
One Misery After Another: The Ordeals of Philippine Overseas Filipino Workers due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Migrant or overseas workers face a very difficult situation when the COVID-19 pandemic strikes which also caught the government by surprise. The case of the Filipino Overseas Workers is even more challenging. Going back to the Philippines is a long and arduous ordeal, such as getting clearance to leave from the host country, from the Philippine National Government upon arriving, and from the Local Government Unit before they could reach home. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore the life stories of Returning Overseas Filipino Workers (ROFs) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It employs a descriptive phenomenological design. Ten (10) ROFs willingly participate in the key informant interviews. Results identify inconvenience and forced double-quarantine as their main struggles. As regards their coping mechanisms, the three themes that emerged are optimism, awareness, and resourcefulness. The situation of the ROFs is a glimpse of the misery this pandemic brings to the vulnerable migrant or overseas workers and it calls for governments around the world to craft policies and act with a well-coordinated, effective and efficient response.

Keywords- COVID-19, overseas Filipino workers, migrants, quarantine, Philippines

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic creates havoc in the lives of people all over the world. It causes a lot of stress, fear, and anxiety (Lu et al., 2020) as people lose their jobs because businesses and companies are forced to close down or temporarily stop operations. Losing a job has created so much inconvenience for the obvious reason of losing an income or livelihood which affected around 800 million people who rely on the support of those working away from their home and country (Newland, 2020). The International Labour Organization warned countries of the eventual increase in unemployment and poverty due to the loss of jobs for millions of migrants forced to return home due to the pandemic (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). Such is the case of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Many of them are stranded in their host countries. The fortunate ones are able to return to the Philippines. It was either they spent their own money, or the company sent them home. From May to the second week of October, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) already reported 248,469 ROFs. In Davao del Sur, where the study was conducted, more than a thousand (1,225) returned home as of September 2020. The lucky ROFs received the government's support, but others did not. Losing one's job has a significant impact on their lives and those who depend on them in the Philippines.

Coming home jobless is painful enough to think that they could no longer provide for their families' needs. Moreover, their ordeals are just the beginning because they have to subject themselves to the health protocols starting from the host country until they arrive in the Philippines. If they are fortunate to pass the tests, they are allowed to leave. However, they have to undergo the same procedures, including a 14-day quarantine the moment they land either in Manila, the Philippines' capital city, or any town the plane lands. Unfortunately, some of them even went beyond the 14 days because the test results come late due to the lack of testing kits. If they finally get the clearance, they are allowed to go home to their respective provinces or localities. However, as part again of the health protocols, they need to undergo another 14-day quarantine. Each local government unit (LGU) in the Philippines strictly implements this measure as the COVID-19 positive cases come from people coming from abroad, including, of course, the Returning Overseas Filipino Workers or ROFs. Coming home is a big sacrifice for ROFs. What happens when they arrive home? It is another challenge how they cope with the reality of not having a job knowing that their families need their support.

In this paper, we delved into the life stories of the ROFs. We looked into their ordeals, starting from losing their jobs up to the struggles of returning home. The stories about overseas Filipino workers had been well-documented. Still, the case of ROFs is unique because this is the first time that Filipino working abroad are forced to return home and are subjected to strict compliance with health protocols. The study's findings contribute to the literature on the lived experiences of overseas workers who are forced to return home. If a similar scenario will happen in the future, the findings of the study can provide a glimpse of their situation and guide actors in society, government agencies, for example, to handle the case properly and appropriately.

Relate Literature

Lockdown around the World

The imposition of lockdowns around the world has a primary purpose: to contain the spread of the virus to the minimum. Many countries imposed partial or full lockdowns while other countries created mechanisms to limit people's movement. The exponential increase in

