

GFEMS Research and Programming: Strengthening Systems for Filipino Migration

This brief highlights learnings from GFEMS-funded activities targeted towards Filipino migrant workers, with a particular emphasis on female overseas domestic workers, between 2018 and 2022. Led by research and implementing partners Two Six Technologies (TST), Blas F. Ople Policy Center (Ople Center), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Fair Employment Foundation (FEF), these efforts target issues across the labor migration system, from understanding key vulnerabilities of workers, to tackling unethical recruitment industry practices, to boosting the capacity of government and other stakeholders to put in place policies and systems that ensure safe migration and employment experiences. Findings from this research and programming help to (1) understand and address vulnerabilities for Filipino domestic workers; (2) equip government and other stakeholders to investigate and tackle labor abuses; and (3) support a shift towards ethical recruitment practices in the sector.

Context

Migrant workers are critical contributors to the global economy, and the Philippines is a leading country of origin for migrant labor. Each year, over 2 million Filipinos work overseas – nearly one million of whom are hired into so-called “elementary occupations”, including construction, transportation, and domestic work. These lower-skilled migrant workers, and female domestic workers in particular, are populations highly vulnerable to exploitation – often subject to unethical recruitment mechanisms, deceptive hiring practices, and forced labor conditions after arriving in the receiving country.

While the Philippines has relatively strong laws and regulations to protect Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and govern the local recruitment industry, unethical actors exploit remaining gaps. OFWs from disadvantaged communities often lack knowledge of and access to safe livelihood and migration options. Notably, OFWs from the Bangsamoro Autonomous

Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), a region characterized by poverty, instability, and a lack of sufficient education and livelihood opportunities, are particularly vulnerable to trafficking¹. They often turn to unlicensed agents who are more likely to assert deceptive practices or charge exorbitant fees. Further, the transience of migrant labor and the global footprint of the OFW population pose challenges for authorities charged with enforcing laws or responding to incidents of exploitation in destination countries. Ethical recruitment channels remain out of reach for the majority of OFWs. There is a lack of an enabling legislative framework to incentivise recruitment agencies to practice ethical recruitment, and employers often do not have the tools and leverage necessary to drive change within the recruitment industry.

This situation has been exacerbated by the economic, public health, and other impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have caused uncertainty, unemployment, and large-scale

1. US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, 2019.

repatriation among migrant workers globally, exposing OFWs and their families to new risks and hardships. A 2020 study conducted with over 6,000 OFWs found that over 75% of

respondents in GCC countries reported facing new financial hardships in the first few months of the pandemic, with nearly 20% reporting a loss of employment.

Intervention Models

Establish a cohesive inter-agency task force and victim case management system focused on forced labor among OFWs, led by Blas F. Ople Policy Center

In partnership with the Philippines Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) through the Department of Justice, the Ople Center spearheaded the creation of the country's first dedicated labor trafficking task force in 2019. During the project period, the task force grew to represent 19 enforcement and welfare agencies; assisted over 2,300 distressed overseas Filipino domestic workers; investigated trafficking cases involving 237 domestic workers; and filed 10 criminal and 36 civil cases against perpetrators. In 2020, the Ople Center worked with the regional government in BARMM to establish a similar task force for the region.

Crucially, the Ople Center also developed an Integrated Case Management System (ICMS) to align task force members on their respective roles and responsibilities and to ensure a coordinated approach to tracking labor trafficking cases.

Since 2020:

- ▶ **1,665 cases have been encoded** into ICMS;
- ▶ **6 key agencies actively use the system to collaborate** on prosecution efforts as well as to monitor referral and service provision for victims;
- ▶ **182 Task Force personnel, including prosecutors and service providers have been trained**, on the effective investigation and handling of labor trafficking cases; and
- ▶ **864 repatriated OFWs have been supported** with access to aftercare and reintegration services, including psycho-social counseling, vocational and livelihoods training, and support with enterprise development.

