

A Phenomenological Inquiry on Filipino Migrant Workers in Japan

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600734>

Received: 10 June 2026; Accepted: 16 June 2026; Published: 04 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines the lived experiences of Filipino migrant workers in Japan. This phenomenological inquiry aims to investigate the quality of life and identify the challenges, coping mechanisms, and shared insights that impact their well-being. The study is grounded in the Capability Approach, which advocates for individual freedom to achieve well-being, and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which examines how individuals cope and address challenges in their environment. Eight (8) participants were selected using criterion sampling and participated in in-depth interviews from May 10 to 29, 2025. Data were collected and transcribed verbatim, then thematically analyzed using Moustakas' method of phenomenological data analysis. The findings revealed five emerging themes of challenges, including poor communal integration, a complex landscape, job insecurity, a language barrier, and financial difficulties, which significantly undermine the study participants' capability development to achieve well-being. Consequently, five identified themes of coping mechanisms and four themes of shared insights, utilizing both emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies, helped participants address and navigate the challenges they faced. Findings highlighted the intensive need for policy intervention in three key areas, referred to as T-P-C intervention: tapping essential support networks for shared responsibilities and dialogues, providing necessary tangible and intangible services and assistance, and creating opportunities for enhanced personal and economic resilience. The study's broader impacts contribute to the positive quality of life and improved well-being of the Filipino migrant workers community in Japan. Moreover, it provides valuable insights for improving welfare and labor migration policies. It serves as a constructive resource to enhance Japan-Philippines bilateral discussions, to strengthen coordination and programs for social welfare protection and labor agreements.

Keywords: Filipino Migrant Worker, Japan, Well-being, Phenomenology, Capability Approach

INTRODUCTION

Filipino migrant workers, locally known as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), constitute the third-largest group of foreign laborers in Japan. According to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2024), there are over 240,000 Filipinos in Japan, representing 10.7% of the total foreign labor population. The skills and contributions of OFWs significantly benefit both their host and home countries. However, prevalent issues and challenges pose a great threat to their well-being and negatively impact their quality of life.

Existing Literatures

Migrant workers face significant risks during recruitment and employment. Key issues include excessive fees leading to debt bondage, illegal withholding of identity documents, and deceptive practices that misrepresent job offers and hide poor working conditions. These conditions can involve long hours, inadequate rest, job mismatches, unlawful contract terminations, and renegotiated contracts that offer less favorable terms for migrant worker (IOM, 2023). Leighton (2020) noted that migrant workers often face labor market inequalities, such as wage disparities, limited access to employment and training, poor working conditions, and restricted social security and union rights. Recent ILO studies reveal that the wage gap for migrant workers is widening in some affluent countries, including Japan, where there is ongoing debate about the growing disparity between foreign and native workers.

A hostile workplace and unhealthy coworker relationships were a common dilemma among migrant workers. A recent study on Filipino care workers in Japan identified common theme stressors that negatively impact OFWs' working conditions. The study highlighted the social concepts of Japanese workplace bias, cultural differences, and issues such as bullying, honne-tatemae (private-public) life concept, and senpai-kouhai (senior-junior) relationship (Asis and Carandang, 2020).

Suzuki et al. (2020) examined the health challenges faced by foreign workers in Japan, highlighting issues related to language barriers and a lack of culturally sensitive health services. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Japan often encounter significant difficulties when attempting to access appropriate healthcare. A study focusing on Filipino women in Aichi Prefecture identified key negative factors affecting healthcare accessibility, such as inadequate emotional, informational, and practical support. The findings reveal that, despite having health insurance, migrant workers are frequently discouraged from seeking healthcare services because they struggle to articulate their health conditions and have difficulty understanding the diagnoses provided by health professionals (Yoshio et al., 2021). The language barrier creates significant challenges for migrant workers, increasing stress and complicating daily life. Paillard-Borg and Hallberg (2018) highlight that proficiency in the local language is crucial for expressing emotions and forming social connections.

