

Filipinos for Export: The Case of Low-Skilled Workers

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the Philippine government's involvement in exporting labor to Taiwan, a country where the Philippines is recognized as a major labor provider. Focusing on the recruitment, selection, and preparation of low-skilled Filipino migrant workers, the study delves into how the Philippine government prepares these workers by imparting knowledge about Taiwanese culture before their departure. By examining narratives obtained from surveys conducted with Filipino low-skilled workers in Zhongshan District, as well as insights from migration experts, the central role of state policies and institutions in the migration industry is emphasized. Furthermore, the paper explores how these interviews, along with institutional resources, contribute to our understanding of these migration institutions. The key argument presented is that influential Philippine stakeholder groups actively participate in migration institutions, shaping international recruitment practices and facilitating the generation and brokering of competitive migrant workers.

Keywords: Brokerage System, Taiwan, Migrant Worker, Migrant Women, The Philippines

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Introduction

The Philippines served as a model for Asian economic development in the 1950s. The Philippines' economy grew rapidly in the 1960s, and it was considered one of the strongest performers in Asia. However, an economic crisis occurred in the 1970s, causing its economic development to lag behind that of its Asian neighbors. During these years of rising inflation, the political situation was volatile, and the debt crisis was deepening. This resulted in shifting to sending migrant laborers abroad. President Marcos' declaration of Martial Law in 1972, and subsequent promotion of overseas labor export as an economic growth plan to alleviate nationwide unemployment, fueled an enormous influx of migrant workers during this period, which continues to this day (Medalla, 2023; Yori, 2023).

As early as the 1970s, the Philippines began sending out migrant workers. Since then, the Philippines has become one of the world's largest exporters of migrant workers, with millions of Filipinos working abroad and sending remittances to their families back home. The Philippines is a major provider of migrant labor, and the country's migration policies have always been founded on the idea that everyone benefits when workers leave their home country to find employment abroad. The export of labor is now an integral aspect of the conventional export strategy for economic growth (Ball, 1997). This objective is more pressing than ever in light of labor migration's significant effects on a nation's economic development and progress in recent decades. Calzado (2007) argues that OFWs should be seen as contributors to development rather than passive recipients of it.

Some of the factors that have prompted people to leave the Philippines include a lack of economic opportunity at home, the promise of higher wages in a different country, and the growth of international demand for services (Calzado, 2007). After failing to create jobs for its highly educated workforce at home, the Philippine government 1974 shifted its emphasis to the export of its workers by establishing an intricate system to facilitate employment abroad. The government of the Philippines established agencies to verify the credentials of migrant workers before they were sent abroad and established a system of consular offices in countries where Filipino migrants settled to provide assistance (Ruiz, 2014). The Philippines, once considered one of Asia's prospective industrialized countries, has gone from having the region's most promising economy in the 1950s to having a failing economy that relies on remittances from its migrant workers. The vast number of Filipino migrant workers around the world made the Philippines the leading exporter of organized labor worldwide, it makes it apparent that this industry is the most successful "global enterprise" in terms of labor. The government of the Philippines has long prioritized the exportation of its workforce, going so far as to establish a complex infrastructure to facilitate expatriate work. There are government agencies in charge of ensuring the safety of Filipinos working abroad, such as the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA). Although the labor export policy has been criticized, it continues to be an important part of the Philippine economy and a major source of income for many Filipino families.

As of September 2021, it was expected that 1.83 million Filipinos, also known as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), had taken jobs outside of the Philippines. Approximately 96.4%, or 1.76 million, of the overall OFWs, are Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs) or those with active work contracts. Overall, the largest age category of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) was 25-34, which is indicative of the prevalence of laborers and unskilled workers across all age ranges (PSA, 2022). This indicates that many Filipinos are compelled to seek

employment elsewhere, often at lower pay, because of the dearth of opportunities and adequate wages in their home country.

