

Lived Experiences of Resilient Overseas Filipino Workers in Their Career Journey: Towards the Development of Thematic Intervention Module

Corazon A. De Jesus¹ & Lorvin M. Adducul²

¹ Master of Education in Guidance and Counseling, Saint Mary's University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines

² RGC, Ph.D, Research Adviser and Faculty Member, School of Graduate Studies, Saint Mary's University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines

Correspondence: Corazon A. De Jesus, Master of Education in Guidance and Counseling, Saint Mary's University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines.

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Abstract

The life journey of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) is a testament to resilience and sacrifice, as they navigate grueling work conditions, cultural barriers, and prolonged separation from their families, all in pursuit of better opportunities and a brighter future for their loved ones. This study, using a descriptive qualitative research method with personal interviews, was conducted to explore the lived experiences of OFWs concerning work challenges, employment conditions, cultural adaptation, social integration, family impact, personal well-being, coping mechanisms, and prospective initiatives. Findings show that OFWs face demanding work schedules, language barriers, job insecurity, and discrimination, leading to physical and mental stress. Cultural adaptation is crucial but challenging, often causing emotional distance and communication breakdowns with family. Coping mechanisms include regular family communication, community engagement, and support from fellow expatriates. Improving OFWs' experiences requires targeted policies and programs. Moreover, challenges for OFWs in Kuwait include long working hours, physical exhaustion, job insecurity, low pay, language barriers, cultural differences, and discrimination. These challenges impact their well-being, financial stability, and job satisfaction. Addressing these issues requires supportive workplace policies, fair treatment, job security, and reasonable working hours. Consequently, this study proposes an intervention program that supports OFWs from pre-departure to their return to the Philippines, covering support systems, financial empowerment, and career development. It is essential for the Philippine Government, NGOs, and host countries to establish favorable conditions to support OFWs throughout their employment abroad, regardless of their duration of stay.

Keywords: cultural adaptation, expatriates, guidance counseling, Filipino migrants, resilience

1. Introduction

The Philippine government has hailed Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as "Modern Heroes," recognizing their crucial role in the nation's economy and society (Eugenio, 2023). While many OFWs enjoy material prosperity abroad, their journey is fraught with challenges, including familial separation, financial strain, and cultural adaptation. This study aimed to examine the lived experiences and resiliency of OFWs, focusing on the adversities faced by a selected group of migrant workers in Kuwait. The study centered on 10 respondents, divided into five professional categories of OFWs.

By exploring these workers' experiences, the study sought to enrich the understanding of the difficulties faced by Filipino workers abroad, providing valuable insights for individuals and organizations. The anticipated findings

were intended to address issues such as job burnout, financial stress, and homesickness, echoing the recommendations of experts like Santos (2020).

According to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), Kuwait was one of the top destinations for newly employed and rehired OFWs in 2011. Historically, the most common employment for OFWs in Kuwait has been in household services, a shift from earlier trends when construction-related jobs dominated (Santiago, 2016). The Philippines heavily relies on remittances from its overseas workers, a significant portion of whom are women employed in caregiving roles.

Kuwait's unique socio-cultural and economic landscape has drawn many OFWs, but with this come various challenges. The study emphasizes that the struggles of OFWs extend beyond their work environment to affect their families in the Philippines, with issues like financial concerns, homesickness, and job burnout. In 2017 alone, the Philippine ambassador to Kuwait reported over 6,000 complaints of abuse, underscoring the difficult conditions faced by Filipino domestic workers (Aljazeera, 2018).

To provide a comprehensive understanding, this study incorporated insights from Maria Wiktoria Komorniczak's work on migrant workers in Kuwait, particularly her analysis of labor conditions and exploitation (Komorniczak, 2019). By integrating her research, this study aims to offer a detailed analysis of the specific challenges faced by Filipino workers in Kuwait.

