



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Back Home but Broken: Lived Realities of Distressed Overseas Filipino Workers in Western Philippines

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study investigates the lived realities of distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who have returned to Western Visayas, Philippines. Employing a narrative phenomenological approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with eight purposively selected participants who shared their personal migration journeys, challenges abroad, and reintegration struggles. Through thematic analysis using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, eight major themes emerged: (1) Shattered Dreams and Disillusionment, reflecting the gap between migrants' expectations and their harsh lived experiences; (2) Psychological and Emotional Trauma, revealing deep mental health impacts caused by abuse, isolation, and overwork; (3) Cycles of Debt and Economic Insecurity, highlighting persistent financial burdens and unsustainable migration-driven debts; (4) Social Reintegration Struggles, illustrating the emotional and relational difficulties faced upon return; (5) Broken Bodies, Broken Futures, addressing the physical consequences of exploitative labor and unsafe work conditions; (6) Invisible Wounds: Gendered Experiences of Abuse, uncovering how migrant vulnerabilities are shaped by gendered violence and discrimination; (7) Institutional Policy Gaps, exposing inadequacies in support systems and (8) Resilience and Determination, showing their unwavering strength in facing hardships their persistent efforts to rebuild their lives despite the emotional, financial, and social challenges they encountered upon returning to Western Visayas. The findings underscore the emotional, physical, and structural toll of overseas labor migration. The study calls for a reimagining of reintegration policies and migrant support structures. It recommends that the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), in partnership with OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare and Administration), DOLE (Department of Labor and Employment), and local government units, implement comprehensive, gender-responsive, and trauma-informed programs. Amplifying the voices of distressed OFWs is essential to forging a more inclusive and compassionate framework for migration governance.

INTRODUCTION

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are essential to the Philippine economy, contributing billions of dollars in remittances each year, which serve as a vital source of national income (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022). Their impact extends beyond economic factors, as OFWs also shape the social and cultural landscapes of both their host countries and their home communities. The narratives surrounding their migration often highlight themes of opportunity and sacrifice, focusing on the advantages gained by their families and the nation as a whole.

However, this dominant narrative tends to overlook the intricate and often challenging realities that many OFWs encounter, especially those who return to the Philippines under adverse conditions. A significant number of these workers face involuntary displacement due to various

factors, including global economic downturns, political instability, labor exploitation, or personal crises such as job loss (Katigbak & Roldan, 2021; Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, 2022). These circumstances can result in financial instability, emotional distress, and strained relationships, complicating the process of reintegration into their home communities.

Despite an increasing awareness of these issues, much of the existing research primarily concentrates on the economic effects of labor migration and the broader implications for families and communities left behind (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020; Zarsuelo, 2018; Fatima et al., 2025). There is a noticeable lack of qualitative studies that delve into the lived experiences, emotional challenges, and coping strategies of distressed and displaced OFWs, particularly those from specific areas like Western Visayas. This gap in the literature restricts our understanding of the personal and localized aspects of migrant return and reintegration.

To fill this research void, the current study aims to investigate the lived experiences of distressed OFWs who have returned to the Western Visayas region. By documenting their stories and examining the difficulties they encounter upon their return, this study aspires to illuminate the socio-emotional and economic aspects of reintegration. Additionally, it seeks to understand the strategies these individuals adopt to cope with displacement and rebuild their lives. Through a qualitative approach, this research contributes to the broader conversation on labor migration, mental health, and policy development, providing insights that can help create more effective and region-specific support systems (Silva et al., 2020; Zarsuelo, 2018; Moghavvemi et al., 2025).

Statement of the Problem

This research investigated the subjective realities of distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Western Visayas. In particular, it addressed the following questions:

1. What were the lived experiences of distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Western Visayas?
2. How did distressed OFWs in Western Visayas articulate the essence of their lived experiences?

Theoretical Framework

Anchored in a multi-theoretical framework that integrated Transnationalism, Reintegration Theory, and Stress and Coping Theory were the bases to examine the complex realities of distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who returned to Western Philippines.

Transnationalism provided a foundational lens for understanding the lived experiences of OFWs. This perspective highlighted the simultaneous embeddedness of migrants in both their host and home countries (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). It acknowledged that migration was not a linear process of departure and return but a continuous negotiation of identity, belonging, and obligation across borders. For distressed OFWs, returning home did not signal the end of their transnational engagement but rather a shift in the challenges they faced such as ruptured expectations, failed migration projects, and the psychological toll of reintegration.

