

Philippine migration journey: Processes and programs in the migration life cycle

Background paper to the *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies*

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Alvin Ang and Erwin R. Tiongson*

Abstract

Migration is a regular part of the economic and social life of the Philippines. This paper provides an overview of the Philippine migration system—its historical background and the legal and regulatory environment that has evolved in response to changing global economic conditions, to facilitate Filipino workers' access to overseas employment opportunities, and to protect their well-being. It outlines the key processes and programs governing the migration life cycle—from predeparture to return and reintegration—and describes the respective roles of institutions. It also provides a brief review of the empirical assessments of selected programs implemented to support policy implementation. The flexibility and easy adaptability of Filipino workers (particularly professionals) ensure that they can deskill and upskill depending on available overseas jobs. The institutionalized system of migration contributes to this ease of finding overseas work.

Keywords: migration system, facilitation, recruitment, deployment, return

* Alvin Ang is Professor and Chair of the Economics Department of the Ateneo de Manila University (email: apang@atenco.edu). Erwin R. Tiongson is Professor of the Practice and Deputy Director of the Global Human Development (GHD) Program at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service (email: ert@georgetown.edu). This paper serves as a background paper to the *World Development Report 2023, Migrants, Refugees, and Societies*. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank and its affiliated organizations, or those of the Executive Directors of the World Bank or the governments they represent. This paper received useful comments and suggestions from Laura Caron, Çağlar Özden, and Jeremaiah Opiniano.

Introduction

Philippine migration is a response to varying global events and internal policy responses to the challenges created by labor movements due to these international events. Occurring initially through distinct waves, migration and return have become a regular part of the economic and social life of the country. Responding to changes in immigration laws in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States in the 1960s, the initial wave consisted of professionals and skilled workers who qualified for permanent migration to these countries. By the 1970s, opportunities emerged for temporary migration following the oil boom in the Gulf and the decline of the Philippine economy. The demand for overseas workers amidst the rapid growth of construction projects in Gulf countries began pulling in professionals and semi-skilled workers in large numbers. This led to the Philippines to begin organizing a formal labor migration program for a new category of Filipino workers employed abroad: the Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW).

As a response to global economic developments, the deployment of OFWs can be seen as the emigration of specific groups of workers of varying skills and occupations, as documented by Ang (2007). In the 1970s, as noted, construction workers and semi-skilled workers emigrated to the Middle East in response to the region's construction boom financed by petroleum revenues. In the 1980s, prosperity in the rapidly growing economies of East Asia created domestic household work and blue-collar employment for OFWs, including opportunities for greater female participation. In recent decades, the demographic shift and growth of the "knowledge economy" in high-income economies have created employment opportunities for higher-skilled workers and technicians, beyond the Gulf countries and newly industrialized Asian countries to different parts of the world.

Philippine migration is characterized by a large share of female workers. About 60 percent of OFWs are female. Seventy percent of them work in elementary occupations requiring simple and routine tasks, mostly household service work. Most are between the ages of 30 to 39. This pattern has remained essentially unchanged since 2015. Before then, OFWs were about 55 percent male. As such, Philippine migration has also raised issues about children left behind. The typical Filipino household that is the source of OFWs has an extended family structure that serves as a social support system when parents go work abroad. However, new communication technologies in recent years have permitted OFW parents to be in closer contact. There is mixed evidence on the impact of migration on the children behind. For example, an ethnographic study of some 119 households in Batangas found that children of migrants were more likely to attend private schools, which are considered "more prestigious" than public schools (Aguilar et al. 2009). This is consistent with a nationally representative study of children from a few years prior, indicating that some 40 percent of children of migrants were in private schools, compared with only 15 percent of children in nonmigrant households (Asis 2006). On the other hand, the results of a UNICEF study of nearly 250 households in four *barangays* (communities) suggest that along selected dimensions—such as the amount of adult attention received—children of migrants were worse off compared to nonmigrant children (Edillon 2008). Many "do not feel that they have active participation in family decision-making." Nonetheless, along other dimensions, these children do better—such as in school, and in the likelihood of receiving academic awards and other recognition. Overall, the study found that there were "mixed effects of having an OFW parent on meeting the rights of the child, using proxy measures."¹ As Asis (2006) concludes, "Although migration creates emotional displacement for migrants and their children, it also opens up possibilities for children's agency and independence."

The ease by which Filipino workers can migrate is due to their high level of educational qualification, their proficiency in English, and their willingness to take jobs requiring lower skills. With more than 2,000 institutions of higher learning in the country producing more than 600,000 graduates annually, overseas work is a viable option, even as the country produces an average of about 800,000 jobs per year. The biggest group of graduates are in the fields of business, education, and engineering. These programs provide generic

professional skills that can easily allow upskilling and deskilling according to job needs overseas. Patterns of enrolment by discipline groups reveal that enrolment essentially tracks overseas demand. For instance, in health care (particularly nursing), enrolment followed overseas demand for nurses, which peaked in 2006. On the other hand, the maritime sector consistently produces workers primarily for international shipping operations. Technical education has also shifted to creating workers for global employment, such as business process outsourcing (BPO), tourism, primary health care, and construction support. Many professionals, such as teachers, engineers, and health care workers, have completed technical certification training that allows them to work overseas in occupations requiring lower skills, such as household and general service work. The flexibility and easy adaptability of Filipino workers (particularly professionals) ensure that they can deskill and upskill depending on available overseas jobs.

The institutionalized system of migration contributes to this ease of finding overseas work. This system has evolved over decades through a series of calibrations and adjustments in response to various challenges faced by OFWs. Lessons learned were developed into policies creating, undoing, and merging institutions and expanding capacities, skills, and financial resources to manage migration. The initial policy and regulatory framework to institutionalize temporary migration consisted of the Labor Code of 1974,² which created the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB) and the National Seamen Board (NSB). These two agencies initially formalized overseas work as a government initiative. However, as demand for workers increased, the government allowed the private sector to provide recruitment services, with the Bureau of Employment Services (BES) providing oversight. As the number of OFWs continues to increase in different parts of the world, protecting the security and well-being of OFWs has become a greater priority, emphasizing the need to further strengthen the institutions beyond recruitment. A Welfare Fund for Overseas Workers was established by Presidential Decree 1694 in 1980, and eventually became the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). Meanwhile, the Labor Code also created the Office for Emigrant Affairs (OEA), which was designed to support permanent migrants. It eventually became the Commission on Filipino Overseas (CFO). Before the end of the Marcos administration in the mid-1980s, the OEDB, NSB, and the BES were merged to form the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) to consolidate further measures to recruit and develop the overseas labor program and to protect the rights of workers. The POEA and OWWA form the pillars of overseas migration management in the country under the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). By the 2000s, the Philippines had evolved a model for temporary labor migration management spanning everything from predeparture through eventual return and reintegration—a system that has been called a “dual approach of facilitation and protection” (Asis 2017). Likewise, it created a parallel system for permanent migration to help ensure an orderly process for both migration windows.