The importance of this study is multifaceted. It provides an in-depth look at the difficulties faced by OFWs, such as workplace discrimination, extended work hours, and social displacement. It also evaluates existing government initiatives to support these workers. The findings aim to guide policymakers, program developers, and support agencies like POEA, OWWA, and PhilHealth in crafting more effective intervention programs tailored to OFWs' needs.

Furthermore, the study explores ways to enhance the overall well-being and work satisfaction of OFWs by assessing the impact of pre-departure training, access to support services, and financial literacy initiatives. The research aims to provide OFWs with the tools to navigate their careers while supporting the growth of their families and communities.

The findings of this study could also improve support systems for OFWs both in Kuwait and the Philippines. Agencies responsible for the welfare of OFWs can use the insights to enhance existing services and develop more targeted programs. Additionally, the study's insights can help OFW families in the Philippines better understand the challenges their overseas working members face, fostering greater empathy and support.

On a policy level, the research can inform the development of more responsive and culturally sensitive policies related to OFW welfare, protection, and support. The study contributes to the broader academic discourse on migrant workers, promoting cross-cultural understanding and fostering better relations between host communities and OFWs. Ultimately, this research seeks to empower and improve the lives of OFWs, enhancing their career journey and overall quality of life.

2. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Kuwait. This design was chosen to uncover the lived realities of OFWs and to understand the meaning and essence of their career journeys abroad. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary data collection technique, allowing participants to provide detailed, first-hand accounts of their experiences.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

Type of Participant	Number
1. Domestic Helper	5
2. Nurse	5
3. Manager	5
4. Dentist	5
5. Information Technologist	5
6. Teacher	5
7. Beautician	5
8. Businesswomen/Businessmen	5
9. Driver	5

10. Human Resource Staff	5
Total	50

The research focused specifically on OFWs in Kuwait, a country with a significant Filipino worker population. Kuwait's socio-cultural context and the presence of a large number of Filipino workers made it an ideal location for this study, offering a unique perspective on the challenges and resilience of OFWs. The study included 50 respondents from diverse professional backgrounds: domestic helpers, nurses, teachers, managers, IT professionals, business owners, drivers, and more.

The respondents were all asked to participate voluntarily, with a careful exclusion of those who had recently arrived in Kuwait to ensure the focus remained on individuals who had already encountered and managed various challenges.

The study's main instrument for data collection was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions that explored themes such as family connections, cultural adaptation, emotional well-being, financial challenges, and coping strategies. This approach allowed for a detailed exploration of how OFWs manage personal and professional adversities while living and working in a foreign country. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and key themes.

Data was collected systematically, starting with participant recruitment and coordination of interview schedules, followed by the administration of the interviews. The research team took comprehensive field notes and ensured confidentiality by anonymizing the transcripts.

The study followed phenomenological methods for analyzing the collected data. The first step was bracketing, where the researcher set aside personal biases to approach the data with an open mind. The interviews were transcribed, and significant statements reflecting the essence of the participants' experiences were identified. These statements were coded and grouped into themes representing common experiences such as loneliness, resilience, and cultural adjustment. Each theme was then interpreted to reveal deeper meanings based on the direct accounts shared by the participants. The final report highlighted these themes, supported by direct quotes from the participants to illustrate the lived experiences of OFWs.

3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were a cornerstone of the study. The research was reviewed and approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board to ensure that all ethical standards were met. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher's own potential conflict of interest was disclosed, as she belonged to the study population. To mitigate this, the researcher worked with an assistant who was not an OFW, ensuring a balanced interpretation of the data. The study prioritized voluntary participation and ensured that participants were aware of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Participants were also informed of the potential risks involved, including emotional or psychological risks from discussing personal struggles. These risks were mitigated by offering participants time to reflect and ensuring their emotional well-being throughout the interview process.

The researcher maintained that all data would be kept secure, using coded identifiers to protect participant identities. The collected information was stored securely, and the study's results were to be shared with participants for their feedback and could be used for further academic presentations or publications.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Lived Experiences of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)

This section highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), touching on their work environments, cultural adaptation, family impacts, personal well-being, and coping mechanisms. It also explores prospective initiatives to improve the OFWs' experiences.