In order to captivate the process of return and reentry into the home society, the study integrated Reintegration Theory (Cassarino, 2004), which framed reintegration as a multidimensional process encompassing economic, social, and psychosocial domains. Reintegration was influenced by both structural factors (e.g., availability of jobs, community support) and individual agency (e.g., coping strategies, preparedness for return). This theory was particularly relevant in analyzing how distressed OFWs, many of whom returned due to crisis or involuntary displacement, navigated the challenges of rebuilding their lives in an often-unprepared social environment.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory was also employed to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of the OFWs' return. This theory conceptualized stress as a result of the individual's appraisal of their situation and their perceived ability to cope. Through this lens, the study investigated the coping mechanisms employed by distressed returnees in response to their experiences of trauma, financial insecurity, and social reintegration struggles.

Through the integration of these theoretical perspectives, the study sought to provide a nuanced and holistic understanding of the return migration process. It acknowledged the structural,

relational, and emotional challenges faced by distressed OFWs and emphasized the interplay between global migration systems and local reintegration realities. This theoretical grounding also informed the analysis of policy gaps and the development of more responsive interventions for returning migrants.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, which was ideal for capturing the personal stories and meanings ascribed to experiences by distressed OFWs. Participants were selected using purposive sampling from various provinces across Western Visayas.

Participants

The study selected twelve participants from diverse provinces across Western Visayas (Region VI), all of whom met the established inclusion and exclusion parameters. To safeguard the participants' identities, pseudonyms were utilized to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure that the study focused on the target population of distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who had returned home to Western Visayas and were recognized by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), it was essential to establish clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. The OFWs had to be officially recognized as distressed by OWWA, which was verified through OWWA records or documentation. Furthermore, they had to reside in the Western Visayas region, as confirmed through residential addresses or local government unit (LGU) records. The distress experienced by these OFWs included economic difficulties, legal issues, medical problems, or psychosocial challenges. To ensure the relevance and timeliness of the data, the study focused on OFWs who had returned to the Philippines within the past five years. Eligible participants were required to be at least 25 years of age and to have accumulated a minimum of six months of overseas employment experience. Moreover, participation was voluntary, and participants were expected to demonstrate willingness to engage in comprehensive, in-depth interviews. OFWs residing outside Western Visayas and those not recognized by OWWA Region VI were excluded from the study. These criteria ensured that the study was targeted and relevant, providing valuable insights into the experiences of distressed OFWs in Western Visayas.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of OFW Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Number of Years as OFW	Countries Worked Before Returning to the Philippines	Province of Origin
Maria	45	4 years	Saudi Arabia, Qatar	Iloilo
Jun	38	7 years	United Arab Emirates	Antique
Liza	41	6 years	Taiwan, Hong Kong	Aklan
Roberto	50	8 years	Kuwait, Saudi Arabia	Antique
Ana	36	6 years	Taiwan, Kuwait	Capiz
Noel	43	5 years	Malaysia, Qatar	Guimaras
Grace	39	7 years	Hong Kong, Qatar	Iloilo
Carla	47	8 years	Saudi Arabia, Kuwait	Guimaras
Marites	34	2 years	United Arab Emirates	Aklan
Alisah	52	5 years	Singapore, Hongkong	Antique
Roselyn	40	4 years	Singapore, Kuwait	Capiz
Dennis	44	5 years	Qatar, Kuwait	Guimaras

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection for this qualitative study was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who had returned to their home provinces in Western Visayas. To ensure participant comfort and openness, interviews were scheduled at times and locations most convenient and safe for each participant. This flexible approach respected the emotional and psychological states of individuals who might still have been

processing traumatic or distressing experiences. Prior to data collection, a formal letter of permission was submitted to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) Regional Office VI to seek approval for conducting the interviews and to coordinate with relevant personnel for participant identification and logistical support.

In alignment with ethical standards for qualitative research, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Consent forms were signed prior to the start of interviews. Each session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in two sessions to allow participants ample time to reflect and share their experiences without fatigue. With the participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription and data analysis. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details that might enrich the interpretation of the narratives.

Research Instruments

The primary research instrument in this study was a two-part data collection tool specifically designed to explore the "lived realities" of distressed OFWs. Part I of the instrument consisted of a brief demographic questionnaire, which gathered background information such as age, gender, country of deployment, length of stay abroad, type of employment, reason for repatriation, and current living situation. This data helped contextualize the individual experiences of participants and identified patterns or factors that influenced their reintegration journey.