Various laws and policies have been passed over the years, fine-tuning the Philippine overseas labor program. Beginning with the passage of the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995 ([R.A.] 8042), which was a response to the Flor Contemplacion trials in Singapore,³ the law increased the worker protection and worker-in-distress components of the POEA’s mandate. It created the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs in the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), whose main task is to assist workers abroad in protecting their rights, especially in times of distress. An amendment to this law, R.A. 9422, stipulated that OFWs can only migrate to those countries with which the Philippines has a bilateral agreement that protects OFWs. The experience created by the Gulf War and the associated repatriations of workers led the government to pass two more critical laws, R.A. 10022 and R.A. 10801. R. A. 10022 strengthens worker protection through compulsory insurance and improves the repatriation process. It also created the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), assigned to assist workers who have returned to the Philippines following their overseas employment. R. A. 10801 authorizes the national government to assume OWWA’s budget for personnel and operations, thus helping OWWA manage its fund to support workers and their families.

Despite having all these structures in place, the government has faced coordination challenges because the different phases of migration encompass multiple agencies and different levels of governance, and require diverse capacities to implement. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that existing structures can be fine-tuned to maximize the private gains of migrants and their families, helping them contribute sustainably to the development of the Philippines and their destination countries.

In response to the challenge of coordination, the Philippine government has recently integrated the whole migration process into a single institutional office to coordinate the different migration phases. Through R.A. 11641, it has created the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), designed to be a “one-stop shop.” It brings together under one roof the POEA as the head department; the International Labor Affairs Bureau (ILAB); all Overseas Labor Offices (POLOs); the National Reintegration Center for OFWs; National Maritime Polytechnic; the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA); the Office of the Social Welfare Attaché (OSWA); and the International Social Services Office of the Department of the Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). The OWWA will continue to be an attached agency. This law will consolidate all programs and resources related to migration into one platform.

The migration life cycle and migration governance

The Philippine migration governance is a complete support mechanism spanning the entire migration life cycle, from job prospecting to return and reintegration. The system, as it has evolved, is designed to support both temporary and permanent migration. The third strand of return migration is relatively undeveloped compared to the outmigration component. Much of the focus is on out-migration, considering the volume of movers, the destination countries involved, and the processes required to ensure efficient and protected movement from recruitment to return. Table 1 describes the migration life cycle and the institutional mechanisms involved in each stage.

Table 1. Philippine migration cycle and governance

ACTIVITIES AND PROTECTIONS	MIGRATION STAGE		
	Before migration	During migration	After migration
Education/training	Commission on Higher Education (CHED)/Technical Skills and Development Authority (TESDA)	POLOs (Overseas Labor Offices)	OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration)/CHED/ TESDA
Job search/ recruitment/job matching /language training and skills upgrading/financial literacy and deployment	POEA (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration)/ private recruitment agencies/Public Employment Service Office (PESO)/civil society groups/OWWA /TESDA /CFO (Commission on		

	Filipinos Overseas)/ Bureau of Immigration		
Within destination country matters: Consular services, social service information, remittances, legal and rights protection, support and shelter requirements, repatriation due to job loss, sickness, death		POEA/private recruitment agency counterparts/ embassy and consulates/ POLOs/ Social Welfare Attachés (SWAs)/OWWA /private financial, insurance, and investment companies	
Return and reintegration			OWWA/Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP)/DOLE (Department of Labor and Employment)/ NRCO (National Reintegration Center for OFWs)

Source: Original compilations for the *World Development Report 2023*.

Note: OFWs = Overseas Filipino Workers.

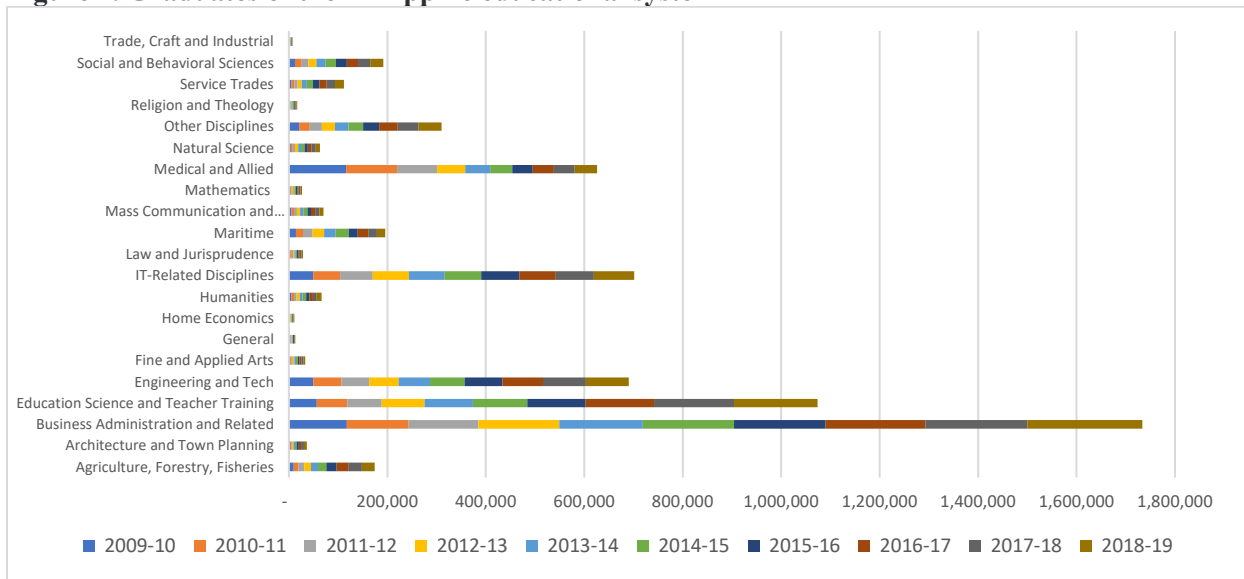
For each component, the Philippines has developed programs that aim to enhance and maximize the benefits for the migrants and their families and increase overall welfare in the Philippines. The discussion that follows describes the general features of each component, including recent developments. The section after that discusses specific programs and what can be learned from their implementation.