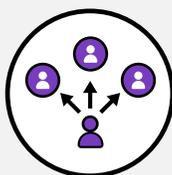
Mainstreaming ethical recruitment principles and practices, led by IOM and Ople Center

Informed by a mapping of prevailing recruitment policies, processes, and practices in the Philippines-GCC² corridor, IOM developed contextualized training modules aimed at enhancing awareness and understanding

of ethical recruitment among key government and civil society actors. The project trained 74 of these stakeholders on ethical recruitment principles and their applicability to the Philippines context. IOM and Ople Center, through



The Ople Center spearheaded the creation of **THE COUNTRY'S FIRST DEDICATED LABOR TASK FORCE** in 2019.



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2. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a regional union that consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

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consistent advocacy and engagement with government, CSOs, the private sector, and migrant workers' groups, developed and launched a multi-stakeholder National Action Plan on Fair and Ethical Recruitment, to guide policy making on ethical recruitment initiatives. These efforts directly contributed to the inclusion of specific provisions and definitions for fair and ethical recruitment in the law on the Department of Migrant Workers passed in December 2021 – marking the first time that ethical recruitment standards were specifically mentioned within a national legal framework in the Philippines.

IOM also conducted a series of activities to build a nuanced understanding of ethical recruitment practices among private recruitment agencies (PRAs) in the Philippines, including multi-day introductory training workshops and webinars on IRIS standards³ for 41 PRAs in collaboration with a key Philippine

recruitment industry association; and an intensive 6-month capacity building program with two PRAs aimed at assessing gaps in their existing policy and management systems and providing them with the tools to shift their operations to align with international fair recruitment standards.



Project efforts contributed to the FIRST MENTION OF ETHICAL RECRUITMENT STANDARDS WITHIN A NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN THE PHILIPPINES.

Pilot an ethical recruitment channel for Filipino domestic workers, led by Fair Employment Foundation

Through the project, FEF recruited and placed 2,532 Filipino domestic workers in overseas jobs via an ethical recruitment channel, i.e., with zero recruitment fees paid by workers in either the source or destination country. As an agency, FEF's share of the recruitment market increased from 3% to 7% between 2019 and 2021 (according to POEA Central Office Database information, accessed in February 2021), a positive

indication of growing employer demand for ethical recruitment options. Additionally, FEF provided pre-departure training on safe migration practices and trafficking risks to 349 prospective OFWs through its training center in the Philippines. **Workers who completed FEF's training program had an average contract termination rate⁴ of 7%, considerably below the industry average of 35-40% for domestic work.**

Strengthen institutional capacity and boost community resilience to trafficking in BARMM, led by IOM

IOM conducted a series of activities to strengthen the capacity of regional and local government units in BARMM to prevent, investigate, and prosecute trafficking cases. First, the project facilitated the development of data-sharing mechanisms to standardize reporting, response, and case management among key stakeholders to ensure that anti-TIP efforts across the geographically dispersed region are streamlined and evidence-based. These efforts led to the enactment of a Regional Executive Order in December 2021, an ordinance which further strengthened the BARMM Task Force and **formally adopted these coordination mechanisms within government frameworks.** Second, IOM worked in close collaboration with community leaders to establish localized technical working groups (TWGs) in 12 of the most at-risk municipalities in BARMM, responsible for overseeing anti-trafficking information and communication campaigns, and monitoring reporting and referral pathways. 243 TWG members were trained on victim-centered and rights-based approaches to reporting, case handling, trauma-informed care, and basic psychosocial counseling skills. Referral mechanisms were

developed in each municipality to enable community members to better prevent, identify, and respond to potential trafficking cases. By December 2021, local government units in 11 out of the 12 project municipalities passed Executive Orders to formalize and strengthen the TWGs, and to institutionalize these referral mechanisms.



11 out of 12 project municipalities INSTITUTIONALIZED THE REFERRAL MECHANISMS ESTABLISHED THROUGH THE IOM PROJECT IN BARMM.