Filipino migrant workers frequently experience homesickness and social isolation. A study in Ibaraki, Japan, found that Filipino migrant women often struggle with the Japanese language, which leads to low self-esteem and feelings of alienation. They are particularly susceptible to separation anxiety and emotional distress due to prolonged separation from their families, exacerbated by their strong family-oriented culture (Matsuo, 2021). The lack of social support makes communal integration challenging, contributing to feelings of isolation (Miller et al., 2019). Many OFWs report feelings of loneliness and a lack of support in coping with everyday challenges. The inability of OFWs to communicate in the local language, build meaningful relationships, and establish kinship with locals severely limits their participation in social activities and economic opportunities.

To tackle these challenges, the Philippines DMW organizes a pre-departure seminar to help OFWs become familiar with their new environment and improve their language skills, providing them with comprehensive life guidance (Ang & Tiongson, 2023). Consequently, the Japanese government also established a roadmap for achieving a society of harmonious coexistence with migrants. The roadmap identified critical measures and intervention points related to language education, social participation, enhanced information dissemination, and consultation systems with multilingual support centers and information services in Japan for foreign workers (Comprehensive Measure for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign Nationals, 2022). The official framework aims to support complementary protection efforts, helping to achieve the goals of the coined term harmonious coexistence with foreign nationals.

The literature highlights several challenges faced by Filipino migrant workers, offering valuable insights into how these issues impact their overall well-being. Building on these empirical and theoretical foundations, this study aims to understand not only the challenges and barriers they encounter but also their coping mechanisms and the realizations they can share with the global community.

Theoretical Framework

To gain a better understanding of the challenges and coping strategies of Filipino migrant workers in Japan, this study utilizes two theoretical frameworks. The first theory is the Capability Approach (CA) developed by Amartya Sen. This theory emphasizes the importance of individual freedom in achieving well-being. Sen (1999) emphasized that the approach cares about individual freedom to choose from the options available to them; these policies must focus on enhancing capabilities, with the government tasked with removing threats, barriers, and addressing challenges that hinder these freedoms. Nussbaum (2011) expanded the approach by identifying ten central capabilities that are essential for individuals to lead a purposeful life. Nussbaum argues that developing these capabilities is crucial for attaining well-being. Her list includes fundamental aspects such as health, bodily integrity, education, and various other factors that contribute to the overall quality of life. Further, Robeyns (2005) argues that the CA is an effective tool for welfare programs in social arrangements, guiding policy development, and evaluating social progress. The discussions on the challenges faced by OFWs provide a comprehensive understanding of capability deprivation, including the lack of access to resources and services, inequality, and a

lack of freedom to achieve well-being, which facilitates the identification of best practices and comparisons in the intervention points of migrant workers' programs and policy actions.

The second theory employed was the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which examines how individuals perceive and react to stressors and challenges in their environment. Coping refers to the thoughts and behaviors that individuals mobilize to manage stressful and challenging internal and external events or situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Coping strategies involve cognitive and behavioral methods and techniques to address stress or navigate challenges. The appraisal process shapes how the individual copes, which can lead to problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies. Problem-focused coping directly addresses challenges or stressors by employing problem-solving skills to eliminate or reduce environmental stressors. It includes developing solutions, weighing the pros and cons, and taking appropriate actions based on how thoughts and feelings impact behaviors. Conversely, individuals experiencing negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, fear, and anger in response to perceived threats and challenges are more likely to adopt emotion-focused coping strategies, as they recognize, regulate, and release negative emotions (Kivac, 2024). In the study, the theory explored the context and categorized the coping mechanisms and insights among Filipino migrant workers in Japan.

Research Focus and Objective

The quality of life of migrant workers should be a priority in the welfare policies and programs of every government. This study aligns with the International Labor Organization (ILO)'s mission to promote the rights of migrant workers to access essential resources and receive support for their well-being and personal development. To support Filipino migrant workers living abroad, this study explores the lived experiences of OFWs in Japan. The main objective is to examine their lived experiences and address the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges of Filipino migrant workers in Japan?
2. How did they cope with the challenges?
3. What are the insights of Filipino migrant workers in Japan?