Education and training

An enduring mismatch between the skills produced by the education system and the skills demanded by the local labor market has produced a steady stream of workers willing and able to work overseas. The Philippine education system, as mentioned, produces approximately 600,000 tertiary education graduates annually. The economy, meanwhile, produces, on average, 800,000 jobs annually. The challenge is that the educational system generally responds to labor demand in overseas markets rather than to labor demand in the country. Most of the graduates of the educational system are in the fields of business, education, engineering, information technology (IT), and medical fields (figure 1). By contrast, as seen in figure 2, the job structure of the country is dominated by agriculture, retail trade, construction, transport, and related services. The mismatch between the supply of workers and domestic demand creates a regular stream of workers willing and preferring to work overseas.

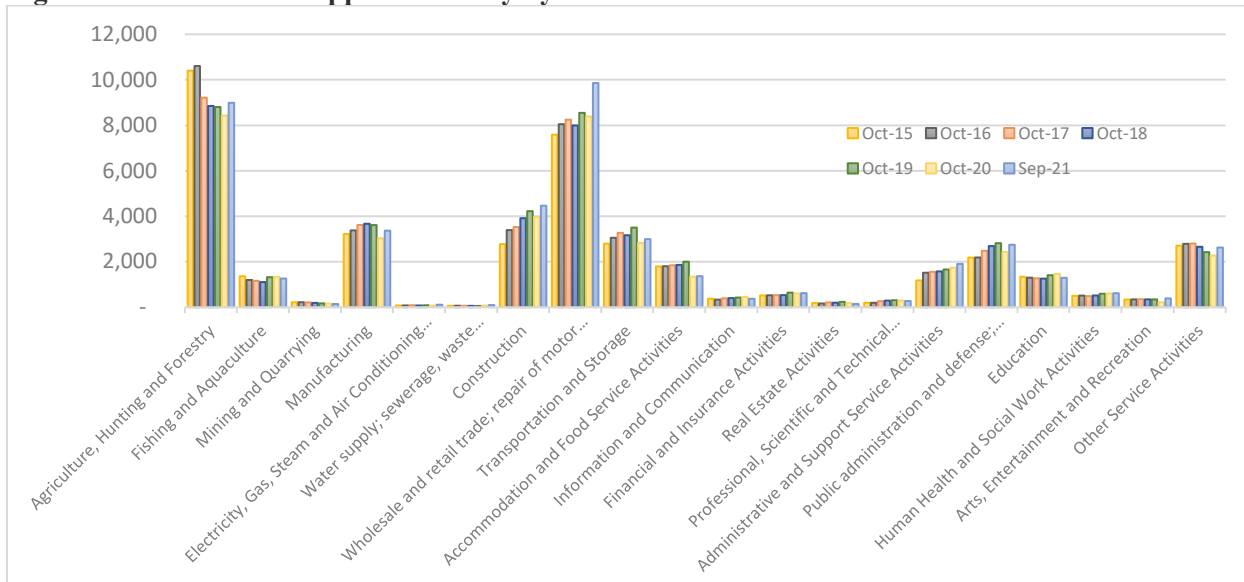
In contrast, the government’s Technical Skills and Development Authority (TESDA) provides training programs for skills required domestically and overseas. TESDA has been graduating more than 800,000 students annually. Before the pandemic, the highest number of graduates were in the following fields: hotel and restaurant (25 percent), language training (19 percent), community development (10 percent), electrical and electronics (8 percent), and health care (6 percent). These courses correspond to service sector opportunities both in the country and abroad.

Figure 1. Graduates of the Philippine educational system



Source: Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

Figure 2. Jobs in the Philippine economy by sector



Source: Labor Force Surveys, various years, Philippine Statistical Authority (PSA).

The disparity in occupational salaries between local and overseas jobs exacerbates the mismatches. Table 2 provides a comparison of the annual average wages of nurses among destination countries. Based on the salary standardization scale of the Philippine government, the entry-level nurse has a yearly estimated salary of ₱456,261 which is about 40 percent lower than the lowest destination country salary of ₱720,000 in Saudi Arabia. Nurses have been in high demand both within the country and abroad, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. But many nurses would rather wait for overseas opportunities and work in health-related jobs in the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry.⁴ These jobs pay an entry-level annual salary of ₱780,000, which is even higher than the nursing salaries offered by Saudi Arabia. There are about 200,000 jobs currently available domestically in the BPO health care sector. Anecdotal evidence from interviews suggests that their employment package includes resources to help them pass the US nurse

licensure board, such as free review materials and seminars on current US nursing practice (USAID and HRH2030 2020). Consequently, a country producing nurses for overseas labor markets cannot fill domestic vacancies in private health care facilities. In fact, more Filipino nurses are deployed abroad than the existing nurse stock of the country.

Table 2. Annual average salary of nurses in destination countries

Destination country	Salary (In foreign currency)	Salary (In Philippine pesos)
United States	US\$55,000	₱2,850,000
Canada	Can\$64,000	₱2,490,000
Australia	\$A60,000	₱2,220,000
Ireland	€30,000	₱2,030,000
United Kingdom	£23,000	₱1,550,000
Singapore	S\$35,000	₱1,340,000
United Arab Emirates	Dh92,000	₱1,300,000
Qatar	QR75,000	₱1,070,000
Kuwait	KD5,000	₱850,000
Saudi Arabia	SRI52,000	₱720,000

Source: Payscale.

