The statements above shows the participants' limited awareness regarding available support and other programs offered by the agencies of the government. The result coincides with the findings of Veen (2021) that many returned migrant workers availed only the assistance that they heard from their fellow OFW and they do not explore other options due to limited knowledge and source of information on whether they are qualified or not. Furthermore, it is also worthy to note the span of time that it takes to receive the financial support as can be seen in the above-mentioned experience of Participant 04. The said scenario became a common dilemma due to the inability to execute full preparedness of the government offices against the striking impact of the COVID-19 pandemic particularly in the first quarter of 2020, which is the peak season for returning migrant workers. As a result, lack of manpower and funds are mentioned to hinder the operations of these agencies (POLO Bahrain as cited in Veen, 2021). With the continued spread of the COVID-19 virus and the return of OFWs, the issues raised above remain relevant. It is now the responsibility of government and its affiliated institutions to address these significant challenges and improve services for our "modern-day" Filipino heroes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study provides a glimpse on how COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of Filipino migrant workers that were forced to come back to the Philippines due to the economic repercussions brought by the current health crisis. The study explains the rigorous process of repatriation that starts even before the arrival of OFWs in the country. The role of OWWA in assisting returned migrants is evident from the transportation of OFWs from the airlines, providing food and accommodation as well as securing swab test results. However, there are still issues faced by the returned migrants such as the length of stay in quarantine facilities due to delay of swab test results, lack of physical distancing in airlines and waiting area in hotels, difficulty of accommodating additional returned migrants due to the lack of available rooms in quarantine facilities, and further problems in areas of transportation and drop off.

From the narratives gathered on the participants, the study found a relation of the pandemic towards the livelihood capability of the returned migrant, emotional well-being, which was manifested on stress level, anxiousness, and extreme worry as well as problematic social relations due to the stigma attached to migrant workers. Still, despite these challenges, having a positive outlook and hope help the returned migrants to navigate their problems and current situations.

In terms of reintegration, various government programs are also identified to address the needs of migrant workers. Nevertheless, the study found out that there are factors that affect successful

implementation of government programs and policies such as the uninformed and misinformed returnees, lack of information dissemination, and limited funds of the government.

For further studies, researchers can focus on other provinces aside from Bulacan or provide more in-depth analysis on the effectiveness of economic, social and psychological programs offered by various government institutions towards OFWs and their families.

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