Furthermore, the study holds significant value on a global scale as it aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No. 3 (SDG 3), which aims to promote good health and well-being for all. SDG 3 underscores the importance of ensuring that everyone, including migrant workers, has access to quality healthcare—a vital component of sustainable living. This vulnerable group often faces challenging living and working conditions, alongside issues like job insecurity, discrimination, social and cultural barriers, and emotional stress, all of which can severely impact their overall health and well-being. The study has broader social significance, as migrant workers frequently encounter stressful events in their daily lives. It is essential to provide opportunities for practical and tangible support systems that help OFWs deal with negative experiences. The study acknowledges limitations in consulting civic and private organizations that support OFWs in Japan, due to constraints in resources and time. Nonetheless, its findings can shed light and significantly contribute to expanding the assistance this group offers. Study analysis will effectively guide initiatives aimed at strengthening social and collective support for the OFW community. Also, the study recognizes limitation in its small data sample size; the demographic of OFWs was limited in the study, due to strong emphasis on achieving data saturation and in-depth exploration of individual lived experiences; however, the study findings can be significant for future replication and can be utilized to support future studies that may include a wider and more diversified group of OFWs in Japan or any other regions around the world.

Ultimately, this study aims to provide critical insights that can guide the development of new welfare and labor migration policies, as well as improve existing ones. It emphasizes the importance of creating accessible support systems in healthcare, community, education, economics, and legal matters, thereby fostering holistic human development and promoting the well-being of migrant workers. Additionally, by highlighting the quality of life of Filipino migrant workers in Japan, this study serves as a resource for enhancing discussions, coordination, and programs related to social welfare protection and labor agreements between Japan and the Philippines.

METHODOLOGY

Study Participants, Instrument and Data Collection

The study utilized criterion sampling to select key participants who met specific criteria, such as having lived in Japan for more than six months. This approach ensures that participants have fully immersed themselves in the environment and can effectively contribute to the study's overall objectives. Eight Filipino migrant workers, primarily residing in Metropolitan Tokyo and surrounding cities within the Kanto region, were chosen for the study. This sample size is sufficient to achieve data saturation, in accordance with the recommendations of Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological model.

The study used a validated and reliable interview guide questionnaire, which was partially adapted and created by the researcher to meet the research objectives. The study conducted in-depth interviews, specifically key informant interviews (KII), to collect detailed information and explore the individual experiences of the participants. The researcher maintained a robust audit trail to verify the findings and to retrace the decisions made throughout the research process. Field notes during the interview and field observations were secured. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were meticulously reviewed and translated from the vernacular language into English. To ensure participant anonymity, the researcher employed coding techniques to conceal sensitive information.

Design and Procedure

A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted, which serves as an interpretative process designed to distill individual experiences into a description of their universal essence (Van Manen, 1990). Data were analyzed thematically using Moustakas's (1994) hermeneutic phenomenological method. This approach examines a small number of subjects over an extended period to uncover patterns and relationships related to the meanings of the phenomena. The method identifies, analyzes, and describes a collection of texts to reveal common patterns of experience. The phenomenological analysis follows a structured process consisting of four key steps: epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis, all of which are integral to a transcendental phenomenological study. Additionally, Strauss and Corbin's systematic open coding technique was employed to break the data into meaningful segments and summarize the information into concise key phrases.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, the research employed the four pillars of trustworthiness identified by Lincoln and Guba (1989): credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The study strictly adheres to the importance of ethics in research and obtained certification from the University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee (UMERC) on May 10, 2025 (Protocol No. UMER-2025-150). This compliance ensures ethical responsibility, addresses sensitive issues, and safeguards the security, privacy, and confidentiality of research participants, thereby enhancing the overall validity of the research. Adhering to the Data Privacy Law, information, responses, and field notes were kept highly confidential and securely stored. File transfer protocols were used to guarantee data access and authentication. There was no existing conflict of interest or personal benefits gained from the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges of Filipino Migrant Workers in Japan