IOM also conducted a range of community engagement and awareness activities aimed at improving knowledge of

3. The IRIS Standard is a set of global principles that define ethical recruitment. It is based on international labor and human rights instruments and was developed through extensive multi-stakeholder consultation.

4. Termination rates are a key indicator since, often, domestic workers have to pay additional fees at destination when they break their contracts in order to obtain a new job, increasing the likelihood of accruing significant levels of debt.

contextually-specific trafficking risks and drivers in BARMM. Community leaders collaborated to develop locally relevant messages that were rolled out through community-driven and community-owned awareness campaigns. **This engagement effort reached over 2,800 vulnerable individuals, and employed a whole community approach**, involving local government, religious leaders, health officials, welfare stakeholders, and school administrators to include trafficking risks within community dialogue in each municipality. This focused intervention was supplemented by broader media campaigns across the region via radio and social media networks aimed at emphasizing key anti-TIP messaging, and promoting established reporting and referral mechanisms.

The COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world in the midst of the implementation period for the research and programming efforts outlined above, generating wide-ranging disruptions to lives and livelihoods, and significantly affecting migrant workers in particular. The pandemic also caused considerable disruption to the functioning of government investigative mechanisms, private recruitment agencies, and other stakeholders specifically targeted by project interventions. While GFEMS and its partners made adaptations where relevant and appropriate in response to the evolving situation, the findings in this brief should be interpreted while keeping these challenges in mind.

Research and Evaluation

To understand the extent to which these interventions contributed to improved safeguards against forced labor, GFEMS and its partners deployed the following research and evaluative efforts:

- ▶ Large-scale study with OFWs to understand vulnerabilities and risk drivers, led by Two Six Technologies (TST). The study planned to register prospective OFWs prior to their departure from the Philippines and then follow up with them via digital surveys to collect information on their recruitment, migration, and employment experiences. However, due to the near total cessation of overseas migration resulting from COVID-19, TST adapted to administer a modified survey via social media networks to OFWs already based in nine major destination countries⁵. The study enrolled 7,526 migrant workers, and gathered data on the labor experiences for 6,085 of them, to gain insights on what factors influence forced labor risks for OFWs and to develop a profile of particularly high-risk characteristics, industries and geographies. Approximately two-thirds of respondents were female, with a median age range between 35 and 39 years old. The majority (65.6%) were employed in the Middle East (including Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait), 20% across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, and 10% in Southeast Asia (including Singapore and Malaysia).
- ▶ The TST migrant worker study additionally assessed the effectiveness of the FEF project intervention (i.e. deployment through an ethical recruitment channel) at reducing forced labor risks for OFWs. Labor outcomes for workers who were placed by FEF were analyzed against the broader participant pool to understand the extent to which the intervention had a protective effect.
- ▶ In-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 41 project stakeholders to assess the relevance and effectiveness of capacity building efforts for ethical recruitment, including PRAs, government agency representatives, migrant worker organizations, and project staff from IOM and Ople Center.
- ▶ A two-time point knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) survey conducted with 300 households in targeted municipalities in BARMM aimed at assessing shifts in community-level awareness of trafficking risks and drivers, practice of safe migration behaviors, as well as understanding of community referral and victim safeguarding mechanisms. This approach was supplemented by key informant interviews and discussions with BARMM government agencies, community-level technical working groups, and IOM staff to collect stakeholder perspectives and reflections on project implementation in the region.
- ▶ Mixed methods approach to assess the effectiveness of the ICMS at improving the efficiency and quality of official responses to reported labor trafficking cases, including (i) remote interviews with 10 Task Force representatives to assess the utility and relevance of the ICMS; (ii) quantitative mobile surveys with a sample of 36 OFWs whose cases were managed through the ICMS to gauge their satisfaction with service provision and response times for assistance and referral; and (iii) trend analysis of consolidated analytics and case management data from the 1,665 encoded cases within the system.

