

Gender Runs Through It: Displacement and Repatriation of Filipino Migrant Workers from Libya and Syria

Maruja M.B. Asis
Scalabrini Migration Center

In 2011, more than 10,000 overseas Filipino worker (OFWs) were repatriated from Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria (repatriation efforts continue in Syria as of this writing) in the wake of the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening. This was the second largest repatriation organized by the Philippine government after the evacuation of close to 30,000 OFWs from Kuwait during the Gulf War of 1990-91.

This paper deals focuses on the displacement and repatriation of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) from Libya and Syria in 2011 (the process is on-going in Syria as of this writing). The mostly male, highly skilled or professional and legal profile of migrants in Libya vs. the mostly female, domestic work and unauthorized status of migrants in Syria shaped the different displacement, repatriation and return migration experiences of Filipino workers.

The study involved collecting data on OFW returnees; reviewing the framework, policies, programs and practices on the repatriation and reintegration of OFWs; and proposing guidelines and recommendations for future gender-responsive interventions in addressing the needs and concerns of OFWs and their families. Primary data were collected through key informant interviews with representatives of national government agencies, local government units and NGOs, interviews with returnees and spouses of OFWs from Libya, and a focus group discussion with women OFWs repatriated from Syria. Secondary data included a review of the existing academic literature, memoranda, advisories and circulars issued by government agencies, and media reports concerning OFWs in the affected MENA countries. Most of the data collection was carried out between 20 October and 30 November 2011.

Prior to the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening, several conflict-related displacements of OFWs had taken place in the Middle East: the Gulf War of 1990-91, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Lebanon conflict in 2006. Lessons learned from the Gulf War experience informed the development of legal and institutional framework governing emergency repatriation. The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 (RA 8042) and as amended by RA 10022 contain specific provisions to address emergency repatriation issues. The law mandates the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration as the key agency in responding to emergency repatriation; provides for an emergency repatriation fund of P100, 000,000; and provides for a country-team approach under the leadership of the ambassador in promoting the rights of Filipino nationals, including assistance in emergency situation. The preparation of a contingency plan and requiring employers of OFWs to submit a contingency is a good practice that came out of the Gulf War experience. The same law also provides for the establishment of the National Reintegration Center for OFWs, the agency responsible for facilitating the return and reintegration of Filipino migrant workers.

Lack of data on the profile of OFWs hampered the organization of OFW repatriation. Data on the OFW population were mostly total counts and lacked details such as the gender distribution and location of OFWs. Similarly, available or reported data on repatriated OFWs were typically aggregate numbers. The problem was particularly acute in Syria where most Filipino migrants were in an unauthorized situation and were employed in private households.

The repatriation process was a major transnational undertaking. Overseas, the Philippine Embassy coordinated with employers in the repatriation of OFWs. The Philippine government deployed the 40-member Rapid Response Team to the embassy in Libya and Syria to augment the embassy personnel. In the Philippines, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) coordinated in planning, implementing and monitoring the government's actions.

Overall, key informants representing the government sector considered OFW repatriation from Libya a success, attributing the successful outcome to the cooperation of employers (especially multinational corporations), the high regard for OFWs by Libyans, and the cooperation of the Filipino community. The repatriation from Syria turned out to be more costly, slow and protracted due to the different complexion of the conflict and the different profile of the OFW community – mostly unauthorized migrants, largely women in domestic work. Repatriation efforts in Syria were slowed by the lack of information on the location of domestic workers in the country. The restricted mobility of women migrants in Syria prevent from them accessing support. Thus, the gendered nature of the jobs of OFWs in Libya and Syria resulted in different repatriation processes and outcomes.

While OFWs were generally satisfied with the repatriation process, they were less satisfied with their reintegration experience. Most of the OFWs who participated in the study were keen to work abroad and were only remotely interested in seeking local employment or setting up a business.

The role of employers in the formal sector as partners in OFW repatriation was demonstrated by the Libyan experience while the challenges of repatriating women domestic workers from Syria highlight the vulnerability and invisibility of women migrants in this sector. Unlike OFWs in the formal sector, employers of domestic workers are less involved in supporting the repatriation process. Moreover, the multiple roles migrant women play also affect their reintegration prospects in the home country following their emergency return.

The study called for the following recommendations: capacity building of foreign service personnel in dealing with crisis or emergency situations, enhancing the preparedness of Filipino communities, improving the database of Filipino communities abroad and return migrants in the Philippines, capacity building of local governments in providing support to repatriated OFWs, and regional assessment of how origin countries in Asia responded to the displacement of migrant workers. Discussions and agreements with destination countries in protecting migrant workers (especially those outside the formal sector) in times of conflict or war should be pursued as a continuing effort.