

# ASSESSMENT OF COVID-19 IMPACT ON OFW LIFE AND RECOVERY NEEDS IN THE POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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## Background of the Study

With the emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, people experienced drastic changes in their way of life due to government-issued measures that restricted people's movement. While restrictions and protocols were put in place to protect people from getting infected with the virus, it also amplified vulnerabilities of marginalized sectors of the society and eroded their coping mechanisms.

This global event affected migrant workers all over the world—including ~11 million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) (Bautista and Tamayo, 2020). To illustrate, in 2019, there were over 2 million Filipinos actively working abroad. This number dropped by ~500,000 in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit (Mapa, 2022) affecting not only those who were already working abroad but pausing the progress of applications of possibly millions more returning and aspiring OFWs.

A study conducted by ACHIEVE aimed to assess the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers and their families in the Philippines and uncovered the issues faced by migrant workers, HIV-positive migrants, and women migrants during the pandemic. ACHIEVE conducted an online survey among 117 OFWs, focus group discussions with five (5) groups, and in-depth interviews with two (2) key persons. The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the impact of COVID-19 on the migration stream? What is the impact on migrants and their families?
2. What recovery needs arise in a post pandemic context?
3. What are the implications for the future of migration in the immediate future and beyond?
4. What was the role of the Embassies, Foreign Ministries and Overseas "Migrants' Foundations and other duty bearers who have the responsibility during this crisis?
5. What measures can be taken to mitigate the impact?

Statement of the Problem

## PRE- and DURING PANDEMIC

### PRE-PANDEMIC: "Nakakasurvive kahit mag-isa"

- ▶ Despite being homesick, OFWs were happier and had less anxiety.
- ▶ They have easier and more stable work, better income, and more savings. They also felt that they had more opportunities that contribute towards supporting their families.
- ▶ Some OFWs acquired loans before the pandemic because they were expecting regular income.
- ▶ Without mobility restrictions, they were able to move around, travel, and go to public parks and recreational establishments.



### DURING PANDEMIC: "Opposite yan nung pre-pandemic"

- ▶ **On health and relationships:** They felt homesick plus gravely anxious about the situation of their families at home. The pandemic also worsened strains in personal and family relationships.
- ▶ **On mobility and safety protocol adherence:** It was hard to move around, to do any tasks, and go to work because of the limited options for transportation and curfews implemented. Their expenses also increased because they had to invest in self-protection.
- ▶ **On work and income:** There were OFWs stranded in Manila, either after coming home or because they were awaiting deployment. For some, businesses either struggled or failed causing them to deplete their savings after incurring so much debt. This also pushed them to get part-time or extra jobs just to make ends meet.



## OTHER CHALLENGES

### “Sacrifice talaga yan”

Most respondents consider being OFW as a sacrifice that they make for the betterment of their loved ones’ lives. OFWs whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed by natural disasters like typhoons felt compelled to go to abroad to “start all over again”.

### Discrimination and abuse

Many agencies and employers still insist on disqualifying applicants based on their HIV status. PLHIV participants of this study had to rely on themselves and CSO networks to look for employers who do not discriminate.

### Women’s Experiences

A huge percentage of OFWs are female domestic workers but they earn less than male OFWs, carry more of the mental load of caring for and nurturing their families even from afar, and are more likely to experience violence and abuse. They are vulnerable to threat of violence, and feel secondhand trauma from experiences of violence of other Filipinos abroad.

### Assistance received

Majority (63.6%) reported receiving assistance during the pandemic, however 36.4% said that they did not. More than a third (38%) said that they did not receive support from the government or other stakeholders, and 32% said that they only relied on the support provided by their families and loved ones.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **OFWs’ pre-pandemic struggles with well-being and stress were worsened by the pandemic.** Their vulnerabilities, shaped by gender, age, social class, and race, necessitate systemic action. Key needs include access to adequate food, shelter, education, healthcare, livelihood, and insurance. These basic rights must be addressed by governments and other duty bearers, alongside efforts to combat structural inequalities, amplify OFWs’ voices, and ensure equal opportunities for all
- ▶ **The pre-pandemic life for OFWs was not without challenges.** Simply put, overseas work is merely a circumnavigation of the existing challenges in their home country.
- ▶ **The needs of OFWs post-pandemic remain the same as what they have always needed.** Their basic human rights fulfilled, health problems, including stress, relieved, and an assurance that the life they have been working so hard to build would not be taken away so easily because of factors outside their control. OFWs were barely able to maintain their well-being pre-pandemic and when COVID-19 hit, they experienced even more loss of coping mechanisms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1

### Database Available Programs

OFWs are unable to access available programs and services due to the lack of information about them and its criteria of selection of beneficiaries. It would not be such a massive undertaking for concerned agencies to come together to create a database that can be easily accessed by OFWs whether they are in the Philippines or abroad. There is also a need to explore the reasons why they do not and cannot access these services and what can be done to reverse this.

2

### Community Organizing

Strengthening the response capacity of NGOs and Filipino communities abroad and institutionalizing them as partners of the Philippine delegation could help in the establishment of community debriefing or Kamustahan sessions (ACHIEVE, 2021), community quick response teams, and channels to access programs and services provided by the Philippine government. In the same manner, embassies could also extend its role in terms of ensuring the psychosocial health OFWs (ACHIEVE, 2021) especially during crises.

3

### Intersectional Programming

The study highlighted the need to review existing policies and programs of relevant agencies to prepare for and mitigate the impacts of future disasters to make sure that the government is not debilitated during times of great need. There is also a need for comprehensive programming that considers OFWs intersecting vulnerabilities of gender, class, age, race, and HIV status in preparation of the establishment of the newly created Department of Migrant Workers to systematically review and streamline the application process and to consolidate programs and services for OFW and their families.

Sources:

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