Part II was a semi-structured interview guide developed to elicit in-depth insights into the personal, emotional, and social experiences of distressed OFWs upon their return to the Philippines. The guide included open-ended questions focused on key areas such as their migration journey, working conditions abroad, the circumstances of their return, psychological and emotional well-being, challenges faced upon reintegration, coping strategies, and sources of support. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in the conversation, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into relevant issues that emerged organically during the interview. This qualitative instrument was designed to capture the rich, nuanced narratives that reflected the complex realities of returning OFWs.

Data Analyses

In this study, the Colaizzi method of phenomenological data analysis was employed to explore the lived experiences of distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) from Western Visayas. Colaizzi's method was a systematic approach designed to uncover the essence of participants' experiences (Colaizzi, 1978). The first step involved familiarization with the data, where the researcher immersed themselves in the transcripts, reading and re-reading them to fully understand the content. Next, the researcher identified significant statements from the data that were directly related to the phenomenon under study, which in this case was the distress and challenges experienced by returnee OFWs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the third step, these significant statements were formulated into meanings, where the researcher interpreted and condensed each statement to capture its essence. The fourth step involved organizing these meanings into clusters of themes, grouping similar meanings to form overarching categories that reflected the common patterns across participants' experiences. These themes served as a foundation for understanding the complex lived realities of the returnees.

Following the theme development, the fifth step was to develop an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, synthesizing all the significant statements and themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. The sixth step focused on identifying the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, where the researcher extracted the essence of the experience of what was universally true for all participants (Colaizzi, 1978). The seventh step involved member checking, where the researcher presented the findings to the participants for validation and feedback to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the eighth step was to prepare a final report, summarizing the essential structure of the lived experiences and discussing the implications of the findings in relation to the broader migration literature. By following Colaizzi's eight-step method, this study aimed to provide a

nuanced and comprehensive account of the emotional, psychological, and socio-economic challenges faced by distressed OFWs upon their return home.

This study adopted the data saturation model proposed by Yang et al. (2022), which presented a nuanced and systematic framework for understanding and implementing saturation in qualitative research. The model emphasized the importance of clear conceptualization, practical strategies for monitoring saturation during the data collection process, and transparent reporting to enhance the overall rigor, validity, and credibility of qualitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study. A formal request was submitted to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) Regional Office VI to obtain permission for conducting interviews with the participants. Prior to participation, participants were provided with an informed consent form, ensuring they fully understood the purpose and procedures of the study. The confidentiality and privacy of participants were paramount, with specific measures put in place to protect their identities and personal information. Pseudonyms were employed to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' identities. These precautions created a safe and respectful environment, encouraging participants to share their experiences openly and honestly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The lived experiences of distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Western Visayas were categorized into several key themes, each highlighting distinct challenges they encountered and the coping mechanisms they employed upon their return home

Table 2. Lived Experiences of Distressed OFWs

Theme	Description	Transcripts
1. Shattered Dreams and Disillusionment	OFWs return home disillusioned after unmet goals and failed expectations from working abroad.	<p><i>"I thought going abroad would save us, but I came back with nothing, just regrets."</i></p> <p><i>"Life overseas was not as easy as I imagined; I had to endure loneliness and exhaustion just to provide for my family."</i></p> <p><i>"Coming home made me realize that true success is not only about earning money but about finding peace and stability with my loved ones."</i></p>
2. Psychological and Emotional Trauma	Participants describe mental health struggles caused by their distressing experiences overseas.	<p><i>"I cry every night. I can't sleep. I feel like I lost myself out there."</i></p> <p><i>"Even after coming home, I still feel the weight of everything I went through abroad, it's like I left a part of myself behind."</i></p>
3. Cycles of Debt and Economic Insecurity	Many face ongoing financial instability due to debt incurred before and after migration.	<p><i>"I'm still paying the loan I took to leave. Now I have no job to repay it."</i></p> <p><i>"Most of what I earned abroad went to paying debts; I hardly saved anything for myself or my family."</i></p> <p><i>"I came home hoping for a fresh start, but instead, I'm buried in the same financial problems I tried to escape."</i></p>
4. Social Reintegration Struggles	Repatriated OFWs often feel alienated or judged by their families and communities.	<p><i>"People think I failed. They avoid me now. Even my relatives look down on me."</i></p> <p><i>"I thought coming home would bring me comfort, but I struggled to adjust; people expected me to have money and success, not realizing how difficult it was to start over."</i></p>
5. Broken Bodies,	Physical ailments or injuries acquired	<i>"My back pain never goes away. I can't</i>