the number of positive cases in Italy, France, and Spain made these respective countries in Europe implement almost a total lockdown (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020). Similar measures were done in Vietnam (Ha et al., 2020), Singapore (Tay et al., 2020), and the Philippines. While these lockdowns became crucial in addressing the pandemic, these also positively impacted the environment (Mahato, Pal, & Ghosh, 2020; Mandal & Pal, 2020; Muhammad, Long, & Salman, 2020; Sharma, Kaur, & Narmal, 2020). However, the lockdowns have taken a toll on people's mental health (Grover et al., 2020; Gualano et al., 2020; Pieh, Budimir, & Probst, 2020; Rossi et al., 2020; Paulino-Bandares & Tudy, 2020) to the point that some even went to the extreme by committing suicide (Gorecho, 2020; Mamun & Griffiths, 2020). Filipinos were not spared from such tragedy, such as a crew worker who was found dead in her cabin (Ramos, 2020). While the lockdowns cause so much inconvenience among the world's citizens, how much more those people stranded abroad? Those who work in a foreign country are all the more affected, especially if they lose a job and could not go home because of travel restrictions.

Community Quarantine in the Philippines

To limit the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the Philippines, lockdown, locally referred to as "community quarantine," was imposed by the government. The government provided scientific advice to its citizens about the virus (Vallejo & Ong, 2020). The Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) introduced two general quarantine levels in the country on April 30, 2020 in their Executive Order No. 112, s. 2020- the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) in high-risk geographic areas and the General Community Quarantine (GCQ) for the rest of the country. Later on, the government characterized several types of quarantine depending on the status of each place such as Extreme Enhanced Community Quarantine (EECQ), Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ), and Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ). The EECQ demanded a stricter limit to people's movement, with only the very essential workers were permitted to leave their homes. Throughout the country, the government imposed domestic travel restrictions on all transportation modes such as land, air, and sea. Large gatherings, such as parties and concerts, were banned. Police officers and military personnel took the lead in ensuring all citizens comply with the health protocols. There were checkpoints in strategic entry points. In effect, the implementation of community quarantine hindered the OFWs from returning to the Philippines, causing delays or cancellation of their booked flights.

Impact on Employment

Unfavorable employment conditions started to manifest in February 2020, according to the index report of the Philippine Institute for Supply Management. The manufacturing sector's employment index deteriorated as a substantial number of the workforce was laid off in April 2020. The worsening employment condition was affirmed in the April 2020 Labor Force Survey (LFS), which showed that the unemployment rate surged to 17.7 percent. The quarantine measures also resulted in the loss of jobs for 7.3 million Filipinos or at 17.7% in April 2020 (Gonzalez, 2020). As expected, the country also recorded its lowest labor force participation rate during this period at 55.6 percent. The underemployment rate also worsened to 18.9 percent, from 13.4 percent in the same period in 2019, as some employers reduced the number of work hours due to lower domestic demand.

The displacement of workers also affected Filipinos who work abroad. As of May 31, 2020, according to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), more than 320,000 onsite overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) were affected by the pandemic, 36,625 were repatriated, and 98,615 were stranded. Travel restrictions also affected the deployment of OFWs. From January to April 2020, Filipino workers abroad' deployment declined by 41.0

percent (Philippine Overseas Employment Agency [POEA], 2020). Those who were most affected were sea-based OFWs, and those that worked in the Middle East. But, the more challenging scenario was the case of returning OFWs. Aside from the difficulty of traveling back home, they had to deal with all the health protocols from the host country to the Philippines.

The Ordeals of Returning Overseas Filipino Workers

Overseas Filipino Workers were affected by massive lockdowns anywhere in the world. Some were fortunate to return home. They were called the returning overseas Filipino workers or ROFs. The government ventured into large-scale repatriation, as many of these workers lost their jobs (Liao, 2020). These ROFs went through a gruesome ordeal. First, they lost their jobs; hence, they had to return home. Second, they had to deal with the travel restrictions, and if allowed, subjected themselves to health protocols. They were suspected to be carriers of the virus, especially if they come from countries with reported positive cases. On March 13, 2020, the Philippine government announced community quarantine implementation, initially limited to the National Capital Region (NCR). However, as more community transmission cases were recorded from the nearby provinces, a Luzon island-wide quarantine was enforced by the President effective March 17. Under this expanded quarantine, land, sea and air transportation were banned, and only transportation for essential services was allowed. Due to the implementation of lockdowns, Filipinos working abroad experienced difficulty in booking flights, leaving them stranded in different parts of the world. When flights were allowed to resume, the Philippine government required a 14-day mandatory quarantine and monitor the health condition of people entering the country (Liao, 2020; Vallejo & Ong, 2020). The Philippine government required a 14-day mandatory quarantine and monitored the health condition of people entering the country. In this paper, we present the overseas Filipino workers' ordeals upon their return to the country because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