Table 1 presents the emerging themes of challenges faced by Filipino migrant workers in Japan, including poor communal integration, complex landscape, job insecurity, language barrier, and financial difficulty. The Capability Approach (CA) provides insight to identify threats that obstruct individual freedoms and constrain capacities for doing and being. Challenges presented in Table 1 are corrosive disadvantages that have a snowball effect, leading to deprivation of central capabilities, a term coined by Nussbaum to describe the lack of access to opportunities and resources that impact key capabilities. Nussbaum (2011) identified ten central capabilities: 1.

life, 2. bodily health, 3. bodily integrity, 4. senses, thought, and imagination, 5. emotions, 7. practical reason, 8. other species, 9. play, and 10. control over one's environment. In her work, the notion of fertile capabilities refers to functioning abilities that are productive and significantly beneficial in promoting other related capabilities, such as forming attachments, social affiliation, freedom of expression, healthcare, etc. These aspects of fertility can vary depending on the context, which helps support additional capabilities. In contrast, corrosive disadvantages represent the opposite of fertility; they refer to deprivation, which is the lack or absence of resources or opportunities.

Table1. Challenges of Filipino Migrant Workers in Japan

Themes	Deprived Central Capabilities	Sub-themes	Representative Responses
Poor Communal Integration	Bodily health Bodily integrity Emotional health Affiliations Control over One's environment	Transient Living	OFW6
		Homesickness	OFW2
		Social Isolation	OFW4
		Lack of community participation	OFW1
		Absence of self-exploration	OFW1
		Limited professional development	OFW6
Complex Landscape	Bodily health Bodily Integrity Emotional health Affiliations	Strained work culture	OFW3
		Cultural differences	OFW4
		Poor working relationship	OFW4
		Discrimination	OFW7
Job Insecurity	Bodily health Bodily integrity Emotional health Affiliation Control over One's environment	Salary disparities	OFW1
		Discrimination work-task related	OFW3
		Contractualization	OFW2
		Workplace strain	OFW4, OFW6
		Exploitation of agencies and company brokers	OFW8
Language Barrier	Bodily health Emotional health Affiliations Sense, imagination and thought Control over One's environment	Limited self-expression	OFW1
		Economic restrictions	OFW7
		Reduced social interaction	OFW3
		Miscommunication	OFW5
		Inaccessibility to social services	OFW3
		Extreme dependability to language support systems	OFW1
Financial Difficulty	Bodily health Emotional health Practical reason Control over One's environment	High-cost of living	OFW1
		Financial responsibilities	OFW1
		Sending remittances to Philippines	OFW2
		Stagnant paycheck	OFW6
		Debt bondage	OFW6
		Economic crises	OFW6

Poor Communal Integration

The first emerging theme of challenges is poor communal integration, identified threats of transient living, homesickness, social isolation, lack of community participation, absence of self-exploration, and limited professional development. These challenges are highly corrosive because they underpin a cluster of disadvantages that profoundly impact central capabilities, including emotions, bodily integrity, and affiliation.

"It is not easy to acquire an apartment without financial assistance. Whenever I change jobs, so is my location and apartment. Moreover, applying for a new apartment in Japan is very costly. Currently, I am still struggling with debt." (OFW6)

"It is not easy to be away from family. I feel lonely and stressed. It is not that easy." (OFW2)

"I feel empty; maybe it is anxiety. I always cry hard. I feel the loneliness. It was quiet; there is no one I could talk to."(OFW4).

