

Review of Reintegration Policies of Former Female OFWs in the Province of Batangas, Philippines: a Gender Responsive Analysis

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Abstract:

After decades of sending workers abroad, the Philippines has become a model framework of labor migration. It is a reality, however, that for these workers to pursue continued economic growth even after returning to the Philippines, successful reintegration must take place. As more women cross borders for work, it is expected that more women will also return to their home country. Reintegration in the home country follows after work completion abroad. The success of reintegration often lies in the programs and policies of the home country. In this modern era of movement and labor, there is a need for programs and policies to respond to the centuries old plight of women and work.

This qualitative paper examines the reintegration policies and programs currently implemented in the province of Batangas for the women returnees using critical feminist theory. The challenges in their implementation were also interrogated. In-depth interviews were conducted with four government agencies deeply involved with reintegration. Documents were also assessed in terms of its gender responsiveness using the Gender Responsive Assessment Scale of the World Health Organization, categorizing policies and programs into gender-unequal, gender blind, gender-sensitive, gender-specific, and gender-transformative.

The recommendation calls for a more cohesive approach to government and private industry programs and policies to achieve consistency and streamlined support in the reintegration of women returnees. This paper contributes to efforts of gender equality and reintegration of migrant workers in the local labor market of the Philippines.

Keywords: Former Female OFWs, Workforce Reentry Program, Reintegration Programs

1. Introduction

Reintegration back to the home country is an inevitable part of labor migration. Most reintegration programs globally emphasize labor market insertion, a process that presents multifaceted challenges across various government and community sectors. The COVID19 pandemic in 2020 triggered a massive return migration, underscoring the urgency of effective reintegration strategies. For a labor-sending country like the Philippines, reintegration to the labor market is a potential solution to the long-standing problem of brain drain.

Because of this, I am interested in understanding the experiences of returning Overseas Filipino Workers

(OFWs) as they reintegrate into the local labor market, starting with an examination of the programs implemented to aid their reintegration. The existing policy support for returning migrants under the 1995 Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act has made the Philippines a model for repatriation.

In the Philippines, reintegration frameworks have been established to facilitate the sustainable return of migrant workers. Among these programs, the Balik-Pinay Balik Hanapbuhay Program is a prominent program that caters to distressed female Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) by fostering socio-economic reintegration through entrepreneurship of these returning women. While formerly managed by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) via the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), these mandates have since been consolidated under the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW). The DMW's comprehensive suite of services - ranging from financial subsidies and vocational training to employment assistance and financial literacy - represents a shift towards diversified reintegration pathways. If these initiatives were fully implemented and availed, I believe that the female returnees will have a more viable exit strategy from the migration cycle.

However, the success of these initiatives is ultimately contingent upon the unique profiles and socio-economic situations of reintegrating OFWs (Opiniano & Ang, 2023). Additionally, despite these efforts, the difference between male and female OFWs who are sustainably reintegrated is significant. In 2020, of the 1.97 million migrant workers, 51.8% were women (Asis & Ruiz, 2024). However, 70% of the returned female OFWs were not engaged in either employment or business activities that contribute to their economic growth, compared to only 31% of their male counterparts. While state-led reintegration initiatives primarily focus on entrepreneurship, many returnees lack the financial capital and entrepreneurial competencies necessary to launch a viable business. Furthermore, not all migrants possess the inclination to pursue self-employment.

Calabarzon, a region in the Philippines, through its Regional Development Plan for 2023-2028, has implemented programs to aid in the integration of returning OFWs into the local economy. This includes partnering with private sectors. From Calabarzon, my study focused on the province of Batangas. The establishment of the Provincial Migrant Center, the significant contribution of Batangas to the migration numbers, and the different employment opportunities scattered throughout the province presents Batangas a relevant case for analysis.

In Batangas Province, reasons point to lack of sex-disaggregated data of returnees, resulting in a lack of literature exploring the alternative reintegration pathways, specifically regarding the integration of female returnees into the domestic labor market (Ndreka, 2019 as cited by Montacatar, et al., 2023). This highlights the need for a comprehensive evaluation of provincial-level policies, practices, and programs to ensure equitable distribution of opportunities across all genders.