Broken Futures	abroad have long-term impacts on health and livelihood.	<i>work anymore like I used to.</i> <i>"I injured my back while working overseas, and until now, the pain makes it hard for me to find a stable job. My body came home, but it's no longer the same."</i>
6. Invisible Wounds: Gendered Experiences of Abuse	Female participants often recount abuse and exploitation shaped by gender roles and vulnerability.	<i>"My employer touched me in ways he shouldn't have. I was scared to speak up."</i> <i>"As a woman working abroad, I was treated unfairly, overworked, underpaid, and sometimes disrespected. I endured it in silence because I needed the job and had no one to turn to."</i>
7. Institutional Policy Gaps	Discontent with the lack of support from government agencies and recruiters.	<i>"I feel like the government should give more protection to OFWs. It is frustrating to be working abroad due to lack of policies that ensures our safety."</i> <i>"When I encountered problems abroad, I reached out for help, but the response from the agency and the government was very slow. It felt like we were abandoned the moment we left the country."</i>
8. Resilience and Determination	Despite experiencing financial hardships, emotional pain, and the disappointment of failed migration, participants demonstrated strength and perseverance. Their stories reflect coping mechanisms, hope for recovery, and determination to rebuild their lives back home.	<i>"Even if I felt hopeless, I needed to stand up again for my children."</i> <i>"What I went through abroad was painful, but I will not give up. I need to start again."</i> <i>"Going abroad may no longer be an option, but I will find a way to survive here at home."</i>

1. Shattered Dreams and Disillusionment

Many of the participants mentioned that returning home was burdened by broken promises and unfulfilled expectations. What they envisioned as a path to economic mobility and family upliftment often turns into a harsh reality marked by exploitation, underpayment, and abuse abroad many of which go unreported due to fear or lack of recourse. These adverse experiences challenge their personal dignity and professional aspirations, often leaving them disheartened.

Upon repatriation, they said they experienced limited employment opportunities and poorly structured reintegration programs, further compounding their distress. In a study by Lasin et al. (2023) OFWs instead of being welcomed by a system equipped to support their transition, they encounter bureaucratic delays and inadequate assistance, leading to a sense of abandonment and failure (Lasin et al., 2023).

2. Psychological and Emotional Trauma

Basing from the narratives of the OFWs from Western Visayas. The emotional and psychological burden carried by repatriated OFWs is substantial. Many suffer from mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder due to the isolation, abuse, or extreme work conditions they endured abroad. The impact is often silent yet profound, eroding their well-being and self-worth upon their return.

Despite the growing awareness of mental health issues, stigma within Filipino culture continues to prevent many OFWs from seeking help. This cultural barrier, coupled with limited access to mental health services in rural areas, results in unaddressed trauma that worsens over time, further hindering successful reintegration (Ramirez, 2024; Marzan, 2022).

3. Cycles of Debt and Economic Insecurity

As what the participants emphasized, economic instability is also defining feature of the post-migration experience for many OFWs. Prior to departure, many incur debts to cover placement fees, training, and travel expenses. Upon return—often abruptly due to job loss, abuse, or global

crises, they find themselves with little to no savings, unpaid wages, and mounting financial obligations.

According to data from the Department of Migration (DMW), a staggering 83% of returnees remained unemployed three months after repatriation, underscoring the economic vulnerability of this group. Without consistent income or access to adequate financial support, many OFWs and their families are pushed further into cycles of poverty (Lasin et al., 2023).

4. Social Reintegration Struggles

The social reintegration process for OFWs is frequently fraught with difficulty. After years abroad, returnees often feel disconnected from their communities, misunderstood by family, or judged for returning without visible success. This emotional dissonance makes reintegration a lonely and confusing experience.

Moreover, studies have shown that returning OFWs often struggle to find work that matches their skills and experiences, making their transition back into Philippine society even more challenging. The lack of adequate reintegration policies and community support systems leaves many returnees feeling alienated and economically stagnant (Asian Development Bank, as cited in Lasin et al., 2023).