- 1) **Work Challenges:** OFWs deal with long hours, job insecurity, low pay, and discrimination, often leading to physical exhaustion and stress. Specific challenges include language barriers, cultural differences, and financial pressures. Occupations like domestic work, healthcare, teaching, and IT face unique obstacles, including heavy workloads, cultural miscommunications, and unsatisfactory contracts. These findings could be related to the study of Asis (2018), the culture of migration in the Philippines was explored, shedding light on the challenges faced by OFWs. The study highlighted long working hours and physical exhaustion as significant issues, especially for domestic workers and

laborers.

- 2) **Employment Conditions:** Many OFWs endure poor working conditions, such as low wages, lack of benefits, and unsafe environments, leading to feelings of exploitation. These conditions negatively affect their mental and physical well-being.
- 3) **Cultural Adaptation:** OFWs experience challenges in adapting to new languages, customs, and social norms, which can lead to culture shock and isolation. However, many successfully adapt by learning the local language, joining community events, and embracing cultural diversity, enhancing their personal and professional growth. In similar studies, Castillo (2020) examines how OFWs adapt to foreign work environments, detailing the strategies they use to navigate cultural differences, such as learning new languages and customs. This process is crucial for their integration and success abroad.
- 4) **Social Integration:** OFWs often face loneliness and isolation but engage in strategies like maintaining communication with family and joining social networks to stay connected. Some face difficulties integrating into local communities due to language barriers and cultural differences, but they work towards building meaningful relationships.
- 5) **Family Impact:** Separation from family members strains relationships, causing emotional distance and stress, especially for children and spouses left behind. OFWs stay connected through digital communication, remittances, and occasional home visits, although the emotional toll is significant. In similar vein, Salazar (2019) investigates the difficulties OFWs face in re-establishing connections with their families and communities upon return, reflecting the ongoing struggles with social integration both abroad and back home.
- 6) **Personal Well-being:** The stress of working abroad takes a toll on OFWs' physical and mental health, leading to fatigue, depression, and anxiety. Many OFWs cope by prioritizing self-care, building support networks, and maintaining a positive mindset to stay resilient. The emphasis on self-care activities such as exercise, meditation, and maintaining a positive mindset aligns with strategies mentioned by Bautista (2020) regarding coping mechanisms for OFWs facing challenges abroad.
- 7) **Coping Mechanisms:** OFWs employ various strategies to manage stress, including self-care practices like exercise and hobbies, maintaining support networks, and setting career goals. Some seek professional counseling or community resources to navigate challenges.
- 8) **Prospective Initiatives:** OFWs desire improvements in their working conditions, including stronger legal protections, better healthcare access, and more robust reintegration programs. Many plan to return to the Philippines eventually, with aspirations to start businesses, continue their education, or balance their overseas work with a future homecoming.

In summary, while OFWs face numerous challenges, their resilience and proactive strategies enable them to navigate difficult circumstances. Policies and programs aimed at improving their welfare, both abroad and upon return, are critical to enhancing their overall experience.

4.2 Common Themes from the Lived Experiences of Overseas Filipino Workers

4.2.1 Challenges Faced by OFWs

OFWs face long working hours and physical exhaustion, job insecurity, and financial pressures. Language barriers and cultural differences hinder their ability to communicate effectively in the workplace, while discrimination and unfair treatment based on nationality are also prevalent. These challenges impact OFWs' physical and mental health, making it harder for them to achieve their financial goals. Language and cultural barriers impede workplace integration, and there is a need for policies ensuring fair treatment, job security, and manageable working hours to improve their work experiences.

4.2.2 Employment Conditions

OFWs in Kuwait experience demanding work schedules, heavy workloads, and communication difficulties due to language barriers. Job insecurity, low wages, and high living costs cause financial strain, and many face discrimination from employers or locals.