While prominent programs from the government focus on entrepreneurship upon return, not all migrant returnees have enough savings to start a business. Nor do they have enough competencies and willingness to do so. This points to the option of employment as a viable alternative for women returnees to continue earning. This employment decision then leads to either reimmigration or reintegration.

Taking feminist theories into practice, this study critically analyzed the programs and policies in place through the lens of the government institutions involved in the implementation. It also presents recommendations to enhance the current workforce reentry programs in the province of Batangas. This paper forms part of a bigger analysis of the phenomenon of returning female migrant workers in their local labor market reintegration.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

This paper used a narrative-descriptive qualitative study as its research design. In-depth interviews were conducted for deep understanding of the implementation of the programs. Secondary literature provided by the interviewed institutions as well was reviewed to assess the gender-responsiveness of the implemented programs.

2.2 Locale and Participants

The locale of this study is in the province of Batangas, in the Philippines, as it is one of the top OFW sending provinces in the country. It also offers a rich list of industries that can offer a variety of employment upon return.

According to Bartholomew et al. (2021), the sample size for qualitative research must be enough to answer the research questions, however, calls for a smaller sample size to achieve higher quality research. I interviewed four government agencies that were involved in reintegration programs. The criteria set was that all institutions must be directly involved in the reintegration of female returnees.

2.3 Instrument

In-depth interviews were used to surface the experiences of the participants in the implementation of programs for workplace reintegration. Interviews are widely regarded as a cornerstone of qualitative data collection, particularly when conducting field studies (Busetto, et al., 2020; Lim, 2023). This study used an interview guide to put forward the reintegration program implementation in the province. Questions included *“What specific role does your organization play in supporting the reintegration of female returning OFWs?”*, *“What primary programs does your organization provide to assist returning OFWs in their reintegration into the local workforce?”* *“How do your programs assist female ex-OFWs in adjusting to changes in their role, both within their families and in the workforce?”*

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

In my study, I used in-depth interviews and reviews of provided documents. Interviews are considered as one of the most important qualitative data collection methods used in conducting field studies (Busetto, et al., 2020; Lim, 2023). I also used Braun and Clarke’s 6-Phase Method for its thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews. For the review of secondary data, I used the World Health Organization’s Gender Responsive Assessment Scale Criteria: A Tool for Assessing Programs and Policies. This scale is meant to assess how gender norms, roles and relations affect behaviors and outcomes as well as public sector responses (World Health Organization, 2011).

3. Results and Discussion

This paper focused on the programs and policies in place for the reintegration of the former female OFWs.

3.1 Programs for Reintegration

I reached out to institutions involved in the reintegration of former female OFWs to shed some light on the opportunities and assistance that aid in their local labor reintegration. What I found through the interviews I made were unsurprising.

I interviewed four government institutions that are active participants in supporting the returning migrants. Three offices accommodated me to conduct the interview in their office, while the other one answered my questions through email. I was also able to briefly interview a private organization via phone call.

A common theme from the institutions I interviewed was that they prioritize gender equality. Table 8 presents the emergent themes and sub-themes from institutional responses and initiatives from the point

of view of the interviewed key players in female returnee reintegration.

Table 8. Themes emergent from the perspective of implementing agencies

Theme	Sub-theme
Focus on gender equality	Government agencies as gender advocates
	Government programs are inclusive
Fragmented agency to returnee services	Fragmented services and data
	Lack of monitoring of beneficiary progress

To respond to gender equality principles, programs for returning OFWs were not privy to whether men or women will avail of the assistance. Table 9 presents how the interviewed agencies describe programs and policies being implemented for reintegration. Unsurprisingly, gender equality is a common answer when asked about programs for former female OFWs. This meant that programs are generally created with both genders as beneficiary, sans whether one might have more needs than the other. One agency’s answer claims that their programs do not prioritize a gender over the other.