Taiwan is one of the primary destinations is Taiwan, which has witnessed a substantial influx of Filipino migrant workers in recent years. This research delves into the intricacies of the Philippine government's active involvement in exporting labor to Taiwan, with a specific focus on the recruitment, selection, and preparation of low-skilled Filipino workers. As the demand for low-skilled labor continues to rise in Taiwan, understanding the underlying mechanisms of this labor flow has become a matter of growing interest. This study seeks to shed light on how the Philippine government plays a central role in shaping the migration industry, with an emphasis on the pivotal significance of state policies and institutions in facilitating this migration process. A critical aspect of this research is the examination of the preparatory measures undertaken by the Philippine government before the departure of these low-skilled workers to Taiwan. Special attention is given to the imparting of knowledge about Taiwanese culture, as this cultural orientation plays a vital role in ensuring the seamless integration of Filipino workers into Taiwanese society and the labor market.

To comprehensively grasp the experiences of Filipino low-skilled workers in Taiwan, narratives are collected through interviews about their pre-departure migration experiences were conducted in the prominent Zhongshan District. Additionally, the research draws upon the expertise of migration scholars and experts to gain a deeper understanding of the institutional frameworks that govern the labor export process. As the research explores diverse perspectives and interview data, it becomes evident that influential Philippine stakeholder groups actively participate in shaping international recruitment practices. This active involvement significantly contributes to the generation and brokering of highly competitive migrant workers.

This paper aims to illuminate the intricate interplay between migration institutions and influential stakeholders, unveiling how the collaborative efforts of various actors, both in the government and private sector, impact labor export policies and practices. Moreover, the research underscores the significance of institutional resources in shaping the experiences of low-skilled Filipino workers as they embark on their journey to Taiwan. This study adds to the existing literature by showing that the Philippines government goes beyond the rhetoric of "comparative advantage" (Rodriguez, 2010) to make sure that its workers are culturally prepared for their new homes. In addition to being "commodified" as "products of use and trade" along essentialist and stereotypical dimensions (Loveband, 2004), migrant workers are also expected to know the cultural "dos" and "don't" of the places where they will be working. To compete in the global market for migrant workers, the Philippines is putting money into making people who are better at understanding other cultures than other migrant-sending states.

Taiwan as a Destination for OFWs

Taiwan, just like the rest of the Newly Industrialized countries, experienced economic growth. After forty years of remarkable economic growth, the labor supply became inadequate around the mid-1980s. Over time, Taiwan's economy transformed from one with a labor surplus to one with a shortage, necessitating the importation of migrant workers from Southeast Asia. The government needed to take a clear stance on the labor issue and ensure a steady supply of workers. However, Taiwan lacked the necessary institutional support to effectively address these issues. It wasn't until 1991 that Taiwan began its official guest worker program, and

since then, the number of migrant workers in the country has increased dramatically. As of writing, the total number of migrant workers accounts for 728,081 (Taiwan Immigrants' Global News Network, 2023). Taiwan's government's policy is marketed as a response to the expanding need for housekeeping and care services among the aging population. As demand for care work and other low-skilled jobs rises in developed and newly industrialized countries, many women from less developed countries migrate into working in transnational low-skilled jobs. Many of these migrant domestic workers are from Southeast Asian nations, and they deal with issues like poor wages, long and tedious working days, and little legal protections. Despite these difficulties, many people keep looking for work in Taiwan because of the economic opportunities it offers.

As of 2023, there are a total of 955, 448 migrant workers in Taiwan, 730, 804 are employed in productive industries and 224, 644 in social welfare (Workforce Development Agency). After Indonesia, the Philippines is the next largest source of migrant workers for Taiwan. An overwhelming majority of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Taiwan are employed in manufacturing, household caregiving, and the fishing industry, all of which pay low wages and require a lot of manual labor (Sills & Chowthi, 2008).

The Philippines has been so successful in developing its labor-export industry that it is widely regarded as a model for countries wishing to do the same. This paper investigates the state's role in the preparation of low-skilled workers who are bound to Taiwan. I zero in on the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) since it is a requirement for all female migrants heading overseas to work as domestic workers to attend a PDOS with the POEA, a government agency, or an authorized NGO before they leave. The purpose of this paper is to offer my views on the mandatory Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar required by the state.

