

# The Triumphs and Travails of Selected Overseas Filipino Workers in the United Arab Emirates

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## ABSTRACT

The term “Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW)” is used to describe those who are employed in foreign countries through a contract with their employers. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) has always been an interesting topic of psychological studies, their triumphs and travails are largely economically motivated and temporary. This study sought to generate sufficient data on selected OFWs in the United Arab Emirates, specifically in the Dubai through questionnaire and these data were used in the descriptive analysis. The analysis on about their triumphs and travails in the UAE. Among the several findings from this study is that all the participants to the survey have entered the UAE legally either via direct deployment from the Philippines or via visit visa. Furthermore, most of the participants have jobs in the Philippines before migrating to the UAE. A more detailed narration and descriptive analysis of the research findings have been discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** Triumphs, Travails, OFW, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## INTRODUCTION

### Filipinos in the United Arab Emirates

Historically, Filipinos in the Middle East, first arrived in Saudi Arabia in early 1973, when a group of Filipino Engineers migrated to the country. During this time, gulf coast countries were beginning to recognize the potential power of their oil reserves and they lacked the manpower to properly exploit their oil resources with domestic labor sources and instead looked abroad for help in staffing their oil sectors.

The term Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) was officially adopted under late President Fidel Ramos administration from Overseas Contract Worker (OCW) to give recognition to the millions of Filipinos who sacrifice by working in other countries. The change, replacing ‘Contract’ with ‘Filipino’ – honors these Filipino workers by pledging the Philippine government’s commitment to their welfare wherever they may be, and removing the precondition of possession of contract for the Philippine consulates to come to their aid, under the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 (Republic Act 8042).

Filipinos in the United Arab Emirates are migrants or descendants of the Filipinos living in the United Arab Emirates. 679,819 Filipinos live in the UAE, of which 450,000 live in Dubai, and they form 6.1% of the whole UAE population, and they form 21.3% of the population of Dubai. Dubai is home to the largest population of Filipinos in the UAE, followed by Abu Dhabi and Al Ain. They are primarily employed in the architecture, construction, cargo, shipping, design, engineering, energy, information technology, marketing, medical, real estate, retail, telecommunications, and tourism sectors or as domestic helpers.

The Philippine Department of Labour and Employment also has two Philippine Overseas Labour Offices (POLOs) in the UAE, in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. These offices, as well as agreements between the Filipino and UAE governments, have set the monthly minimum salary for OFW's at US\$400. Because of the high number of Filipinos in the UAE, OFW's have called more direct flights from the UAE to the Philippines. In 2007, Filipinos in the UAE sent more than US\$500 million in remittances back to the Philippines.

Over the last 8 years, the Philippines has engaged in multiple rounds of talks with the UAE over worker protections. After numerous cases of negligence in 2014, the Philippines banned the entry of OFWs into the UAE for the purpose of domestic work. This policy proved ineffective though as Filipinos still travelled to the UAE on tourist visas then transitioned to work permits once in the country. As a first step to tackling the problem of unsanctioned recruitment and unregulated work, in 2017 the Philippines and the UAE agreed on an official memorandum of understanding "In the field of manpower". Among many other provisions, the MOU states that "Recruitment of manpower in the Philippines and its workers' entry into the UAE will be regulated in accordance with relevant laws, rules and procedure of the parties" and that all OFWs must work under contracts "authenticated by the UAE Ministry of Labour." While these provisions protect OFWs directly, it is also a priority of the Philippines' government to protect the flow of remittances from OFWs back to the Philippines. This is observable in Article 8 of the MOU which states, "Workers will have the right to remit all their savings to their country of origin or elsewhere in accordance with the financial regulations of the UAE."

However, even with these enhanced protections, working conditions under the MOU were still deemed insufficient to protect domestic laborers and the ban remained in place. Despite the ban, employment of Philippine domestic workers in the UAE continued, reaching over 200,000 employed just in household service alone. Due to the continued failure to ban domestic work and the minimal protections under the 2017 MOU, the government of the Philippines sought to reach a new, more comprehensive labor agreement.

In the past few years, it has been observed that a growth in data has shown that OFWs are specifically choosing the United Arab Emirates to migrate and work temporarily. The study of selected Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) is relevant due to their growing number. The current population of the Philippines is 113,397,231 as of February 15, 2023. 10% of the country's total population are living and working abroad. 15% percent of OFWs are in the United Arab Emirates.