Institutions claim to be advocates of gender equality. The Women and Development in Nation Building Act or Republic Act (RA) 7192 “recognizes the role of women in nation building and shall ensure the fundamental equality before the law of women and men. The State shall provide women rights and opportunities equal to that of men.” However, the same RA also stipulates “ensure that programs and/or projects are designed so that the percentage of women who receive assistance is approximately proportionate to either their traditional participation in the targeted activities or their proportion of the population.” With the number of women returnees exceeding those of men, it is reasonable to assume that there is a need for more nuanced programs for Filipina returnees.

Similarly, the agencies believe that their programs are inclusive. This inclusivity is presumably defined as all programs catering to both genders. The theoretical foundations of gender inclusivity are rooted in feminist theory, which seeks to question and deconstruct patriarchal structures to advance gender equity (Chikwe, et al., 2024).

Table 9. Programs and policies as described by the interviewed agencies

Theme	Sub-theme	Exemplar Quotes
Focus on gender equality	Government agencies as gender advocates	“That is what we’re trying to avoid because we are gender advocates. All our programs and services for the Batangueños do not discriminate whether you’re male or female.” <i>Government 1</i>
		“All our programs are inclusive and available to all Batangueño job seekers and displaced workers.” <i>Government 2</i>

	Government programs are inclusive	“We have non-traditional trades, those that are typically for men, that we encourage women to take on as well.” <i>Government 3</i>
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The challenges shared by the agencies were defined as fragmented and lacking monitoring. Table 10 presents the challenges in program implementation as viewed by the government agencies. One of the government agencies interviewed lamented that one of the possible reasons why services are not enjoyed by the returnees is because they have not heard of the programs. Existing literature also points that active members of OWWA are more likely to access services (Kuschminder and Saguin, 2025).

The law mandates that 5% of the total annual budget of agencies goes to gender-focused programs, projects and initiatives (General Appropriations Act). Availing these services will only be possible if the returnees actually know there are programs that exist. Many of the returned migrant workers only avail of government services and assistance when they have heard it from fellow returned OFWs (Astila & Marcos, 2022, Budlong & Moreno, 2024). If there was no earlier information, the worst case scenario is the view that the government does not assist in finding jobs locally, or reintegrating in the local labor force (Montacatar et al., 2023). In Batangas, the list available from the Migrants Desk was a summary of Overseas Filipino Workers in Batangas Province that only lists the total number of migrant workers from submitting cities and municipalities, ergo, not all migrants were documented, let alone returnees. What results are programs that are one dimensional and do not cater to the unique needs of migrant returnees. Adding to these fragmented services, the government agencies named the lack of monitoring of the programs implemented. One of the agencies interviewed said that once they have granted the assistance to the beneficiaries, they are no longer aware of how this assistance has impacted the lives of the beneficiaries, saying, “*If we give them financial assistance, will they get better?*” Another agency confirms that they have no mechanism in place to know if the lives of their beneficiaries have improved. This is consistent with existing literature that the sustainability of these programs also depends on stakeholder efforts to monitor program effectiveness (Budlong & Moreno, 2024).

Table 10. Challenges in program implementation

Theme	Sub-theme	Exemplar Quotes
Fragmented agency to returnee services	Fragmented services and data	“We don’t have an engagement with returnees...maybe because they also don’t know who to report to... they have no idea what the programs are...” <i>Government 3</i>
	Lack of monitoring of beneficiary progress	“That’s what we’ve been trying to do because we are in social service... for example, if we give them financial assistance, will they get better? Were we able to monitor?” <i>Government 1</i>
		“We don’t have information on the impact of our programs. We need to know if there have been improvements in the lives of our beneficiaries.” <i>Government 4</i>

Unfortunately, none of the challenges claims problems in programs that are responsive to gender-specific needs. This points to a further need to examine the implemented programs. With the programs named by the interviewed institution, I used the World Health Organization Assessment Scale to assess these programs.

3.2 Gender-responsiveness assessment of reintegration programs

Consistent with the perspective of interviewed organizations, what keeps on reappearing as a problem in migration data is the lack of official data on the magnitude of return migration. This includes the skills, characteristics, and the circumstances surrounding their return (Ndreka, 2019 as cited by Moncatar et al., 2023). This lack of data persists even if multiple global events have forced the return of many OFWs, to include the imminent war between the United States and Iraq in 2001, the global financial crisis of 2008 (Go, 2012), the global pandemic in 2020, and the potential return migration caused by the Middle East crisis in early 2026.