1. What are the struggles experienced by the Returning Overseas Filipino Workers (ROFs) brought about by COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are their coping mechanisms to battle with the struggles they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

Research Design

We applied a descriptive phenomenological design. A phenomenology is an approach that focuses on the perspective of those who experience the phenomenon (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). In simple terms, phenomenology is about studying people's lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1997). This method originated in philosophical traditions that evolved over centuries. However, most historians credit Edmund Husserl for defining phenomenology in the early 20th century. We followed the descriptive phenomenological approach to understand overseas Filipino workers' lived experiences returning to one of the municipalities in Davao del Sur, Philippines.

Setting and Participants

We selected the participants based on the purpose. We made sure that the participants qualified on the criteria set for this study. These included the following: (a) the participants must be Returning Overseas Filipino Workers (ROF) in the period of the implementation of community quarantine due to COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 – July 2020); (b) the participants must be bona fide residents of the municipality being considered; and (c) the participants must have already finished the mandatory 14-day quarantine period by the LGU. From the master list given, there were remarks if the ROFs already completed their quarantine period. We chose informants, who had already completed their quarantine period. We tried to contact them and to ask if they could be part of our research. We also considered the logistical challenges. For example, some of the ROFs lived in remote areas. In the end, we were able to conduct face-to-face interviews with four (4) informants, strictly following the health protocols. Moreover, we interviewed six (6) informants through social media platforms, particularly Facebook Messenger.

Sampling

We used purposive sampling in this research due to the study's nature and the difficulty of getting informants because of the pandemic with some mandatory protocols to be followed. We purposely chose the informants, who could give credible information about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In obtaining qualified informants, with the permission of the Municipal Mayor, we asked for the master list of the Returning Overseas Filipino Workers (ROFs) from the Municipal Disaster Risk and Reduction Management Office (MDRRMO). Based on the master list, the municipality recorded a total of twenty-four (24) ROFs as of July 15, 2020. Due to distance constraints and limited transportation, only ten (10) ROFs, comprising of six (6) men and four (4) women, were able to participate in the Key Informant Interviews (KII). However, this number was within the range suggested by Morse (1994) and Creswell (2007).

Data Collection

Responses obtained through semi-structure interviews among the qualified informants based on the criteria set are the main data sources. We utilized a combination of a face-to-face interview and the use of social media through Facebook messenger. Mindful of the health protocols required by the government, we wore facemask and observed social distancing. We used the local dialect in asking questions to make our participants comfortable and willing to share.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

We adopted Colaizzi's (1978) method in the analysis of data. This process includes the following seven steps: (1) Read and reread each transcript to ensure that the researcher has an overall understanding of the concept, (2) Extract significant statements from the transcript that relates to the phenomenon being explored, (3) Formulate meanings from the significant statements, (4) Sort these meanings into categories or clusters of themes, (5) Integrate these findings into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, (6) Describe the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and lastly (7) Validate the findings of the study by having the research participants compare their experience to the researchers results. From the transcript we made, we read it several times to fully grasp the informants' responses. Moreover, we used pseudonyms for each transcript to keep the confidentiality of the informants. Following the 2nd and 3rd step of Colaizzi's method, we identified the informants' significant statements and formulated meanings in each significant meaning. We used a table with three columns for easier analysis, as suggested by Tudy and Gauran-Tudy (2020). The first column contained the identified significant statements. The second column had the pseudonyms, its

corresponding transcript number, page number, and line numbers. The last column was for the formulated meanings of each significant statement.