In response to the needs of both the local (domestic) and overseas labor markets, Global Skills Partnerships (GSPs) might represent a mutually beneficial option. As of yet, there is no formal GSP in the Philippines as typically defined⁵—in the sense of a training program in the country of origin funded mainly by the destination country that trains students both for work in the destination country and domestically. However, there are related international partnerships (see next section on Germany’s Triple Win Program as an example of a Bilateral Labor Agreement) and a few decentralized efforts to train prospective seafarers domestically with support from foreign governments. These include programs led by Finland,⁶ Japan,⁷ and Norway.⁸

Job search, recruitment, and deployment

The POEA is the central government agency providing information on jobs abroad, although private recruitment agencies also play a significant role in prospective OFWs’ job search and hiring. The POEA has recently instituted an optional Pre-Employment Orientation Seminar (PEOS) that may be taken online. The PEOS provides information on the following eight areas: the essential guide to working and living abroad; the job search process, including information on avenues for applying for work overseas, required documents, and the Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC); illegal recruitment; mandatory fees; minimum requirements in an overseas job contract; life and work in the destination countries; likely health and security risks; and government agencies involved in migration. Because illegal recruitment is relatively common, all prospective OFWs should verify through the POEA that their recruitment agency is legitimate; all legal private recruitment agencies are accredited and regulated by the POEA. Most job applicants go through an agency for private recruitment or the POEA for Philippine government-arranged employment. Under POEA recruitment, there is no need to pay placement fees. A third, less used, approach for overseas work recruitment is a direct hire.⁹ Regardless of how recruited, all workers must attend a Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) (managed by OWWA) and pay for their PhilHealth insurance, OWWA insurance, and POEA fees to secure their OEC. Some occupations, such as those in services and domestic household work, require additional certification from TESDA and OWWA. The OEC serves as the primary document confirming that an OFW has fully complied with all predeparture requirements.¹⁰

Government agencies and private recruitment agencies work to ensure the broad dissemination of information about overseas job opportunities. Private recruitment agencies and the POEA provide job information to those without internet access or in rural areas. The PESO in every city and municipality serves as the labor market information system for domestic and overseas job vacancies. Several civil society organizations (CSOs) assist OWWA and private recruitment agencies in the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar by providing additional free seminars and training on financial literacy, cultural adaptation, and language. In addition, there are informal channels, with networks of OFWs providing information on job search and recruitment. Regardless of the route chosen, the OFW must ensure that they are legally contracted to work abroad.

Services within the destination country

Institutional support to migrants continues even after OFWs arrive in the destination country. In particular, the Philippines offers the Post Arrival Orientation Seminar (PAOS). The PAOS is designed to help OFWs familiarize themselves with their new environment. The seminar is organized by Philippine embassies and consulates and is a partnership among government personnel, worker's organizations, employers, and civil society. Instead of standardized content, the seminar is tailored to the specifics of the destination country. Typically, it covers immigration laws and procedures in the destination country, services offered by the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) and the embassy/consulate, emergency preparedness, and reintegration plans, among others. The seminar is provided regularly only in a few embassies, such as those in Hong Kong SAR, China; the Republic of Korea; and Singapore. The government is designing a virtual seminar to make the program accessible to as many OFWs as possible. Organizing the workshop in person everywhere is impractical, considering the number of OFWs and destination countries and the frequency of their arrivals.

The POLO is the institutional extension of the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in destination countries and provides many services to OFWs. A total of 34 POLOs are located in Asia (11), Gulf countries (13), Europe (7), and the Americas (3). The office is led by a Labor Attaché and staffed with welfare officers from OWWA. It generally provides services and support to OFWs regarding labor disputes and workers' rights. It also provides counseling, legal advice, social services assistance, temporary shelter for distressed workers,¹¹ financial literacy training, livelihood and skills upgrading seminars, training for eventual reintegration, and emergency relief operations during wars and natural disasters. Most POLOs have a 24/7 contact number and social media account for accessible communication. Because there is a POEA presence in diplomatic posts, the POLO also represents the POEA in marketing labor opportunities in the destination country. This makes the POLO a mini-labor department and marketing agent for Philippine overseas labor.

Return and reintegration

By definition, temporary migrants are expected to eventually return to the Philippines and find productive employment or start new businesses using skills, experiences, and financial savings they acquired overseas. The system is designed to support this reintegration. Return and reintegration were recognized as essential stages of the migration cycle early in the development of the Philippine migration management program through the establishment of OWWA. As mentioned, OFWs can prepare for their return and reintegration by attending seminars on skills upgrading, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy while working in destination countries. These are provided by the POLO in coordination with civil society organizations and occasionally with the assistance of financial institutions based in the Philippines.

OWWA and the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO) provide more support services to OFWs and their families immediately upon their return. For example, OWWA provides job search support and business advisory services, among other forms of assistance. It further supports livelihood programs by

providing grants and concessional loans in cooperation with the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP) and the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP). The NRCO provides more specific programs supporting certain OFWs to help them manage the savings acquired overseas and help facilitate their technology and skills transfer. There are numerous specialized reintegration programs, depending on the characteristics of the returning OFWs and their circumstances, including entrepreneurship programs specifically for distressed female OFWs; livelihood grant assistance for undocumented OFWs; reintegration programs for teachers who worked abroad as household service workers and can now serve as teachers in their hometowns or can be employed by the Department of Education (DepEd). These programs also support families of OFWs through services supported by OFW Family Circles, including scholarships, counseling, and business planning.

Processes over the life cycle of migration and key programs in the overseas employment system are summarized in table 3.