My study also explored the reintegration programs available to female OFW returnees. Gender equality is the goal of many institutions, as noted in their responses. The Philippine Business Coalition for Women Empowerment defines gender equality as everyone having access and enjoying resources, opportunities, and benefits to progress at all levels. However, gender equality can only be achieved if the men and women, and everyone in between, are on an even playing field to access these opportunities. This is where gender responsive programs are necessary, because these acknowledge and address the different needs, roles, and situations of men and women, and everyone in between.

Because of the limited information I was able to gather during my interviews with the institutions involved, I conducted a separate document review from available materials on the web during the course of my research and documents that the government offices provided. There are programs available to Filipino migrant workers upon their return consistent with previous studies (Roldan, 2020; Estolas, 2023). The problem potentially lies in the communication of these programs to the target beneficiaries.

Upon my visit to the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office (PSWDO), I found that it was a shared space with the provincial office of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). From my review of programs based on the information provided by the government offices I visited, Table 11 presents the programs implemented for female former OFWs in aid of their reintegration. These programs were assessed using the World Health Organization Assessment Scale using the following ratings: gender-unequal, gender-blind, gender-sensitive, gender-specific, and gender-transformative. (World Health Organization, 2011). Using these assessments, only the nationally implemented *Balik-Pinay, Balik Hanapbuhay (Woman Returnee, Return to Livelihood)* program is gender-specific, taking into account its intentionality in addressing the specific group of distressed women. This program ultimately helps women who were forced to return to reintegrate in their country of origin (Fufa, 2021). It should be noted that exposure to this program comes after repatriation as handled by the agencies involved.

The Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) presented a program that aims to reintegrate licensed teachers back into the Department of Education as teachers upon their return. This is called the *Sa Pinas, Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir* (SPIMS) Program, which roughly translates to *In the Philippines, You are Ma'am Sir* which gives honor to returning teachers. Given the title of the program, this also provides equal employment opportunities for both male and female returnees. While this program provides a stepping stone for return to employment, only the teaching profession have received such reintegration programs. My interview with the DMW provided information that the agency is currently gathering data on the employment reintegration of other professions. This is looking positive from the perspective of returnees

who plan to be employed upon return. Unfortunately, upon writing of this paper, the unique needs of women returnees were not highlighted.

Entrepreneurship has always been promoted as an exit strategy for the former OFWs. In the case of former female OFWs, the *Balik-Pinay, Balik Hanapbuhay (Woman Returnee, Return to Livelihood)* program stands out as a program that caters exclusively to former female OFWs. However, this program is exclusively for distressed female OFW returnees essentially to start a business, which makes it inaccessible to female returnees who voluntarily returned home for reasons that were not classified under oppression, yet who returned for lack of better options abroad.

Apart from the exclusive *Balik-Pinay, Balik Hanapbuhay (Woman Returnee, Return to Livelihood)* program, all other programs I found were open to male and female returnees. There was no mention of distinction between genders because of gender-equality. While the agency I interviewed claims these programs were gender-equal, and upon analyzing narratives surrounding these programs, I found that these programs hardly consider the norms, roles and relations of men and women. These programs are often considered as “fair” but often fail to acknowledge the different needs of men and women, of girls and boys, and of other marginalized groups. A dated study by Atikha in 2012 highlighted the need for gender-responsive interventions.

Post-pandemic, the Philippines has included in its latest national development plan (2023-2028) action items for migrant reintegration (Ang et al., 2023). This includes the inclusion of returning migrants in services related to employment facilitation that includes career development support, and an active labor market system (National Economic and Development Authority, 2023). It would also be advisable to include the design and implementation of programs that are responsive to the needs of female migrant returnees.