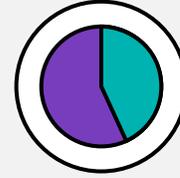
5. Including Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates

Key Learnings

Indications of forced labor abuses experienced by OFWs are widespread

The migrant worker study assessed the risk of forced labor among the sample of OFWs by examining the extent to which workers experienced the threat or use of force and/or other forms of coercion associated with their migration and employment experiences. Forced labor risk levels range in severity from violence and restricted freedoms of movement (high severity) to not being paid for overtime (low severity).

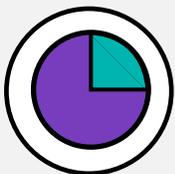
Study findings indicate that Filipino migrant workers face considerable risks to their freedom, and economic and personal safety. Over 25% of OFWs experienced moderately severe forced labor conditions, with the majority of this group reporting being compelled to work on rest days for fear of being fired, and facing restrictions on their movement after work. Nearly **5% of surveyed workers experienced critically severe forced labor conditions**, nearly half of whom also owed debts to their employer



43% OF DOMESTIC WORKERS EXPERIENCED MODERATELY SEVERE FORCED LABOR CONDITIONS – a rate nearly double the overall population of OFWs.

or recruiter, suggesting a high likelihood of debt bondage among this group.

Domestic workers are nearly twice as likely to experience forced labor than other OFWs. Gender, debt, and destination country of employment are other key drivers of vulnerability



OVER 25% OF OFWS EXPERIENCED MODERATELY SEVERE FORCED LABOR CONDITIONS.

Migrant domestic workers face particularly high risks of forced labor. The study found that 43% of domestic workers experienced at least moderately severe forced labor conditions – a rate which is nearly double that of the overall sample, confirming the acute vulnerability of workers in this predominantly female occupation. Over half of surveyed domestic workers reported having to work on rest days, owing debts, not being paid for overtime work, and lacking freedom of movement. Nearly 30% did not have access to their passports and consistently worked more hours than agreed upon with their employers.

The study identified additional risk factors linked with a higher likelihood of exploitation for OFWs. Critical gendered

differences in vulnerability emerged – **female OFWs faced more than twice the forced labor rates of their male counterparts**. Further, risks of forced labor were significantly higher for OFWs with debt burdens compared to those who did not owe a debt. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically increased the percentage of OFWs who are indebted. **Forty-nine percent of respondents indicated that they carry a debt, and 62% of this group confirmed that their debts were a result of the pandemic.**

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia emerged as the two destination countries associated with the highest risks of forced labor for OFWs. The study found that at least **60% of female domestic workers working in these regions experienced at least moderate forced labor conditions**. This is particularly concerning, as these countries alone accounted for 37% of the global population of female OFWs, with the percentage of OFWs employed in so-called “low-skilled” occupations such as domestic work actually increasing between 2019 and 2020⁶. Philippines government data for this period suggest that domestic workers tended to remain employed while OFWs working in other professions were repatriated, suggesting that proportionally more domestic workers have continued to work through the vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic in the highest-risk destinations and occupations.

6. Philippine Statistics Authority. (2022, March 7). Overseas Filipino Workers are estimated at 1.77 million. <https://psa.gov.ph/press-releases/id/166375>

Employment through an ethical recruitment channel reduces risk of forced labor. However, there remain barriers to shifting the industry towards ethical practices.

Quantitative analysis of responses from a sample of recipients of the FEF ethical recruitment intervention in comparison with a similar group from the larger study cohort suggests that **placement through an ethical recruitment channel, i.e., in the absence of any recruitment fees, has a protective effect for migrant workers**, reducing their vulnerability to forced labor. FEF participants were significantly less likely to experience forced labor conditions than non-participants, regardless of placement geography⁷.