"I am struggling. I am alone and do not know anyone. I do not know the language. I cannot explore myself; I often feel hindered by the system. I want to participate in the community, but I'm unsure of how or where to reach out. What are the options to help? I do not have any opportunity. It is hard."(OFW1)

"Staying here limits your growth, causing your skills and education to be wasted. It is hard to be alone, really hard. So, thinking of opportunities, in the Philippines, you can develop yourself and have wider opportunities, but here, everything stops". (OFW6)

The results showed that unstable living arrangements and jobs keep study participants struggling with debt and financial stress. Also, loneliness and isolation are detrimental to emotional and mental well-being. The lack of interaction translates to a struggle with social connectivity and communal integration, hindering their ability to access social network-forming support and a sense of belonging. Homesickness is a common experience during migration. Van Tilburg et al. (1996) describe homesickness as a state of distress that individuals experience when they leave their homes and find themselves in a new, unfamiliar environment. Evident in the responses of OFWs experiencing negative emotional states, the feelings of loneliness and a sense of having no one to rely on highlight the absence of a functioning support network. That could lead to a perceived depression and other conditions that manifest through various tangible symptoms, which can be physical, cognitive, and behavioral (Hack-Pola, 2008).

OFW1 is implied to be constrained by the structure and system of the host community; unable to secure a sense of control over one's environment and the inability to engage in communal activities, he is now skeptical about long-term residing in Japan. The lack of access to professional and economic opportunities, as well as skills mismatch, hinders OFWs from utilizing their earned education and skills. As a result, OFW6 experienced skill deterioration and frustration about unused education. This shows that some OFWs who have developed capabilities become idle in Japan compared to when they were in their home country. Nussbaum (2011) argues that one may lose internal capability in the absence of the opportunity to function. Moreover, Bilgili et al. (2015) argued that when workers operate below their skill level, it not only increases their risk of distress but also has a significant negative impact on their psycho-social wellbeing. The case of OFW6 suggests that deskilling, a process by which the skills required to perform a particular job are reduced or eliminated and broken down into simple tasks or routines, caused her emotional distress and frustration.

Complex Landscape

The second theme of challenges is a complex landscape, including issues of a strained work culture, differences in lifestyle, poor working relationships, and discrimination, which creates corrosive disadvantages that impact emotional and bodily health, bodily integrity, and affiliations.

"I cannot talk at work or express everything because they're "kankenai" (do not care). They have different social lives. Our relationship is mostly about work." (OFW3)

"The Japanese work only; they do not care about other things. Outside (work), they will not interact; it seems they do not know you. I do not have Japanese friends; I got tired of understanding them." (OFW4)

"I have a Japanese co-worker who often insults me and bullies me on task distribution, which makes me feel demotivated to work." (OFW4)

"I experienced discrimination while working with a Japanese coworker. Typically, we divided tasks evenly, but she assigned more work to me and frequently bossed me. It was not the first time; I had heard similar complaints from Filipino coworkers. They say she treated us the same way. I was upset; I decided to report the issue to the management. Discrimination exists, sometimes in indirect forms." (OFW7)

The idea of Japan as a homogeneous society is a complex and widely debated topic. Burgess (2007) argued that the concept of the Japanese people "Nihonjin", a racially unified nation with shared language, ethnicity, values, and social structure, poses a threat to effective cross-cultural coexistence. Japanese society struggles to accept "the others" or foreigners, which poses a significant social problem hindering social integration and efforts to cultivate a more inclusive and unified community that includes the foreign population (Nazary, 2004). Persistent prejudice among foreign workers is difficult to eliminate (Yamaguchi, 2013; Demelius, 2020). OFW3 and 4 mentioned that it is extremely hard to create a deep relationship with the locals, citing differences in cultural and social lifestyles. Freedom of expression and the ability to experience and produce works and actions of one's choice were being limited, as evident in most responses. Further, it affects how they navigate relationships and adapt effectively. The inability to form attachments and build social bases of self-respect free from any discrimination was experienced by OFW4 and 7.

Job Insecurity

The third emerging theme in the challenges faced by study participants in Japan is job insecurity. This issue encompasses several common problems, including salary disparities, discrimination, contractualization, workplace strain, and exploitation by agencies or company brokers. These barriers hinder OFWs from achieving economic stability, securing a safe and fair working environment, maintaining bodily health, boosting self-esteem, and pursuing professional development. These deprived central capabilities include bodily health, bodily integrity, emotions, and control over one's environment.