After providing the formulating meanings, we sorted out these meanings into clusters of themes. We created a second table with two columns. We copied all the formulated meanings into the first column of our second table and the second column containing the clustered themes. When we identified the cluster of themes, we created the third table. It contained the clustered themes in the first column and the emerging themes in the second column. We came up with this third table by analyzing the cluster of themes and grouped them into a common concept.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness or rigor in qualitative study, we subscribed to the criteria outlined by Guba (1981). These criteria include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility is one of the most important criteria for doing qualitative research. According to Moustakas (1990), credibility means following the process of “reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance or meaning, and ultimately elucidating the themes and essences that comprehensively, distinctly, and accurately depict the experience.” We ensured that we treated the data accordingly by following the protocols of doing qualitative research. Before writing the final manuscript, we asked the participants to check the truthfulness of the data based on their sharing. We asked other experts in qualitative research to review the paper and check the methodology's correctness and the writing of the results and discussion. Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the research findings. We provided a detailed explanation of the methods we employed in conducting the study, as Shenton (2004) suggested. We also deepened our discussion with supporting literature. For Confirmability, we had an audit trail to trace the actions and changes we made in the conduct and analysis of the data. We also ensured that we write with objectivity in line with the concept of descriptive phenomenology. As to Transferability, we first shared the findings in two international conferences to enrich the paper from the suggestions of experts. At the same time, we provided an avenue where other scholars could relate to our study, which can be replicated in similar or different contexts.

Ethical Considerations

We ensured we observed ethical standards in conducting the study. First, we secured the necessary permission. We asked the municipality mayor's permission to conduct the research and get access to the list of ROFs. After determining the prospective participants, we sent letters or called them if they were willing. As soon as they expressed positively, we gave them an informed consent form. Before the interview, we asked them to sign the informed consent signifying their formal approval to be part of the study. Second, we practiced confidentiality. We did not divulge any information, except for the ones we discussed in the study's findings. Third, we observed anonymity. We used pseudonyms instead of their real names to hide their identity. We also removed any direct identifier that could reveal their identity.

Results

We present the study's findings into two clusters- the struggles of ROFs and their coping mechanisms.

Struggles of the Returning Overseas Filipino Workers (ROFs) due to the COVID-19

Our first part of questioning the participants focused on the struggles they experienced as ROFs. After the interviews, we analyzed the data, and two themes emerged: inconvenience and forced double-quarantine.

Inconvenience

One of the difficulties that the Returning Overseas Filipino Workers (ROFs) experienced upon returning home, considering that the world is facing a pandemic, was an inconvenience. The participants shared about the delays and cancellations of flights. They had difficulty processing travel requirements due to lockdowns. It was a stressful situation. They had no choice but to subject themselves from the host country to the mandatory tests for travel. All these forms of inconvenience took a lot of their time just to be home. Participant 3 expressed her inconvenience, saying,

Returning as an overseas Filipino worker during the COVID-19 pandemic is quite time-consuming to process requirements and inconveniences. (Participant 3, Transcript 3, Page 1, Lines 6-7)

Additionally, they expressed difficulty with transportation because it was limited due to community quarantine or lockdowns. They felt unsecured to go outside because of the possibility of being infected by the virus. Indeed, they missed their families.

Community quarantine took away the excitement to see my family on time and took almost half of my vacation leave. (Participant 4, T4, P1, L12-13)

Based on the participants' sharing, the inconvenience was a natural consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for those who returned to the Philippines. They had to deal with the protocols of the host country. A lot of changes happened, like changes in flight schedules. Because of the delays, their scheduled vacation was cut-short in terms of time, although they might be forced to take it longer since they could not easily go back to the host country as the pandemic continued to linger.

Forced Double-Quarantine

Undergoing Forced Double Quarantine is another struggle cited by the informants. The participants already experienced so much inconvenience to travel back home, but they had to deal with additional health protocols when they arrived in the country. First, the government required them to undergo a 14-day quarantine upon arrival, mostly in Manila, the capital city. When they passed the health check and finished the quarantine period, they could go back to their home province or city. Second, when they arrived in their home provinces or cities, they would again undergo another 14-day quarantine. They called it forced-double quarantine. It might sound crazy, but local governments imposed additional quarantine since many of those cleared in Manila turned out positive upon arriving in their final home destination. One of the participants said

The most challenging part of being a ROF during this pandemic is being isolated for a couple of days and being far away, and prohibiting myself from my family even though I'm already here in my hometown. (Participant 4, T4, P1, L15-17)