Qualitative responses from PRA representatives that completed the 6-month intensive ethical recruitment capacity-building program point to the utility of these standards for agencies. Respondents emphasized the effectiveness of the training at practically expanding their understanding of ethical recruitment beyond just the absence of charging recruitment

While these are promising indicators of the viability of ethical recruitment channels, project findings clearly indicate that there are **several barriers preventing a widespread shift towards fair and ethical recruitment standards**. Interviews with PRAs also revealed low levels of understanding and buy-in among management for a shift to align with ethical standards. Additionally, PRAs highlighted an inability and unwillingness to invest significant resources (including time, money, personnel) to transform their operational and management systems, particularly in the absence of a clear and supportive regulatory framework for ethical recruiters. Considerable losses sustained by the industry during the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened these resource constraints, shifting agencies into “survival mode” and limiting their capacity for reform.

“It is all about making it a little bit easier for an ethical player to do business (...) ethical players do everything by the book, while there are other recruitment agencies who are willing to do the shortcuts, the job orders will most probably go to them. Same thing also with the candidates, sometimes they are drawn to other recruitment agencies who are able to deploy them faster.” –PRA Association representative, In-depth Interview



Evidence suggests OFW PLACEMENT THROUGH ETHICAL RECRUITMENT CHANNELS HAS A PROTECTIVE EFFECT.

fees and other costs to workers. They noted their introduction to an entire spectrum of common-sense business practices including guidance on adhering to destination country laws, establishing clear policies and operating procedures, strengthening due diligence and internal information-sharing processes, and maintaining on-going channels for communication and grievance redressal with employers and workers.

“It is a game changer for us to know the tools, know the standards.” –Trained PRA representative, In-depth Interview

Meanwhile, interviewed government stakeholders stressed that international recruitment standards are not readily applicable to the legal and regulatory context in the Philippines, and that additional analysis is likely necessary to effectively translate and integrate these recommendations into current legislative frameworks. Respondents also highlighted the need to secure compliance from employers and agencies in destination countries to ensure the ability of ethical recruitment processes to adequately safeguard migrant workers in the long term.

Targeted and participatory engagement efforts can shift critical community attitudes and behavior towards trafficking risks and safe migration practices

Assessment findings indicate that IOM’s localized approach to community engagement with community-led and evidence-based messaging contributed to shifting knowledge, attitudes and practices in the most vulnerable areas in BARMM towards safer and more risk-informed migration. The household-level KAP survey revealed that 98% of respondents who participated in these initiatives perceived improved knowledge of trafficking risks and drivers as well as of established referral and victim safeguard mechanisms. The majority (96%) of these individuals



Nearly all respondents (95%) in target communities perceived REGULAR AND LEGAL MIGRATION CHANNELS AS WORTH THE ADDITIONAL TIME AND COST, compared to only 17% at baseline.

7. Notably, sample sizes available for analysis were small due to COVID-19 limitations on overseas migration.

also reported sharing their experience and learnings with other members of their community.

At the end of the project, nearly **80% of respondents were aware and informed about local laws and policies related to illegal recruitment, compared to 39% at baseline**. Further, over 95% of respondents could identify specific community institutions and actors from whom potential trafficking victims could seek help, registering a 44% increase from project baseline. Crucially, nearly all respondents (95%) in target municipalities perceived regular and legal migration channels as worth the additional time and cost, compared to only 17% at baseline. Qualitative responses from FGDs with local government representatives corroborate these findings, with all confirming increases in information and help-seeking behavior related to safe migration.

Attitudes regarding conflicting advice from family and friends was a critical component the project looked to shift, since, in BARMM, friends and neighbors often act as intermediaries for traffickers

Alignment with current government priorities is critical to uptake of systems to enhance inter-stakeholder cooperation and collaboration

Prior to the project, the government agenda in the Philippines was already focused on improving protections for OFWs. While there were a number of welfare and law enforcement agencies tasked with addressing labor exploitation faced by migrant workers, there was no coordinated mechanism to manage and streamline their efforts. Leveraging this receptive environment enabled Ople Center to expedite the formation of the Task Force and the adoption of the ICMS. Owing to this alignment with broader government priorities, project efforts were inherently sustainable, contributing to considerable enhancements in the efficiency and effectiveness of the Philippines government approach to reported labor trafficking cases. Despite the significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the average response time from OFW complaint to repatriation improved following the launch of the ICMS, **from an average of 27.5**

and illegal recruiters to gain the trust of victims and families. At project end, **65% of respondents stated that they would not follow risky migration advice from family and friends against their better judgment, compared with 32% at baseline** (an additional 34% of respondents at baseline were unsure how they would react in such a situation).