Table 3. The Philippine overseas employment system: Processes and key programs

Process	Steps and institutions involved
Individual preparation	Acquire passport; clearances; qualification documents such as diplomas and certificates, resumes, and photos.
Pre-employment	Attend a Pre-Employment Orientation Seminar (mandatory for first-time overseas workers; conducted online by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration [POEA]). Acquire a certificate of completion. Register at POEA online for e-registration.
Job search	Conduct job search through private employment agencies, government placement (POEA), direct hire opportunities through online or personal network/connection, Public Employment Service Offices (PESO). For private employment agencies, applicants should confirm their legal status and registration at the POEA website or the POEA offices.
Job application	Submit application to preferred company/employer.
Employment requirements	Undergo interviews, skills and language upgrading, medical tests, and other pre-employment requirements for the type of jobs applied for.
Visa processing	After a worker secures a job offer, the agency/POEA/employer processes the work visa.
Employment contract	Sign an employment contract with a foreign employer. Pay private recruitment agency a placement fee of up to one month's salary as specified in the contract, if required.
Pre-departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) or Comprehensive Pre-Departure Education Program (CPDEP) for household workers	Attend required online seminars organized by agency associations, recruitment agencies, civil society organizations, and Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO). acquire a certificate of completion. Emigrants leaving for permanent residency abroad register with the CFO before departure. <i>Au pairs</i> heading to Europe, even if they are not technically considered overseas workers, also need to register with CFO and receive orientation.
Submission of document to the POEA	Submit all completed documents to the POEA for verification. Applicant must pay for the following: POEA processing fee of ₱200, Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) membership fee of US\$25, Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (Philhealth) fee of ₱1,200, Pag-ibig Fund (housing development) contribution of ₱100, and medical insurance. The POEA then issues the Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC), which serves as the worker's exit clearance.

Deployment	The worker must present all documents and the OEC at the Immigration Counter.
Arrival at the destination country	The worker registers with the Philippine mission and undergoes the PAOS at the POLO (Overseas Labor Office) if it is being conducted.
Life in the destination country	The Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) coordinates with the POLO and Philippine mission on any social protection or labor-related issues. OFWs can also prepare for return by accessing various programs the POLO offers. OFWs can also access services offered by the POLO, including legal assistance and social support.
Return	OFWs returning for good can access various programs offered by OWWA, the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), and private firms involved in entrepreneurship, business development services, and investment. DOLE also assists with reintegration through job placement in the domestic labor market. OFWs returning temporarily for vacation or family visits are required to process their OEC to facilitate subsequent exit—either overseas through the POLO, before their trip, or upon arrival in the Philippines at the POEA and its satellite offices in the country.

Source: Original compilations of various government directives for the *World Development Report 2023*.

Note: Pag-ibig = Home Development Mutual Fund.

Selected key programs in the overseas employment process

This section reviews protections against illegal employment and trafficking overseas; bilateral agreements with Germany and Korea; protections for household workers working abroad; mandatory insurance coverage; and reintegration programs.¹²

Issuance of the OEC protection, and formalization of overseas work

As mentioned, the Philippines has been fine-tuning its overseas migration systems to ensure that OFWs’ work is legal, including regulations to protect workers from illegal recruitment, trafficking, and void contracts. Following several challenging episodes affecting female migrant workers (in particular, the killing of Japan-based overseas performing artist Maricris Sioson in 1989 and, as mentioned, the execution of Singapore-based domestic worker Flor Contemplacion in 1995), the country further enhanced the regulatory framework for the protection of OFWs.

Specifically, R.A. 8042 provided the legal basis for the POEA to begin crafting specific rules concerning the recruitment and employment of a land-based worker, along with a separate set of rules for sea-based workers or seafarers. One significant provision of these rules and regulations specifies what constitutes a valid employment contract, which foreign employers must follow when hiring Filipino workers. This work contract covers the verifiable “model employment agreement” submitted by the foreign employer (or principal) containing the terms and conditions of employment. The POEA verifies the authenticity and legality of this employment contract before the worker processes any other document. This valid employment contract can be issued through government-to-government hiring (through the POEA) or recruitment and employment agencies licensed by the POEA. Once the employment contract is deemed valid, the POEA then requires the prospective migrant worker to attend a Pre-departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS); pay necessary fees (including membership with a migrant workers’ welfare fund, a pension fund, a health insurance fund, and a housing fund); and secure their exit clearance document, called the Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC). All these documents must be screened at Philippine international airports to ensure that departing migrant workers are going abroad via secure regular, legal channels (IOM and SMC

2013). Even before the migrant worker goes through these premigration requirements, Filipinos can check on the POEA website for the list of licensed recruitment and employment agencies (including those whose licenses were revoked, suspended, and eventually canceled). In addition, the POEA curbs illegal recruitment activities at home and actively monitors and prevents contract substitution in host countries.¹³

After their arrival in the destination country, migrant workers who have experienced insecure welfare and work arrangements abroad can seek redress from the POEA.

Before the pandemic, the Philippines had been instituting numerous guidelines regulating the recruitment sector to better protect the welfare and rights of migrant workers, in keeping with the aims of R.A. 8042 and R. A. 10022 (leading some in the recruitment sector to complain that POEA rules have been stringent). Before and during the pandemic, the Philippine government set up one-stop centers nationwide,¹⁴ where prospective overseas workers can complete initial procedures without traveling to the capital (where the POEA head office is located). In addition, the POEA expanded the services it offers online to facilitate quick yet secure processing of paperwork for migrant workers (POEA 2022).

Protection against trafficking

The Philippines adheres to a law to combat human trafficking and has introduced policies and programs accordingly.¹⁵ The law broadly defined “human trafficking” to include the “recruitment, transportation, transfer or harboring, or receipt of persons... for the purpose of exploitation which includes at a minimum, the exploitation or the prostitution of others... or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery, servitude or the removal or sale of organs.” The law also created the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT), a multisectoral coordinating body that designs and implements policies and programs to counter trafficking, provide support to survivors and victims, and oversee the prosecution of cases. IACAT is under the Department of Justice, and the Council has created 24 task forces (2 national, 6 port-based, and 16 regional) (IACAT 2020).

Globally, the Philippines’ human trafficking programs are monitored by the U.S. Department of State’s annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report. In 2005, the Philippines was assigned a Tier 2 rank but, from 2016 on, has since been assigned and maintained a Tier 1 ranking, indicating that the country complies with the minimum standards of the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act. According to the 2021 TIP Report (US State Department 2022), the Philippine government has been investigating reports of labor trafficking among OFWs.