Isolating for a month or more was a big sacrifice. Arriving in their home province or city did not mean seeing their family members during isolation. The government prohibited them from mingling with anybody, except the health professionals. Some of them expressed sadness and even experience depression. One shared his experience this way:

I underwent quarantine for fourteen days or equivalent for two weeks. It was not easy for me to be alone at the quarantine facility. Meanwhile, I could not socialize with my family and relatives to ensure their safety that made me feel depressed and lonely. (Participant 1, T7, P1, L13-15)

The forced-double quarantine appeared to be too much. It could also be interpreted as the weakness of why there is a need for another 14-day quarantine. It was a reality of the ROFs, and they had no choice but to deal with it.

Coping Mechanisms of the Returning Overseas Filipino Workers (ROFs)

Despite the participants' struggles, we asked them what their ways of coping with the challenges are. Based on their responses, three terms emerged- optimism, awareness, and resourcefulness.

Optimism

Being optimistic was one of the means shared by the informants in battling this COVID-19 pandemic and their experience of going home to their home country and family. They remained positive and were hopeful that the pandemic would end in due time with the Almighty God's guidance and the unconditional love of their families. Having faith in God is something that kept the spirit of the participants. For example, Participant 2 said,

My technique in coping with these challenges as a ROF is keeping my trust in the Lord that all these challenges I've been experiencing will end in time. (T6, P1, L33-34)

With the availability of technology, the participants found a way to be optimistic by communicating with their families through phone and social media. They were alone physically, but they had their family, relatives, and friends as their company through technology. Participant 5 expressed how he remained optimistic by sharing,

Always communicate with your family and loved ones to forget the difficulty of being all by yourself. (T2, P1, L22-23)

The sharing of the participants, particularly that of Participant 4 and Participant 5, showed how the ROFs tried to keep their spirits up by being optimistic. They relied on their faith in God and the help of family, relatives, and friends through the use of technology.

Awareness

Apart from being positive, the informants shared that being aware of what is happening around them and being updated from time to time helped them manage their struggles. They used their time watching television to keep themselves informed. Participant 6 shared his experience of being aware of what is going on.

To cope with this pandemic, I fed my mind with knowledge by searching on the internet, asking friends, and consulting a physician on the necessary things to do, such as health and sanitation protocols to avoid being infected with the virus. (T5, P2, L38-41)

They even suggested for people to be aware and understand the situation and follow the government's protocols in terms of containment of coronavirus, just like what they were doing. Participant 7 shared what other ROFs must do, saying,

Know first the requirements to comply and follow protocols implemented by the government, such as getting Medical Certificate and undergoing quarantine so that returning to your home be possibly done. (T7, P2, L39-41)

As we can see, the ROFs, without much to do in the quarantine facility, made most of the time being productive. They kept themselves abreast of the situation and even found a way to share what other ROFs should do, like following government protocols.

Resourcefulness

When they finally got home after, of course, passing all the required tests and quarantine days, they tried to be productive at home. Knowing that they did not have a job, but when they finally got home after, of course, passing all the required tests and quarantine days, they tried to be productive at home. Knowing that they did not have a job, but their family depended on them, they found ways to be resourceful. Some of the participants considered themselves just having fun, but at the same time earning. For example, Participant 8 found a way to entertain herself and being productive at the same time. She said,

I took it as a form of leisure by raising the pigs of my mother. I also sold some goods to sustain our daily needs. (T1, P1, L37-39)

Some participants took advantage of the boom in plant selling and food selling during the pandemic. As observed, many were into planting and growing flowers. With the restrictions of people's movement, many preferred to order food for delivery in their homes. Participant 5 shared his experience in this way.