Research Methods

The primary site for the interviews I conducted is in Zhongshan district, where Filipinos gather during their break. I interviewed 10 female migrant workers, 3 were care workers and 7 were factory workers. The other set of data came from in-depth interviews with a government official working in MECO. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours in length. All the interviews with professors and migrant workers were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Some interviews with Filipina workers were conducted in public settings filled with noises and interruptions, for which I only took notes. I communicated with all Filipina workers in Filipino and translated into English by myself; the interviews with Professors were conducted in English. Readers should keep in mind that most employers actually speak limited or moderate English. The identities of the respondents are not revealed.

State's Role in the Migration Industry

The Philippines government has implemented a series of policies that promote the widespread contract of laborers abroad. This resulted from coordinated efforts in marketing and recruitment. The creation of the Labor Code (ILO, 1974) in 1974 was an expression of the need for greater control over the process of international migration and an awareness of the potential benefits to be gained through a policy of deliberate state promotion of overseas employment. As Battistella (2015) points out, nations are working to ensure that their migrant workers have an advantage over those from other migrant-sending countries. The states in the sending regions understand that the demand for female migrants is more stable in the market than that for male migrants. For this reason, countries like the Philippines ought to promote

the export of female migrants. To better meet the growing international demand for temporary workers, the Labor Code was enacted in 1974 to serve as a legislative, political, administrative, and policy focal point for the labor-export sector.

The Labor Code mandated that the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB) and later its successor, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA): (a) actively recruit land-based workers for overseas employment, market, and establish goodwill with foreign employers; (b) generate foreign exchange from the earnings of Filipino employers under the program; and (c) promote the employment of Filipinos under government to government (G2G) arrangements. This paper strongly advocates for the globalization of certain sectors of the Philippine labor force and the need to legitimize this program domestically by mandating the protection of workers' rights. The Labor Code established the many roles that state agencies must play in the implementation of this charter, including encouraging private and public sector recruitment of labor, marketing Filipino workers internationally, generating foreign exchange through worker export, safeguarding worker welfare, and so on. Asis (1995) notes, the government has a significant role in encouraging and enabling Filipinos, especially labor migrants, to leave the country.

Feminist scholars have claimed that migration is skewed by gender and to the state's advantage. According to Rodriguez (2017), the state shapes its narratives in two ways to maintain the gendered migration: the first is through the discourse of "migrant heroism," which portrays overseas workers—especially women migrants—as self-sacrificing, nationalist martyrs to normalize migration and migrants' faithful remittance-sending to the homeland. The second is that it promotes ideas about Filipinas as ideal workers because of their unique racialized and gendered traits.

According to Rodriguez (2002), "the state has attempted to incorporate Filipino migrant contract workers as part, not only of the national imaginary but, of the polity by providing them with special kinds of entitlements even when they are abroad through the discourse of 'new national heroism.'" Rodriguez argues that the Philippine government's efforts to reintegrate Filipinos working abroad into national identity serve primarily as "a state strategy for income generation" and "a means by which the Philippine state disciplines migrants as cheap, flexible labor for the global economy." She goes on to say that the export of Filipino labor is a precarious state project because migrants contest how they have become exported and commodified, despite the rhetorical condition of wanting to protect them abroad.

Pre-departure Seminar Experiences

Before departing the Philippines, the state provides its migrant domestic workers with orientation classes where they learn about the state's ideal working circumstances (Parreñas, 2021). The pre-departure orientation seminar, which has been mandatory for all migrant workers since 1983, is a one-day, country-specific seminar that covers cultural and social norms in countries of destination and provides advice on how to maximize the opportunities afforded by migration. According to the OWWA website, the orientation is "a one-day mandatory orientation to OFWs [Overseas Filipino Workers] consisting of modules on employment contract, country of destination, stages of the OFWs' life abroad, health and safety, financial literacy, travel tips, and airport procedures, and government programs and services." Before their overseas deployment, all workers must attend this. The Philippines' migration system is coordinated by the government to produce employees who match the needs of other countries. PDOS is one of the methods it uses to achieve this goal. All

emigrants and OFWs must enroll in PDOS courses. Their stated goal is to assist migrants in adjusting to their country of destination. Migrants attend the appropriate session, which is determined by factors such as the type of immigrant they are, the talents they bring with them, and the country from which they originally hail. Various Philippine government agencies that deal with migration regularly host PDOS seminars.

The Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) is a form of intervention by the Philippine state in migration. The Philippine government, through agencies like the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), mandates the PDOS program for migrant workers bound for Taiwan. This regulation ensures that workers are adequately prepared and informed before they leave the country.

The PDOS program serves as a platform for the Philippine government to provide vital information to migrant workers. It offers guidance on various aspects of overseas employment, including legal requirements, labor rights, employment contracts, cultural orientation, and personal safety. By disseminating this information, the government aims to protect and safeguard the welfare of its citizens working abroad.

PDOS empowers migrant workers by equipping them with knowledge about their rights, responsibilities, and available support systems. This intervention is crucial in protecting workers from potential exploitation, abuse, or violations of their rights. By providing information on avenues for reporting abuse, seeking assistance, and accessing support services, the government aims to ensure the well-being and protection of its citizens.

As an intervention, the PDOS program allows the Philippine government to assess the effectiveness of its efforts in preparing and supporting migrant workers. It provides an opportunity to gather feedback, identify areas for improvement, and update the content of the orientation based on evolving needs and challenges faced by migrant workers.

All migrant workers bound for Taiwan must attend the seminar. The purpose of PDOS is to prepare Filipino migrant workers for employment in Taiwan and to provide them with essential information about their rights, responsibilities, and the potential challenges they may encounter while working abroad. During the PDOS, participants receive guidance on various topics such as employment contracts, labor rights, cultural orientation, language training, financial management, and personal safety. They also learn about the laws and regulations of Taiwan, as well as the services and assistance available to them through the Philippine government. An employee at MECO stated that the length of PDOS seminars can vary anywhere from half a day to an entire day. Those in charge of educating the migrant workforce on matters of immigration law, citizenship, and resettlement do an excellent job. Polanco (2015) states that her study shows there are similarities between different points of view. In her research, she attended 6 PDOS seminars. During the seminars, there were representatives from banks who demonstrated how simple it is to send money through their institutions, and the remaining sessions directed employees to additional resources. Migrant workers were also reminded that they must complete government requirements including medical tests and PDOS sessions before they can be released for travel. A considerable amount of time was spent examining travel laws, such as acceptable luggage size and forbidden things to travel with. The general content of orientations was standardized, and this included the responsibilities that Filipino migrants have to their families and country. Domestic workers are required to attend a lecture on stress management and a course on

language and cultural familiarization in addition to the mandatory pre-departure orientation program.

They say PDOS has become "commercialized," which is a negative thing, according to some migrant workers. An excessive number of commercials (from banks, pre-need plans, and insurance providers) have been introduced into the seminar. Moreover, the orientations' treatment of cultural differences varied. Additionally, she notes that emigrants heading to Japan had a separate meeting than those going to the Middle East. The emphasis in Japan was on encouraging migrants to respect hierarchies and Japanese manners and practices, whereas in the Middle East, the orientation was more broadly characterized as preparing migrants to navigate a landscape fraught with potential dangers, including rampant sexual assaults and other perils. When taken as a whole, the PDOS sessions demonstrate how the Filipino migratory apparatus prepares various cultural subjects for export to other locations. A key part of the Philippines' effort to prepare subjects with a "comparative advantage" for export is providing them with the information they need to adapt to the values and conventions of recipient contexts.

Migrant workers are disciplined in these seminars so that they can compete with other workers in the same industry. The state hopes that this will give them the ability to bargain with their employers for improved working conditions. The Philippine government defines a competitive worker as one who is willing to follow orders. As a result, it conducts pre-departure orientation sessions to train domestic workers to be 'subservient servants.' The government, meanwhile, urges them to stand up to bosses who abuse their subservience (Parreñas, 2021). According to migrant workers, the PDOS sessions emphasize that their main purpose in seeking overseas employment is to send remittances back to their families. This indicates that the primary goal of PDOS is not to educate overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) about their rights but rather to mold them into ideal migrant subjects who, as Polanco (2015) explains, are conditioned to become "enthusiastic and obedient workers."