Implications: These tough employment conditions lead to physical and mental health issues, increased isolation, and continued financial struggles. Improving employment conditions through better policies and support systems is essential for OFWs' well-being.

4.2.3 Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation for OFWs involves challenges like learning new languages, customs, and social norms. Successful adaptation requires strategies such as learning the local language, participating in community activities, and building relationships, which contribute to personal and professional growth. Cultural adaptation

is a complex and dynamic process that enhances both personal and professional growth. Support systems and strategies that help OFWs navigate these challenges are essential for their overall success.

4.2.4 Social Integration

OFWs often struggle with social integration in their host countries due to cultural differences and limited social networks. Maintaining connections with their home country provides emotional support, but they also face difficulties in forming bonds within the local community. Social integration is crucial for OFWs' mental and emotional well-being. Support networks, communication with home, and coping strategies help them navigate challenges and foster personal growth while adapting to their host environment.

4.2.5 Family Impact

Migration significantly impacts family relationships, especially due to emotional and physical distance. The absence of a parent can affect children's emotional development, and OFWs face challenges in maintaining strong family connections. Strategies like regular communication and financial support are used to stay connected. Strained relationships and emotional challenges are common, especially for children of OFWs. While financial support is important, emotional support and presence are equally vital. Support systems for OFWs and their families are essential to manage these impacts.

4.2.6 Personal Well-Being

OFWs prioritize self-care and resilience to manage stress, build support networks, and maintain a positive mindset to achieve their career goals. These strategies are crucial for coping with the pressures of working abroad. Managing stress and maintaining mental health through self-care, support networks, and goal setting are essential for OFWs' well-being. These practices help them cope with challenges and succeed professionally while maintaining personal resilience.

4.2.7 Coping Mechanisms

OFWs employ coping mechanisms such as self-care practices (exercise, hobbies), building support networks (communication with family and friends), maintaining a positive mindset and career goals, and seeking professional and community resources for additional help. These coping strategies help OFWs manage stress and maintain emotional well-being. They also foster resilience, enabling them to overcome challenges and adapt to their environment. Access to support resources enhances their ability to thrive abroad.

4.2.8 Prospective Initiatives

Many OFWs plan to start businesses or advance their careers upon returning to the Philippines. Continuing education and professional development are important for staying competitive, and many OFWs aim to balance overseas work with a return to their home country. These initiatives offer economic empowerment, contribute to local economic growth, and promote continuous learning for career advancement. Encouraging return and reintegration into the Philippines supports family well-being and strengthens community ties.

In relation to the study of Baldoz (2016) provides a critical analysis of existing government policies and suggests prospective initiatives to improve the welfare and protection of OFWs. These include better legal frameworks and support services tailored to the needs of OFWs.

5. Conclusions

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) face a range of challenges that impact their physical and mental well-being, including long work hours, job insecurity, financial pressures, language barriers, cultural differences, and discrimination. These stressors affect their ability to integrate socially and professionally, while also straining family relationships due to prolonged separation. To cope, OFWs employ strategies like staying connected with family, engaging in community activities, and seeking support from fellow expatriates. Addressing these challenges through supportive workplace policies, fair treatment, and reasonable working conditions, along with programs that support OFWs throughout their career journey, is crucial. Cooperation between the Philippine government, NGOs, and host countries is essential to improving their overall experiences and ensuring their well-being.

6. Recommendations

Recommendations for supporting Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) include strengthening mental health support through tailored programs, enhancing communication channels for regular contact with families, and promoting cultural adaptation through orientation and language training. To address challenges faced in Kuwait, improvements in working conditions, job security, fair contracts, and combating discrimination are essential, alongside language training and financial literacy programs. An intervention program should include enhanced pre-departure orientation, ongoing support systems, financial empowerment programs, career development opportunities, and reintegration assistance for returning OFWs. Collaboration among the Philippine

Government, NGOs, and host countries is vital for implementing these recommendations to ensure OFWs' well-being and success at every stage of their journey.

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