My manner in coping with these challenges as a ROF is that I enjoy playing games on the mobile phone. Now that I already finished my 14-day mandatory quarantine, I collected succulents/cactus and cook food that I really missed while I was in Korea. Sometimes I sold it to those interested. (T5, P2, L43-46)

Based on the informants' responses, it could be perceived that Returning Overseas Filipino Workers (ROFs) handled the situation by finding ways to be resourceful. In return, they had fun while at the same time, earn extra money.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a big threat to the millions of migrants worldwide, including the Filipino Overseas Workers (Ullah, Nawaz, & Chatteraj, 2020). The Philippines, a country with over 2 million Overseas Filipino Workers (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020), showed concerns for these citizens' fate who would most likely lose their jobs. They were vulnerable to the virus, especially if they travel. The inconvenience and forced double-quarantine are the struggles shared by the informant ROFs that greatly affected them in many ways. If losing a job was already tough, the ROFs had to deal with all the inconvenience of securing clearance to travel back home. When they arrived in the Philippines, they had to deal with the double-quarantine. First was on their immediate arrival, mostly in Manila. The second

was in their respective locality implemented by the local government unit (LGU) despite passing the necessary tests in their first quarantine. The Philippines' LGUs were very serious in implementing mandatory second quarantine after several ROFs tested positive upon arriving in their locality. It seems like a mystery why they passed in the first series of tests and yet tested positive. Nevertheless, the LGUs did not take any chances. Hence, all ROFs were mandated to undergo a second quarantine.

To some extent, these measures have helped control the outbreak and create an unpleasant experience for the ROFs. They have to deal with isolation, and to some extent, discrimination for being suspected as a virus carrier the fact that they came and traveled from outside the country. They looked like strangers in their native land. However, the Philippine government was firm in treating the ROFs with care, just like how other ASEAN countries prioritized the containment of the virus (Fauzi & Paiman, 2020). Their experience of inconvenience and the forced double-quarantine was crucial for the government to control the virus' spread. However, according to Liao (2020), the government's efforts to bring back those Filipinos stranded abroad had faced many challenges, including assistance after their arrival. At any rate, the participants expressed how these measures became a struggle for them. However, most of them supported the government since they believed it is also for their good and the good of their families when they finally are allowed to be home.

The participants shared how they cope with the challenges they experienced by being optimistic, aware of the situation, and resourceful. Filipinos are optimistic. It is shown in their resiliency (Austria, 2008; Nerosa, 2019; Thomas, 2013), especially during disasters (Callueng et al., 2020). In studying resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic, Callueng, Aruta, Antazo, and Briones-Diato (2020), identified community resilience as one of Filipinos' strong predictors. The study participants share how they coped with the ordeals of going through the travel requirements, particularly the double-quarantine. Still, they received support from families, relatives, and friends without necessarily having them around. Despite their situation, they remained optimistic and showed resiliency. They made use of the time during quarantine to educate themselves about the virus and the situation worldwide and in the Philippines. The severity of the pandemic heightened people's desire to be aware of the COVID-19 pandemic (Alahdal, Basingab, & Alotaibi, 2020; Labban, Thallaj, & Labban, 2020). They were interested to know the nature of the virus and its effects on humans. As reported, Filipinos learned more about the virus through television and radio (Lau et al., 2020). The ROFs also made use of these platforms, although they got information from the internet using their phones. Being aware was not only helpful for knowledge's sake. According to the Department of Health (DOH), awareness of the pandemic could reduce panic and fears (Sabalza, 2020). The ROFs had to endure the fear of contracting the virus because of their exposure to long travel and the unavoidable contact with people. However, they helped themselves by having proper knowledge about the virus.

The ROF participants tried to be productive despite the restriction brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippines, many Filipinos went into plant growing and selling, which became a hit during the pandemic (Petinglay, 2020). Some of the participants also ventured into plant selling, while others sold other goods like food. They were just among a million overseas Filipino workers who lost their job, as estimated by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) (Gonzalez, 2020). The government extended some sort of assistance through the Bayanihan to Recover As One Act, giving a special power given to the Philippine president to address the country's COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the local government units (LGUs) provide other forms of assistance like food rations. However, all these forms of

assistance were not enough as the pandemic dragged on. Filipinos, like the ROFs, found ways to be productive by being resourceful.