Government-to-government temporary work migration schemes

International cooperation is essential to ensure that international migration is mutually beneficial for migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries. As of 2019, the Philippines has signed 52 bilateral labor agreements (BLA) and five regional agreements. Middle Eastern countries have arrangements for the deployment and protection of domestic workers. In some countries, the government has agreements on the deployment of workers through a government-to-government arrangement. There is also mutual recognition of skills, qualifications, and competencies for regional agreements such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹⁶

The Philippines has had a government-to-government arrangement since 2004 with Korea through Korea Employment Permit System (EPS). EPS is an organized temporary or guest work program for recruiting low-skilled workers from (currently) 16 partner countries such as the Philippines, typically in Korea’s manufacturing sector. After passing a Korean language proficiency exam, a worker can work in Korea for four years and ten months. Korea’s Ministry of Employment runs the EPS program, including the job matching process, the requirements before departure and those upon arrival (such as 20-hour mandatory

training on labor laws and Korean culture), and postmigration programs. Both the Korean Ministry of Labor and the POEA work together to address reported labor-related cases affecting Filipino EPS workers.

The Philippines has a BLA with Germany through Germany's Triple Win Program.¹⁷ Since 2013, the program has promoted the “sustainable recruitment and employment of nurses” from the Philippines, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Tunisia. It aims to alleviate the shortage of nurses in Germany due largely to the country's demographic transition, with nursing vacancies exceeding the number of qualified applicants. In particular, the nursing sector is projected to need 150,000 new nurses by 2025—and possibly more due to the lingering pandemic. The partner countries were chosen because of their known surplus of well-trained nurses seeking overseas opportunities. The program was designed to prevent “brain drain” and the domestic shortage of nurses. The project is expected to produce three benefits—ease pressures on labor markets in the countries of origin, generate remittances for development, and relieve the nursing shortage in Germany—hence, the “Triple Win.” Nurses are provided with language and professional training before deployment and during their stay in Germany. More than 4,000 nurses from the three partner countries have been placed in Germany's clinics, geriatric care homes, and outpatient units.

The Philippines has sent more than 900 nurses to Germany since 2013, with hundreds more recently requested. The pay is attractive—from €2,000 to €2,400 per month when workers are deemed qualified to serve as a nurse by Germany's system—about double the highest salary among nurses in the Philippines. The pandemic has increased the demand for Philippine nurses. Just before the pandemic in January 2020,¹⁸ Germany requested 550 nurses. In July 2021, it asked for an additional 750 nurses to fill vacancies across medical institutions, offering a higher average salary, ranging from €2,300 per month to €2,800 for qualified nurses.¹⁹

The BLA with Germany represents a viable way to manage the flow and sharing of skilled workers, particularly in the health sector. However, more could be done to ensure that it is mutually beneficial. As the pandemic and the demographic transition compel many destination countries to rethink their health human resource strategy, primarily by drawing surplus workers from overseas, there is a need to ensure that this does not, at the same time, create shortages in the countries of origin. One option is to provide training and financial support to nurses who choose to stay in these countries or replace those who leave for work overseas.

Household service workers reform

The unique nature of household service work (HSW) requires a more detailed protection mechanism and preparation for workers. Amidst increasing reports of abuse, maltreatment, overwork, and nonpayment of salaries among domestic service workers overseas, the Philippine government strengthened and expanded regulations concerning the overseas deployment of these workers. The HSW Policy Reform, promulgated in 2006, led to the Philippines signing BLAs with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and other Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCCs), where most HSWs are located.

The objective of the reform was to better prepare HSWs for overseas work by providing them with necessary technical skills and knowledge as well as cultural and language orientation. Among other measures, new rules set the minimum wage of HSW at US\$400 per month and the minimum age of workers at 23 years.²⁰ It also required new skills assessments and a competency certificate (NC II) from the Technical Skills and Development Authority (TESDA), mandated additional cultural and language training led by OWWA—also known as the Comprehensive Pre-Departure Orientation Program (CPEDP)—and abolished placement fees to reduce migration costs and decrease the incidence of borrowing for migration.

Mandatory insurance coverage of OFWs

Since 1995, OFWs have been required to have insurance coverage. This mandatory insurance includes life insurance, medical insurance, and repatriation insurance and covers both newly hired and rehired migrant workers. Previously, only agency-hired migrant workers were subject to the mandatory insurance requirement. However, a new set of guidelines issued in 2022—Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) Department Order 228—has expanded the mandatory insurance coverage to include directly hired and rehired migrant workers.²¹

The new guidelines expanded the accidental and natural death and disability benefit for directly hired and rehired workers. Provisions also include medical evaluation, and compassionate visits, as well as repatriation due to termination and, in case of death, the repatriation of remains. The recruitment agency or the foreign employer directly hiring the worker pays the cost of the mandatory insurance coverage.

Only accredited insurance companies with licenses issued by the Insurance Commission can offer insurance products under this mandatory insurance scheme. In addition, departing OFWs pay membership fees with the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth), the Social Security System (SSS), and the Home Development Mutual Fund (Pag-ibig). These forms of social protection have also come in handy during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, critics have observed that this mandatory insurance lacks good health and medical coverage for OFWs during their work tenure abroad. Force majeure evacuations such as those experienced during wars, climate disruptions, and the recent COVID-19 shutdowns have put the burden of repatriation on the migrant-sending countries, such as the Philippines. For events at this level, BLAs or even regional and global agreements should include cost-sharing in the health and repatriation costs of migrant workers.

Reintegration program

The Philippines has long been involved in the return migration and reintegration of Filipino workers, mainly through the NRCO and OWWA. Before the setting up of the NRCO in 2006, OWWA had already been involved in migrant reintegration through its financial and social protection programs for OFWs and their families. In particular, OWWA has provided financial aid to affected returnees (including female domestic workers), entrepreneurial training and business start-up kits, scholarships for vocational training, and psychological and social services through OFW Family Circles. The NRCO works with OWWA to run these reintegration programs and links returning OFWs with the private sector and financial institutions to address their economic needs.²² Most reintegration programs cater to providing alternatives to overseas work. The NRCO has designed specific business programs for female migrants for small-scale business opportunities such as neighborhood and community retail and services. There are also programs run by large private organizations, such as Coca-Cola Philippines and Suy Sing Group, that help start-up groceries in communities.

Other government agencies have been involved in programs for returnees. In particular, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and its International Social Services (ISS) programs help distressed returnees. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) provides entrepreneurial training programs to OFWs, whether currently abroad, temporarily returning to the Philippines for vacations or family visits, or already reintegrating. The Department of Agriculture (DA) runs projects to help returnees invest in agriculture-related ventures. In addition, the Landbank of the Philippines has been offering business loans to returning OFWs (Opiniano 2021).