Countries with neocolonial labor brokerage systems, such as the Philippines, view women as the "preferred migrant citizen subjects" (Rodriguez, 2010). This is because women are considered to be more responsible and, consequently, are anticipated to regularly remit their earnings. Consequently, PDOS reinforce gender-specific expectations. In the 10 Commandments of PDOS issued by OWW, the agency listed the do's and don'ts that migrant workers should abide. Some of the commandments are: "do learn and understand the host country's language; do respect the culture, traditions and practices of the host country; Don't live beyond your means. Avoid falling into a debt trap. Avoid guaranteeing debt; and don't attempt to run-away from your employer, try to settle any disagreement." These commandments encourage migrant workers to live up as the "ideal" migrant subjects. The 10 Commandments of PDOS also includes more information which includes reminders in living in Taiwan. Some of the reminders for migrant workers are as follows: "respect Taiwanese tradition, customs, practices and strictly observe all laws and regulations' learn a few words of Chinese; A nod of the head or a slight bow is considered polite for the first meeting, and handshakes are generally only for males who are friends; and if a Taiwanese gives you a compliment, it is polite to deny graciously." One of the migrant workers mentioned that during the PDOS seminar, the cultural adaptation module highlighted the renowned reputation of OFWs for their strong work ethic and respectful demeanor. This observation is consistent with the guidelines, Do's and Don'ts, and reminders provided during the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars (PDOS). Another interviewee recalled that during the seminar she attended, the lecturer actively encouraged OFWs to prioritize respect and

emphasized the importance of embodying Filipino attributes like "*pakikisama*," which refers to the ability to get along harmoniously with others. This conveyed the message that it was the responsibility of OFWs to foster and maintain a cordial employment relationship with their employers. Another interviewee shared that during the seminar, the significance of maintaining a "Maria Clara" demeanor when interacting with employers throughout the OFWs' time abroad was highlighted. To be "Maria Clara" meant to exhibit modesty and a reserved disposition. Considering Taiwan's conservative culture, it was advised for OFWs to conduct themselves in a way that avoided drawing unnecessary attention to themselves. Embodying the "Maria Clara" attitude also entailed the need to deflect male attention, particularly from male employers. According to another interviewee, the seminar lecturer emphasized the significant sacrifices made by these migrant mothers. They were reminded of their essential role as mothers and encouraged to persevere, driven by the desire to secure a brighter future for their children. The lecturer highlighted the importance of ensuring their children have access to quality education and improved living conditions, reinforcing their dedication to nurturing a better life for their loved ones. The research of Tanyag (2019) examines the Philippine government's labor migration strategy, which strategically assigns gender roles by associating Filipino identity predominantly with service and care work. Simultaneously, the government endeavors to instill a perception among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) of being "innate mothers." This research aligns with the gendered dynamics with the narrations of the migrant workers interviewed. In addition, Lim and Oishi (1996) note that "the promotion of labor exports and the protection of migrant workers could be conflicting or contradictory," with the potential for these conflicts to be especially relevant for female migrants.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, an increasing number of women working in low- and middle-skilled jobs in the Philippines have migrated to work abroad.

This research delves into the intricate dynamics of the Philippine government's pivotal role in labor export to Taiwan, with particular emphasis on low-skilled Filipino migrant workers. Through interviews conducted in the bustling Zhongshan District and insights from migration experts, this study underscores the central influence of state policies and institutions in shaping the migration industry.

An essential aspect of this research is the exploration of the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) as a critical state intervention in migration. Functioning as an empowering platform, PDOS equips migrant workers with vital knowledge about their rights, responsibilities, and the cultural norms of their destination country, and positioning them as competitive and compliant participants within the broader migration institutions. This goes beyond viewing these workers merely as laborers but as "ideal migrant citizen subjects," intrinsically associated with their identities as providers of service and care. Throughout the investigation, I have underscored the interconnectedness of state policies, influential stakeholders, and migration institutions, all of which collectively shape the labor export industry. By delving into this interconnected web, I have deepened our understanding of how these migration institutions facilitate the generation and brokering of highly competitive migrant workers.

In conclusion, this research unequivocally confirms the vital role of the Philippine government in the migration of low-skilled workers to Taiwan. The dynamic interplay

between state policies, institutions, and influential stakeholders significantly influences the experiences and integration of Filipino migrant workers within the host country. Our findings contribute invaluable insights to the wider discourse on international labor mobility, urging policymakers to critically consider the optimization of labor export practices and the promotion of the welfare of migrant workers.

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