While the findings of the study paint a clearer picture of the ROFs, there is much to learn and reflect on what the governments, not just the Philippines, need to do as a response to the suffering of migrant workers like the ROFs. The ordeals of returning foreign workers only showed the lack of coordination and consistency just like other countries which were also caught by surprise or simply were crumbling for answers (Liem et al., 2020; Wahab, 2020). In fact, the pandemic even exposed the vulnerability and even exploitation of migrant workers (Foley & Piper, 2021; Koh, 2020; Paul, 2020; Wahab, 2020) as their situation became more known and got noticed by both host and home countries. It calls for governments to create guidelines and responsive programs to address the health concerns, ensure their rights are protected (Attal, 2020), and prevent social exclusion (Voola et al., 2022) as part of the coordinated efforts during crisis like a pandemic.

The primary concern of any government is to ensure that returning citizens receive proper care and support. The Philippines installed mechanisms similar to what other countries are doing. For example, Singapore and Thailand expanded the healthcare for migrant workers, Taipei, China provided COVID-19 tests while South Korea and Hongkong, China made it mandatory (Napier-Moore & Baruah, 2022). In addition, several countries ventured into an ambitious repatriation effort. For instance, India implemented the Vande Bharat Mission (VBM) to cater to Indians around the world (Wickramasekara, 2022), which is similar to the “Repatriated Overseas Filipinos” program of the Philippines. Since not all can be accommodated, priorities to certain groups were identified such as pregnant women, elderly, person with disabilities, and even those who were laid off from work, like the case of most ROFs. The volumes of returning foreign workers were so huge that governments were left with no choice but to prioritize. Moreover, the problem of undocumented migrants and the lack of coordination between countries (Wickramasekara, 2022) all the more contributed to the problems which are already taking a heavy toll on government’s human and financial resources. In the end, these findings do not only tell the stories of the ROFs but also expose the weaknesses of government’s response and calls for a better action something that countries around the world with similar situation can learn from.

Implications and Limitation of the Study

The findings showed the ordeals of ROFs. Based on their experiences, the government can look into how to expedite dealing with people entering the country like the ROFs. Also, the forced double-quarantine has to be reviewed, particularly on the effectiveness of the first level of quarantine, which could be enhanced enough for the ROFs to be allowed to return straight to their respective homes. For the new batch of ROFs, the findings could give them a glimpse of what ordeals await them so that they can prepare physically, psychologically, and emotionally. For the local government units implementing second quarantine, it would be advisable to coordinate closely with the national government and the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) to find ways to eliminate the double-quarantine while ensuring the effectiveness of the quarantine protocols.

On the one hand, governments around the world can take the case of the ROFs as a feedback mechanism of improving their respective responses by crafting and implementing appropriate policies and programs for migrant workers who are vulnerable during a crisis like

a pandemic in their respective countries. On other hand, governments can also take a closer look of addressing the concerns of migrant workers returning home during a pandemic. The experiences of ROFs are clear manifestations of the unpreparedness and lack of appropriate actions to ensure timely, effective, and efficient facilitation.

This study is limited to the experience of ROFs in a certain LGU in Southern Mindanao. Each LGU has its own way of implementing second quarantine. The experience of ROFs might differ from one LGU to another. It would also be useful to investigate how different LGUs in the Philippines and around the world effectively carry out their respective quarantine measures and other health protocols for ROFs or any resident returning home from travel abroad.

Concluding Remarks

The stories of ROFs show a picture of how overseas workers all over the world suffer by losing their jobs and returning home while subjecting themselves to health protocols both from the host country and their respective homeland. For ROFs, they go through several layers of inconvenience from getting out of the host country until they arrive in the Philippines. Moreover, they have to deal with the forced quarantine, not just once but twice- from the city they landed in and from their city or province. It is like one misery after another. It takes them almost a month to finally set foot in their respective houses if they pass the required tests. If found positive with the virus, it is another form of misery. However, the ROFs find ways to counter the challenges by being optimistic, showing their resiliency. They make themselves aware of the situation in the country and around the world as regards the pandemic. Finally, when they are allowed to return home, they tried themselves to be productive by being resourceful. Despite dealing with one misery after another, they are happy to be back home. On a broader sense, the case of ROFs serves as a feedback to all nations in terms of policy crafting and implementation to ensure that migrant workers receive an appropriate support and guidance from both host and home countries. Moreover, the case of the ROFs exposes the weakness of the government's response during a pandemic but provides lessons what to do during a pandemic or similar crisis.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that they have no conflict of interest.

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