5. Broken Bodies, Broken Futures

As narrated by the participants, the physical consequences of overseas work often follow OFWs home. Many return suffering from chronic illnesses, untreated injuries, or work-related disabilities that significantly limit their productivity and future employment prospects. These health issues are not only physical burdens but also psychological stressors that affect their overall quality of life.

Unfortunately, access to affordable and comprehensive healthcare remains limited, especially in provincial areas. With inadequate rehabilitation services and minimal health insurance coverage, distressed OFWs are often left to manage their conditions alone, leading to long-term suffering and further marginalization. (Ramirez, 2024)

6. Invisible Wounds: Gendered Experiences of Abuse

In particular, female OFWs participants stated that those working as domestic helpers, are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence, exploitation, and harassment. These women frequently work in isolated environments where abuse goes undetected and unpunished. Upon returning home, they carry the invisible wounds of their experiences many of which remain unspoken due to fear, stigma, or trauma.

While some women report these violations, many do not, leading to a significant underrepresentation of abuse cases in reintegration data. Additionally, the government's reintegration programs often lack a gender-sensitive lens, failing to address the specific psychosocial and legal support needs of female returnees (Ramirez, 2024).

7. Institutional Policy Gaps

Several participants often express deep disappointment in the very institutions meant to protect them. From pre-departure to repatriation, many encounter inefficient, fragmented systems that fail to offer adequate legal, financial, or emotional support. Upon returning, promises of livelihood assistance, skills training, or healthcare are frequently delayed or never materialize.

A study by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation revealed that these gaps in policy and program implementation remain persistent issues, with poor data coordination and limited funding making reintegration the "weakest link" in the country's migration framework. As a result, many OFWs feel abandoned and betrayed by the institutions they once trusted (Ramirez, 2024).

8. Resilience and Determination

Despite the many adversities these participants face, OFWs continue to show inspiring levels of resilience. Many find strengths in community networks, grassroots initiatives, and mutual aid groups formed by fellow returnees. These support systems offer not only emotional comfort but also tangible resources for recovery, such as job referrals and legal assistance.

Most of the participants used their experiences to advocate for labor rights and reintegration reforms. Their determination demonstrates the potential for transformation through solidarity, and highlights the role of collective action in achieving justice and long-term reintegration (Marzan, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The lived realities of distressed OFWs returning to the Western Philippines reflect a profound cycle of shattered dreams, psychological trauma, and ongoing economic instability. The themes uncovered in this study highlight the pervasive impact of broken promises, financial loss, and the emotional toll of abuse and isolation abroad. These workers often face significant challenges in reintegrating into their communities, where stigma and judgment exacerbate their feelings of failure. Furthermore, the physical and mental scars, including work-related injuries and emotional trauma, remain long after their return, compounded by the burdens of debt and unemployment. Gendered experiences, particularly for female OFWs, reveal the additional vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Institutional betrayal and gaps in policy further amplify their sense of helplessness, as they struggle to find support in the aftermath of migration. Yet, amid these adversities, some demonstrate remarkable resilience, seeking to rebuild their lives through community support and alternative livelihoods. This study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms and societal support to address the multifaceted challenges faced by returning OFWs.

Recommendations

In order to mitigate the challenges faced by distressed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), it is recommended that the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) implement a series of practical and feasible interventions. First, DMW and OWWA should establish a comprehensive post-return support program that includes mental health services, legal aid, and financial counseling to help OFWs cope with emotional trauma, legal challenges, and economic difficulties. A dedicated reintegration office could assist returnees in finding stable employment or alternative livelihoods, while partnerships with local businesses could create job opportunities for those facing underemployment. Furthermore, both agencies should strengthen efforts to raise awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding "failed" migration through public campaigns that focus on the complexity of the migration experience. To address gender-specific issues, targeted support services for female OFWs who have experienced abuse should be prioritized, including safe spaces, counseling, and advocacy. The DMW and OWWA should also streamline the process for accessing healthcare for returning workers, ensuring they receive timely treatment for both physical and psychological issues, particularly those with work-related injuries or chronic illnesses. Lastly, enhancing collaboration with recruitment agencies and employers to ensure that contracts are clear, fair, and legally binding will help reduce exploitation and prevent future cycles of debt. By coordinating these efforts, DMW and OWWA can provide a more holistic and sustainable support system for OFWs, facilitating their successful reintegration and improving their quality of life upon return.

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