"It seems to be unfair because if you're not a native English speaker, the salary is only within this range (lower), unlike with the native Western employees, whose initial entry salary is higher. We are doing the same job, sometimes I even do more."(OFW1)

"I experienced discrimination in my previous job as an English teacher. My Japanese co-teacher told me that I shouldn't have gotten the position because I am not a native English speaker. That situation caused me significant stress and led to subsequent emotional breakdowns, ultimately prompting me to change jobs." (OFW3)

"My only concern is the yearly visa renewal. I am worried about whether immigration will approve it or not, and for how many years. I am hoping I'll get from 1 year to 3 years (visa validity) next time." (OFW2)

"I lose weight because of physical exhaustion. I was sick, I have developed sciatica (nerve damage), and I got it from lifting heavy elderly patients." (OFW4)

"My current management does not care at all. I got into a minor vehicle accident and wasn't able to seek medical care."(OFW6)

"I did not know what my job was; it was explained to me when I arrived here. I cannot back out because I need to pay for all the incurred expenses. I have an obligation to the broker, which is deducted automatically from my salary. I am in debt for a large amount." (OFW8)

According to the International Organization for Migration (2007), migrant workers are often vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and violence, which can begin during the recruitment phase based on factors such as gender, age, religion, race, or sexual orientation. Additionally, during employment, migrant workers frequently receive less favorable terms and conditions. Participants face greater job insecurity compared to their Western and Japanese counterparts, particularly in wages, workloads, and respect. Despite having a higher proficiency in English, OFW1, an Assistant Language Teacher, revealed the salary disparity between him and Western coworkers; meanwhile, OFW3 expressed the impact of discrimination on her emotional stability and self-

confidence. Affiliation is one of the central capabilities that emphasizes the importance of healthy social bases for equality, self-respect, and non-humiliation, which was limited in the experiences of the participants. Also, contractual positions and irregular employees, particularly those from dispatch companies and seasonal workers, face an unstable status in Japan (Tanno, 2010). These challenges contribute to job instability and insecurity from short-term contracts, making it difficult for individuals to obtain and maintain long-term residency.

Associated with poor health outcomes is a precarious working environment. Workers in hazardous environments or difficult working conditions with unsafe employment are associated with increased symptoms of depression and higher rates of psychological distress, which negatively impact an individual's well-being (Kim et al., 2016) and bodily health. OFW4, a health worker, shared the same dilemma. Moreover, insufficient workplace support can result in increased stress, diminished work motivation, and potential health risks, which is evident in the experience of OFW6. According to Hammig (2017), support from supervisors, coworkers, and occupational physicians is crucial for the long-term health and safety of workers.

Brokers and recruitment agencies play a role in processing applications for migrant workers. However, many Filipino workers seeking employment abroad encounter challenges related to high recruitment fees and debt bondage. One Filipino migrant worker, referred to as OFW8, shared that being under a company broker often results in substantial debt.

Language Barrier

The fourth emerging challenge is the language barrier, which relates to limited self-expression, restricted economic opportunities, miscommunication, limited social interaction, difficulties accessing medical and social services, and a strong desire for support and translation services. These disadvantages deprived central capabilities include bodily health, emotional health, affiliations, control over one's environment, and limited expression of senses, imagination, and thought.

"It is difficult to make a move, and I have no freedom to express myself because of the language barrier." (OFW1)

"It is different if you passed the JLPT exam (Japanese Language Proficiency Test); many will hire you, and you will have other opportunities. I got a prospective job offer at a hotel in Disneyland. I want it, but since I failed the exam, I lost the offer." (OFW7)

"I cannot even talk at work. I cannot express everything, my wants and desires." (OFW3)

"Like at work, sometimes you will get scolded; there is miscommunication because of the language barrier." (OFW5)

"I cannot go alone to see a doctor because of the language barrier. The language is challenging, and I am not good at it. I cannot fully express my medical conditions; it is hard to communicate with a doctor." (OFW3)

"It is difficult because I do not know the language, so it is hard to transact on a day-to-day basis. I needed someone who could assist and speak both Japanese and English. I need a third party." (OFW1)

Expressing oneself, understanding instructions, and difficulty engaging and interacting with the locals increase mental and emotional strain. Evident in the response of OFW 5, who mentioned that most troubles come from miscommunication at work. The inability to articulate thoughts and ideas restricts social interactions and the ability to form attachments and human associations with local co-workers. This deprived them of entering a meaningful relationship of mutual recognition. Language proficiency exams in Japan have been a significant challenge; passing them and mastering the language is a gateway to more job opportunities. Evident in the experience of OFW7, who was frustrated for repeatedly failing the Japanese language exam.