The large number of returnees during the pandemic has prompted a new approach to return and reintegration. More than one million workers returned at the peak of the pandemic. With overseas labor

markets not fully open then, few options were available to the government, leading the Philippines to adopt a “whole-of-government” approach to support returnees. In addition to the programs of OWWA and the NRCO, government-run financial institutions have launched various entrepreneurial loan and entrepreneurial training programs for OFWs. DTI and the Department of Agriculture have worked together to introduce similar services. The Department of Science and Technology (DOST) now offers returnees loans and technical assistance to set up technology-related business ventures. Following two national laws on pandemic recovery efforts, DOLE handed out US\$200 cash aid to returnee OFWs displaced by the pandemic. With these various forms of assistance, Philippine migration policy had effectively pivoted toward return migration and reintegration (Opiniano 2021). Soon, the Philippine government, in collaboration with the United Nations family of agencies, will launch an OFW reintegration website/hub, bringing together relevant government agencies and private sector partners to provide tailored economic and social reintegration services to different categories of returnees.

Empirical assessments of selected programs

Rigorous assessments of Philippine migration programs and policies are limited, but the few available empirical studies suggest that several programs and policies work reasonably well, although with room for improvement. This section briefly summarizes some of these available studies. It includes investigations that make use of experimental or quasi-experimental approaches, where they exist, as well as more descriptive assessments that at least make use of some empirical evidence, as indicated.

Bilateral Labor Agreements (BLAs)

The Philippine BLA with Korea, EPS, has raised household expenditures for participating OFWs significantly, with particularly more significant increases in spending on children’s education and health (Clemens and Tiongson 2017). The study utilizes a regression discontinuity based on the Korean language test requirement. Because there is a discrete passing score—if applicants test above the cutoff score, they can work in Korea; if they test below it, they cannot—comparing those applicants just above and just below the cutoff is a credible evaluation method. The study’s results suggest that overall expenditures of migrant households increased by up to 36 percent, leading to greater savings and lower borrowing for selected categories of households. On average, households spend “hundreds of percent” more on children’s well-being. In particular, their children are more likely to attend higher-quality private schools and visit private health clinics.

More generally, the Korean EPS is an exemplary BLA model for managing migration flows across all partner countries (Cho and others 2018). As of 2018, EPS had employed more than 500,000 workers from its 16 partner countries. An assessment by Cho and others (2018) documented several measurable gains compared to the previous system: EPS has helped reduce migration costs by about 75 percent, from nearly \$4,000 to less than \$1,000. It has also decreased the number of overstaying workers from about half to less than one-tenth of workers. In addition, there is qualitative evidence that this program has helped promote migrant workers’ well-being, including through the provision of social insurance and counseling services.

An econometric study of nearly 600 BLAs worldwide—including those of the Philippines—spanning the period 1945 to 2015 finds that countries that have BLAs are more likely to experience larger emigration flows, thus providing evidence that such agreements can help promote more secure labor movements (Chilton and Posner 2018). The authors claim that they are unable to establish causal impact, although they use essentially a difference-in-differences framework, and are thus able to provide rigorous evidence. However, a recent Philippine study using an instrumental variables approach (O’Steen 2021) is unable to find evidence that BLAs lead to more migration outflows. It does find that BLAs are associated with higher exports.²³

However, not surprisingly, not all BLAs have produced favorable outcomes. An assessment of the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA), a trade agreement that includes provisions for the enhanced mobility of nurses and health workers, finds disappointing outcomes and concludes that it has been a “failed nurse migration policy” (Yagi et al. 2014). In particular, some four years after the program was first introduced, less than one-tenth of applicants passed the required examination, compared to the passing rate of more than 90 percent among Japanese natives. Meanwhile, as applicants wait to meet program requirements, many have been underemployed, relegated to performing lower-skill tasks, and are not allowed to carry out tasks that they had previously performed in the Philippines. As a consequence, the administrative cost of the program has been enormous, with one estimate cited by Yagi et al. (2014) suggesting that the cost of a single successful JPEPA applicant is about US\$1 million.

Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs)

MRAs are agreements facilitating the mobility of skilled workers through an agreed framework to recognize the qualifications and credentials of these workers. The Philippines is part of an MRA through ASEAN that governs the flow of eight occupations and professional fields.

No rigorous empirical assessment of this MRA exists, but an empirical simulation exercise suggests measurable economic gains for the participating countries (Corong and Aguiar 2019). The study uses a Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) model to analyze the enhanced trade flow and the increased flow of skilled workers in the ASEAN region. The authors find plausible increases in the gross domestic product (GDP) of participating countries, including the Philippines, due to these trade and migration policy changes.

Nonetheless, a qualitative assessment suggests that the gains might be relatively small, and the arrangements are challenging to implement (Mendoza and others 2017). Their case studies indicate that arrangements can often take a long time to negotiate—possibly spanning decades—and are even more challenging to preserve, requiring significant resources to update and renegotiate. Where less costly alternatives are available—such as more decentralized efforts—they can be challenging to monitor or enforce.

Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS)

No systematic evaluations of PDOS modules exist, although the program has been in operation since the early 1980s. It has evolved over decades. Initially, the POEA required recruitment agencies to provide this training. In the 1990s, accredited nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provided this training. More recently, OWWA has overseen the program.

The results of a recent field experiment indicate that a new PDOS module to improve financial decision-making increased the likelihood of having a bank account among a select group of migrant workers (Barsbai et al. 2020). The experiment introduced two new interventions—a financial savings module and a savings reminder regularly sent by text to participating workers after deployment, both aimed to promote the financial literacy of migrant workers. About 2,000 domestic household workers bound for Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong SAR, China were randomly assigned to these new interventions and to a control group. Over several years, the field experiment found that those given the intervention and bound for Hong Kong SAR, China were more likely to have savings accounts. In contrast, there was no significant impact among those who worked in Saudi Arabia. In large part, these country differences in effects may be due to differences in the ease of opening a bank account.

Recently, the Philippine government began requiring financial literacy training for all prospective OFWs.²⁴ In partnership with the central bank, OWWA has incorporated this new training module into the PDOS and the PAOS programs. They include videos and in-person training.