Table 11. Programs Implemented for female former OFWs’ reintegration

Program Name	Description	Scope	Intended Beneficiaries	Assessment
Balik-Pinay, Balik Hanapbuhay	This is a training cum-employment intervention intended to improve the socio-economic well-being of distressed female returning OFWs. From a March 2025 press release, the NRCO has disbursed P10.7M livelihood aid to more than 1,000 women nationwide.	National	Returning women OFWs who were distressed and sheltered by POLO	Gender-specific <i>Intentionally targets and benefits a specific group of women or men to achieve certain policy or programme goals or meet certain needs</i>
Provincial Ordinance No. 003 (2024) An	<i>Migration Center or OFW Desk</i>	Provincial	All returnees	Gender-blind <i>Often constructed based on the</i>

<p>Ordinance Strengthening the of Migrant Workers Center in the Cities and Municipalities of the Province of Batangas</p>	<p>This program by the provincial government of Batangas was created through the initiatives of the former governor in 2010. Followed by a new governor, this assistance desk was kept and served its purpose of helping returnees. Unfortunately, this Migrant Desk was not localized in the cities and municipalities. Even though caravans were done by the Desk, it was not prioritized by the local government. As the original creator of this initiative returned to power, it is expected that the Migrant Desk will improve in the course of the next 3 years.</p>			<p><i>principle of being “fair” by treating everyone the same</i></p>
	<p><i>Financial Assistance</i></p> <p>For financial assistance programs, it was said that when the returnees do not qualify for OWWA’s financial assistance, they can apply for the financial assistance provided by the province as it serves as the catch-all support for the returnees.</p>	<p>Provincial</p>	<p>All returnees</p>	<p>Gender-blind <i>Often constructed based on the principle of being “fair” by treating everyone the same</i></p>
	<p><i>Psychological Counseling</i></p> <p>This service is offered especially to those who were repatriated due to violence or war.</p>	<p>Provincial</p>	<p>All returnees</p>	<p>Gender-blind <i>Often constructed based on the principle of being “fair” by treating everyone the same</i></p>

	<p><i>Reintegration Mentoring and Mobilization of Investment Opportunities</i></p> <p>This was made available to returnees and their families. This is conducted on a regular basis, either in the city/municipal or barangay level.</p>	Provincial	All Returnees	Gender-blind <i>Often constructed based on the principle of being “fair” by treating everyone the same</i>
AssistWell	This is an initiative by the Department of Labor and Employment with the Department of Migrant Workers	National	All returnees	Gender-blind <i>Often constructed based on the principle of being “fair” by treating everyone the same</i>
Sa ‘Pinas Ikaw ang Ma’am at Sir (SPIMS)	This is an initiative by the Department of Migrant Workers to reintegrate the returning licensed teachers back to DepEd.	National	All returnees	Gender-blind <i>Often constructed based on the principle of being “fair” by treating everyone the same</i>

4. Conclusions

My study sought to understand the implementation narratives and challenges of the institutions involved in the reintegration of former Filipina migrant workers to the local labor market in the province of Batangas. Interviewed institutions claim that programs being implemented are gender-equal and inclusive. The challenge in the implementation of these programs lies in the fragmented data and services, knowing that different institutions have different programs implemented in reintegration. However, a common concern among these institutions is the monitoring of the impact of their assistance to the beneficiaries. The review of the programs being implemented have a rating of gender-blind, with the exception of the *Balik-Pinay, Balik Hanapbuhay (Woman Returnee, Return to Livelihood)* as gender-specific, but focuses on entrepreneurship and not return to local labor.

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that government and non-government agencies develop structured reintegration programs that address both the emotional, social and economic aspects of returning female OFWs. It is also suggested that skills training be more readily available and accessible across the province. There is also a need to move beyond the traditional financial assistance and entrepreneurial activities. Policy recommendations may include training profiling, needs analysis, skills assessment, job matching events, upskilling, retooling, and reskilling programs that are tailor-fit to the realities of the returning women OFWs. Other support programs may include work-life balance workshops and professional development

guidance. I also recommend the government organizations in charge of welfare to create a support platform to become a space for women returnees to share experiences, offer advice, and build a community directly addressing their unique challenges and societal roles.

Further research into the participation of the private sector may help in labor market reintegration.

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