This study sought to generate sufficient data on selected OFWs in United Arab Emirates specifically in Dubai through questionnaire and these data were used in a descriptive analysis.

Considering the significant objective of the study, in this case, the hypothesis to be tested are:

H1: The OFWs are happy with their overall health and well-being.

H2: The OFWs are happy with their balance work-life environment.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The study participants are composed of fifty (50) OFWs from the Emirate of Dubai. Dubai was chosen because it has the highest recorded population of OFWs among the seven emirates, which is suitable and applicable to the study. All the participants were selected through random sampling. The characteristics of the participants of this study included age with 26 participants are between 30-39 years old, gender with 27 participants are male, civil status with 30 participants are married, number of children with 20 participants

having no child, number of years in the UAE with 24 participants living in the UAE for the last 5-9 years, monthly salary with 25 participants having a monthly salary of 7,500 Dirhams and above, and field of work with 17 participants working in Engineering and Architectural field.

### Measure

After establishing the validity and reliability on how to gather data, formulating questions appropriate for the study and all doing necessary modification to the chosen participants. Fifty (50) copies of the questionnaire will be distributed and will be successfully completed and returned. The study must adhere to ethical norms to ensure trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness (Resnik, 2015). Thus, their corresponding answers to the questions are kept in accordance with the agreement of the participants and the researcher.

The ethical considerations during the gathering and presenting the research data:

- A. The rights to privacy of the individuals involved.
- B. The nature of participation in the research must be voluntary and the individuals involved must have the right to withdraw partially or completely from the process.
- C. All participants must provide their consent first.
- D. Maintenance of the confidentiality of data provided by individuals as well as identifiable participants' anonymity.
- E. How participants react to the researchers' methods in seeking to collect data.
- F. How the participants will be affected by the way in which data is analysed and reported.
- G. The behaviour and objectivity of the researcher.

Data was collected, coded, and then encoded into MS Excel, where frequency and percentage were used to analyze the answers of the participants and a descriptive analysis to the study's objectives. Fifty (50) OFWs in Dubai, UAE were sampled for the survey questionnaire method of which fifty (50) OFWs were successfully reached and provided information, yielding a 100 percent response rate.

## RESULTS

Table 1 Characteristics of the participants in the health and well-being questionnaires

Health and Well-Being Questionnaires	Extremely happy	Very happy	Somewhat happy	Not so happy	Not happy at all
Overall, how happy do you feel?	7 (14%)	33 (66%)	9 (18%)	1 (2%)	
Overall, how would you rate your mental health?	10 (20%)	29 (58%)	10 (20%)	1 (2%)	
Overall, how would you rate your total wellbeing?	8 (16%)	32 (64%)	9 (18%)	1 (2%)	

Table 1 shows the participants' overall happiness, mental health, and wellbeing. Three questions were provided to the participants that can be chosen with the predetermined answers of extremely happy, very happy, somewhat happy, not so happy, and not happy at all. Overwhelmingly, most of the participants answered "very happy" for the three questionnaires, 66 percent for happiness, 58 percent for mental health and 64 percent for well-being. Alongside these triumphs, many OFWs in the UAE also face significant travails and challenges. One common difficulty that OFWs encounter is homesickness and feelings of

isolation. Being far away from their families and loved ones, OFWs often experience loneliness and longing for the familiar comforts of home. The physical distance between them and their families can take a toll on their mental and emotional well-being, leading to feelings of sadness, despair, and disconnection. In times of celebration and hardship, OFWs yearn to be with their loved ones, but are unable to do so due to their commitments and responsibilities in the UAE.

Table 2 Characteristics of the participants in the work-life questionnaires

Work-Life Questionnaires	Yes	No
Are you compensated fairly relative to your current role?	38 (76%)	12 (24%)
Are you satisfied with your overall compensation?	39 (78%)	11 (22%)
Are you satisfied with your work-life balance?	46 (92%)	4 (8%)
Do you have enough time when you get home to decompress from your workday?	43 (86%)	7 (14%)
Would you recommend to other OFWs to live and work in the UAE?	48 (96%)	2 (4%)

Table 2 shows that most of the participants positively answered “Yes” with majority of the percentage are more than 75 percent for the 5 questions relating to work and life environment. The question with the highest percentage of answer is “would you recommend to other OFWs to live and work in the UAE?” with 96 percent. Relatively, a small percentage have answered “No” to the questionnaires. This finding means that most of the participants have a balance lifestyle and are contented with their living and working conditions. Some OFWs in the UAE have been able to climb the career ladder and achieve professional success. Through hard work, dedication, and perseverance, they have earned promotions, recognition, and respect in their chosen fields. These individuals serve as inspiring examples of the possibilities that await those who are willing to put in the effort and seize opportunities for growth and advancement. Their triumphs are a testament to the resilience and determination of the Filipino spirit, and they serve as role models for others who aspire to follow in their footsteps.