Minimum wage policy

Following the 2006 HSW Policy Reform, there were concerns that the new US\$400 minimum wage requirement for Filipino workers would make them less competitive for overseas work, but the evidence is mixed. McKenzie, Theoharides, and Yang (2014), using data from 2001 to 2009, found that the increase in minimum wage decreased the employment of OFWs but increased their wages in countries where the minimum wage was enforced. A qualitative assessment by the Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA) in 2015, on the other hand, found that half of the HSWs participating in their study did not receive the US\$400 wage.

The creation of the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW)

In 2021, the Philippine government created the Department of Migrant Workers (Republic Act 11641), bringing together the programs and institutions that govern international migration throughout the entire migration cycle, from deployment to reintegration.²⁵ Before the enactment of this law, overseas work was mainly managed as part of the national employment strategy; hence, several migration agencies are formally under the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). These include the POEA, the POLOs, the NCRO, and OWWA, as attached agencies. The increased welfare and protection efforts of the government led to the creation of the Office of Social Welfare Attaché (OSWA) under the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA) in the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). These are in addition to various government agencies with which migrant workers must interact to get clearances and certificates to complete their overseas work application.

The new law envisions a much stronger national coordination of efforts along several dimensions. It merges agencies with related functions, including diplomatic posts servicing OFWs. It institutionalizes the one-stop center for OFWs in regions and field offices nationwide—where government agencies are housed in a single location—to jointly provide services that help OFWs and their families meet pre-employment and post-employment requirements. The law creates a national OFW skills registry to ensure that the skills profiles of OFWs are more closely aligned with the national employment strategy. The law also aims to provide separate funding streams for legal assistance and other assistance needed by OFWs. It incorporates the national reintegration program, covering both documented and undocumented migrant workers, formally making reintegration part of a comprehensive, full-cycle migration system. Finally, it affirms the country's commitment to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM). The department is expected to be fully operational in about three years.²⁶

Notes

¹ A more recent study (Pajaron, Latinazo, and Trinidad 2020) using a quasi-experimental approach is just as inconclusive. It found “an overall positive impact on education, work, and temper” among migrant children, though they are also, according to the authors, more “physically sickly.”

² Presidential Decree No. 442 (Labor Code of the Philippines), 1974, <https://blr.dole.gov.ph/2014/12/11/labor-code-of-the-philippines/>.

³ Flor Contemplacion was a domestic helper in Singapore who was hanged for murdering a fellow Filipina domestic helper in 1991. The case became controversial and raised public awareness of the hardship faced by domestic helpers abroad. In addition, the Philippine Embassy in Singapore was criticized for not providing enough support. The hanging of Contemplacion led to the resignations of the Secretaries of Foreign Affairs and Labor in the Philippines and an overhaul of the Philippine overseas migration program through the passage of R.A. 8042.

⁴ BPOs are back-office activities such as accounting and human resources activities or front-office activities such as customer service and sales support activities that firms outsource either domestically or internationally. The Philippines is one of the top BPO providers in the world, servicing mostly US and European companies. Nurses are employed in BPOs for the medical customer support and medical transcription needed in clinical processes.

⁵ Michael Clemens has inspired and led efforts worldwide to organize GSPs. See Clemens (2015).

⁶ <https://www.businessfinland.fi/en/whats-new/news/2017/finnish-learning-by-doing-for-filipino-seafarers>.

⁷ <https://marina.gov.ph/2019/02/21/ph-japan-renew-commitment-on-maritime-education-training-2/?cfchl tk=vow6PIW7eiXXaiZOILvOaiz5esh2.b2Zuzi.uG8.ovk-1657587189-0-gaNycGzNCKU>.

⁸ <https://scandasia.com/25-years-with-norwegian-trained-filipino-seafarers/>.

⁹ The Philippine government does not allow the direct hire of workers, except in certain circumstances. Direct hire is different from the process by which workers are hired through private agencies because it requires the employer in the destination country to provide all the necessary documentation, including the employment contract, for validation by the POLO in the destination country. After validation, the documents are sent to the worker in the Philippines who, in turn, needs to go to the POEA to complete the hiring process and secure the OEC. The POEA processing fee is US\$100.

¹⁰ POEA (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration) and Bureau of Immigration, One Stop Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC) Validation System, Memorandum of Agreement, July 4, 2013.

¹¹ R.A. 8042 created Migrant Workers Resource Centers (MWRCs) in destination countries with significant number of female OFWs. The MWRC serves as shelter for female OFWs in distress.

¹² This section is based on the Philippine Migration Report by the International Organization for Migration and the Scalabrini Migration Center (IOM and SMC 2013).

¹³ Under contract-substitution, the migrant worker is given a new valid employment contract that differs from the one s/he signed before leaving the Philippines and which the POEA has verified and authenticated.

¹⁴ POEA (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration) and Bureau of Immigration. 2013. One Stop Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC) Validation System. Memorandum of Agreement, July 4, 2013.

¹⁵ Republic Act 9208 (Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003), amended in 2012 as R.A. 10364 (Expanded Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act).¹⁶ Philippine submission to the Voluntary Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), October 2020.

¹⁷ <https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/vor-ort/zav/Triple-Win-Pflegekraefte>.

¹⁸ <https://www.poea.gov.ph/news/2020/NR-January%202020%20-%20Germany%20needs%20additional%20550%20Pinoy%20nurses%20under%20Triple%20Win%20Project.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.poea.gov.ph/news/2021/NR-Germany-needs-750-Pinoy-nurses-under-Triple-Win-Project.pdf>.

²⁰ The POEA recently increased the age to 24, aligning it with the passage of the Expanded Anti-Trafficking Law of 2022 (RA 11862).

²¹ <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2022/03/14/direct-hired-rehired-ofws-now-covered-by-insurance/>.

²² National Reintegration Center for OFWs. Undated presentation. Reintegration Program Guidelines.

²³ The study uses investment treaties and other measures of international ties. It is not clear whether larger export flows might be due to these instruments.

²⁴ <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/money/personalfinance/685254/ofws-must-now-undergo-financial-literacy-seminar/story/>.

²⁵ Republic Act 11641 (Department of Migrant Workers Act) and its Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR), <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2021/12/30/republic-act-no-11641/>.

²⁶ This timeline is stated in the law and its accompanying Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR).

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