Findings also highlight the need for additional focus on “non-traditional” demographic groups. The study revealed the **persistent vulnerability of young men and boys in the Bangsamoro region**. Across genders and age groups, men aged 18-25 were least likely to understand either the risks and consequences of irregular migration or the benefits of migrating legally through formal processes, and were the least knowledgeable about local anti-trafficking policies and referral mechanisms. The assessment also found them to be the most susceptible to deceptive recruitment practices, with only 22% of this group able to correctly identify indicators of legitimacy and trustworthiness.

days to an average of 14.3 days between January and June 2021. Critically, the availability of an integrated online system for inter-agency coordination allowed Task Force members to continue investigations even during strict domestic lockdowns, supporting the successful prosecution of labor trafficking cases in Bahrain and Malaysia, as well as the conviction of an illegal recruiter in 2020.

Discussions with Task Force representatives confirm the system’s utility and relevance in supporting the pursuit of cases against perpetrators while ensuring the delivery of proper legal, repatriation, and reintegration assistance to victims. Noting the significance of the ICMS in generating actionable data, improving inter-agency coordination, and easing the burden of information-sharing, government caseworkers cited the ICMS as critical to strengthening their trafficking response.

In BARMM, family members from older generations have the strongest influence over decision-making and represent 97% of heads of household. They demonstrated the narrowest shifts in attitudes and beliefs relative to younger community members. Therefore, while the group specifically targeted by the project (women aged between 18-25 who are most likely to migrate for domestic work) acquired considerable knowledge of trafficking risks and legal recruitment pathways, the final decision underlying their migration approach could likely rest with community elders such as parents or clan patriarchs.

Recommendations

Drawing on the insights in this brief, three recommendations are highlighted to inform multi-stakeholder action for the protection of Filipino migrant workers.

- 1. Legislate ethical recruitment.** Government should integrate specific laws governing ethical recruitment within national legal and regulatory frameworks, and support the operationalization of these laws at the local level. This could include decentralizing responsibilities for regulation by involving frontline local government employment offices in the monitoring of recruitment agencies and the identification of bad actors.
- 2. Incentivize PRAs.** Government should build in regulatory incentives for PRA compliance with ethical recruitment standards to strengthen the enabling environment for an industry-wide shift to fairer practices. These could include expediting certain components of the recruitment process for agencies that demonstrate concrete operational criteria such as continuous due diligence of employers and effective grievance mechanisms for workers.
- 3. Improve pre-departure preparation for OFWs.** Government and migrant worker organizations should work to enhance mandatory pre-departure training courses to transition away from routine “checkbox” processes to sessions that effectively prepare workers for specific risks they may face abroad, their legal rights and protections, and best practices for ensuring their safety. This could involve sensitization training for service providers on applying curricula to specific regional contexts



INTEGRATE SPECIFIC LAWS ON ETHICAL RECRUITMENT WITHIN NATIONAL REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS



STRENGTHEN THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR ETHICAL RECRUITMENT AGENCIES



ENHANCE PRE-DEPARTURE TRAINING AND ORIENTATION FOR OFWS

in the Philippines, deploying multimedia training modules with content tailored to OFW religious and cultural backgrounds to boost engagement and retention of the material, or establishing “one-stop” OFW resource centers at the provincial level to provide information and services for prospective migrants looking to work overseas.

Acronyms

BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IACAT	Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking
ICMS	Integrated Case Management System
OFW	Overseas Filipino Worker
PRA	Private Recruitment Agency
TWG	Technical Working Group