## DISCUSSION

In recent years, the phenomenon of Filipino workers going abroad to seek employment opportunities has become increasingly common. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the top destinations for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), drawing in thousands of skilled and unskilled laborers looking to support their families back home. While many OFWs in the UAE have achieved remarkable success and prosperity, others have faced numerous challenges and struggles along the way. This study explored the triumphs and travails of selected OFWs in the UAE, shedding light on the complex and varied experiences of this migrant community.

One of the most significant triumphs experienced by OFWs in the UAE is the opportunity for economic advancement and financial stability. Many Filipinos come to the UAE in search of higher-paying jobs that they could not find in their home country. With salaries often exceeding what they could earn in the Philippines, OFWs are able to support their families, pay for their children’s education, and invest in their futures. This financial empowerment is a source of pride and accomplishment for many OFWs, as they can provide for their loved ones in ways they never thought possible.

Some OFWs in the UAE grapple with the harsh realities of living and working in a foreign country. They may face discrimination, exploitation, and abuse at the hands of their employers or colleagues. In some cases, OFWs are subjected to unfair working conditions, long hours, low wages, and limited opportunities for advancement. Despite their hard work and dedication, they may be undervalued and underappreciated, leaving them feeling powerless and vulnerable. The lack of legal protections and social support systems for

migrant workers in the UAE exacerbates their struggles, making it difficult for them to seek help or recourse when they are mistreated or taken advantage of.

OFWs in the UAE often grapple with the challenges of cultural adjustment and integration. They must navigate unfamiliar customs, traditions, and norms, adapting to a new way of life that can be vastly different from what they are accustomed to in the Philippines. Language barriers, cultural differences, and social isolation can all contribute to feelings of alienation and disorientation. OFWs may struggle to find a sense of belonging and community in a foreign land, leading to a sense of displacement and estrangement.

## CONCLUSION

The study determined the characteristics of Overseas Filipino Workers in relation to health and well-being questionnaire, they are experiencing happiness and stress while working abroad. Their balance living and working conditions are commendable and the state of their mental health is satisfactory. Although, they have a stable personal tendency to show specific undesirable answers, regardless of survey topic or design. They may also tend to not honestly answer a question or survey, as the individual is inclined to reply to inquiries in the most positive and favorable way possible rather than providing the facts.

The triumphs and travails of selected OFWs in the UAE highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of the migrant experience. While many OFWs have achieved remarkable success and prosperity in the UAE, others have faced significant challenges and struggles that continue to impact their lives. By shedding light on the triumphs and travails of OFWs in the UAE, we gain a deeper understanding of the realities faced by this migrant community and the ways in which they navigate the complexities of life abroad. As we continue to explore and engage with the experiences of OFWs in the UAE, we must strive to amplify their voices, advocate for their rights, and support their well-being and empowerment. Only through greater awareness, empathy, and solidarity can we truly appreciate the triumphs and travails of OFWs in the UAE and work towards a more just and equitable society for all.

The welfare of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) has always been a priority for the Philippine government. With millions of Filipinos working abroad in various industries, it is crucial to have measures in place to protect them from potential exploitation and abuse. To address this issue, national agencies and programs specifically designed to advocate for and legally protect OFWs should be developed.

Despite the challenges and limitations faced by existing agencies and programs, such as lack of resources and manpower, the Philippines is recognized as a pioneer in the development of policies to safeguard the rights of its migrant workers. The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) are two key agencies that have been instrumental in promoting the welfare of OFWs through various services, including legal assistance, repatriation, and skills training programs.

The Philippine government should prioritize the development of national agencies and programs designed to protect Overseas Filipino Workers from exploitation. While there may be challenges and imperfections in the current system, the Philippines has made significant strides in promoting the welfare of its migrant workers. By strengthening existing agencies, investing in resources, and advocating for the rights of OFWs, the government can make a positive impact on the lives of millions of Filipinos working abroad.

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