Furthermore, findings show participants struggle with daily transactions and express a strong need for translation services. Transactions require a decent amount of understanding and the ability to speak Japanese, but language

is a common barrier that discourages most OFWs from accessing social and healthcare services. OFW3 expressed that it's difficult to understand the diagnosis for a health practitioner.

Financial Difficulty

The fifth challenge theme is financial difficulty. Study participants encounter significant financial strain due to the high cost of living and various financial responsibilities, including sending remittances to their families in the Philippines. Additionally, stagnant wages, debt accumulation, and vulnerability to the effects of global economic crises further exacerbate their situation. These deprived them of their central capabilities, such as physical health, emotional well-being, the ability to exercise practical reason, and control over their environment. These factors hinder their ability to achieve financial stability, economic freedom, and sustainable living.

“The lifestyle here is so expensive. You just rent an apartment, and then pay bills and insurance. I even pay for pension.” (OFW1)

“My daily worries are about finances. You need to budget every day with all your bills, gas, and taxes, and send money to your family. I need to provide for my family, yet I also have needs here Nothing's left on me.” (OFW2)

“.. I need to send money to the Philippines. I cannot afford to be sick (OFW4).

“Right now, salaries are not increasing. The yen is depreciating, and commodities are expensive, so I cannot save; all my money goes out. Now, I heavily rely on a credit card.” (OFW6)

Most OFWs expressed that living in Japan is expensive and entails numerous financial obligations. Recurring sentiments supporting family back in the Philippines were in almost all responses. These financial strains cause severe anxiety, stress, and emotional burden. Highlighted in this discussion was OFW 2, who worries a lot about how to budget daily payables and remittances for her family. OFW 4 also emphasized that being sick and absent from work was never an option for her, as she needed to work to provide for her family in the Philippines. OFW6 also expressed concerns about stagnant paychecks and the declining value of the Japanese yen. These challenges lead her to rely on credit cards, which are an unhealthy alternative financial source, resulting in debt accumulation.

Coping Mechanisms of Filipino Migrant Workers in Japan

Table 2 outlines the recurring themes on coping mechanisms of Filipino migrant workers in Japan, highlighting both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. These strategies include enriched emotional health, enhanced adaptation, cultural identity, access to resources, and collective support.

Table 2. Coping Mechanisms of Filipino Migrant Worker in Japan

Themes	Coping Strategies	Sub-themes	Representative Responses
Enriched Emotional Health	Emotion-focused	Emotional regulation and stress management	OFW3
		Positivity	OFW5
		Achieved goals	OFW8
Enhanced Adaptation	Problem-focused	Financial management and strategies	OFW6, OFW3
		Recreational activities	OFW5
		Outlet of self-expression	OFW3
		Spiritual practices and activities	OFW8
		Personal Resilience	OFW7, OFW5
Cultural Identity	Problem -focused	Regular communication to family	OFW4
		Socialization fellow Filipinos	OFW8
		Filipino comfort foods and symbols	OFW6

Access Provision	to Problem -focused	Access to food, shelter and utilities	OFW5, OFW4
		Transportation services	OFW7, OFW8
		Access to healthcare system	OFW5
Collective Support	Emotion-focused and Problem-focused	Peer support	OFW2, OFW6, OFW1
		Familial support	OFW6
		Japanese company support	OFW8, OFW5
		Government assistance	OFW8, OFW1

Enriched Emotional Health

This coping strategy uses an emotion-focused approach, primarily addressing challenges related to poor communal integration and a complex landscape. The theme of improved mental health emphasizes how participants engaged in activities that promote positive emotional well-being, such as cultivating positivity, regulating emotions, and achieving personal goals.

“Sometimes you cannot really avoid negativity; however, it is vital to maintain a positive mindset.” (OFW5)

“I try now to control my mind and emotions. I developed anxiety, so I focused on my mental health. I focused on being positive to help myself cope.” (OFW3)

“Even if you’re tired, you will be motivated. We still need to strive, because we still have goals.” (OFW8)

Participants utilize emotion-focused strategies to cope with negative feelings. According to transactional theory, these coping strategies illustrate how thoughts can influence feelings, and how feelings, in turn, affect thoughts and behaviors. Individuals experiencing negative emotions and perceiving threats or challenges often employ methods to alleviate these feelings (Kivac, 2024). Research indicates that maintaining a positive attitude, practicing mindfulness, developing a clear and healthy mindset, and regulating emotions are effective ways to cope with anxiety and stressful situations.

Enhanced Adaptation

The second emerging theme in Table 2 is enhanced adaptation. The theme highlights the problem-focused strategies employed by participants to cope with financial difficulty, poor communal integration, language barrier, and a complex landscape. In the transactional model, the problem-focused coping strategy directly addresses challenges or stressors. It utilizes problem-solving skills to eliminate or reduce stressors, which include developing solutions, weighing the pros and cons, and taking appropriate action.

“Save money and lessen controllable expenses such as food. I strategize my food; I cook meals good from Wednesday to Saturday.” (OFW6).

“I also have budget planner.” (OFW3).

“Just internet, playing games, sleeping” (OFW5).

“I try to read books and write journals; I also express myself through social media and my hobbies”. (OFW3).

“I find ways to enjoy myself here. I am happy to travel, meet friends, walk, and exercise at the park”. (OFW2).

“I pray at home since the church is far from here. I continue to be strong through prayer.” (OFW2)

“To cope with loneliness, my family joined a Christian church, recommended by a Filipino friend. At least, we can divert our focus instead of thinking about problems”. (OFW8)

“I tried to adopt their lifestyle here, and I am more practical.” (OFW7)

“Just be positive even in difficult time” (OFW5)

Filipino migrant workers employed various direct actions to manage the challenges of living in Japan. Most OFWs focused on practical financial strategies, such as sound financial management, budgeting, and controlling expenses. Research indicates that recreational activities significantly impact mental health (Litwiller et al., 2017). Participants cultivate indoor hobbies and self-indulgent activities as valuable outlets for self-expression, helping to alleviate negative feelings and cope with social isolation and cultural barriers. OFW3 shared that writing and reading are her effective coping mechanisms with anxiety, and social media is an outlet for self-expression. Meanwhile, OFW2 enjoyed leisure activities, including outdoor and physical activities. Spiritual activities significantly help most participants to cope effectively with their problems, pursue their personal goals, and maintain overall well-being (George et al., 2020).

Personal resilience refers to the ability to adapt and recover from adversities and challenges. Masten (2018) describes resilience as "the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to significant challenges that threaten its function, viability, or development." Hutton (2016) emphasizes that coping strategies play a crucial role in enhancing individual resilience, self-worth, and a sense of empowerment. Many Filipino migrant workers have employed problem-focused coping strategies, allowing them to develop personal resilience over time. For example, OFW7 has become more flexible and practical by adapting a Japanese lifestyle; meanwhile, OFW5 adopts a positive mindset despite difficult times.

Cultural Identity

The third theme of coping mechanisms is cultural identity. This coping addresses challenges in poor communal integration, a complex landscape, and a language barrier. OFWs who experience homesickness and isolation often use problem-focused coping strategies to stay connected to their Filipino roots. These strategies include regular communication with family, gathering and socializing with fellow Filipinos, and enjoying Filipino comfort foods. These approaches are effective activities that help them adjust and gradually navigate life in their host community.

"I maintain regular communication with my partner and family. My family motivates me, even during difficult times." (OFW4)

"I play basketball with Filipino friends." (OFW8).

"My coping is food, that's my comfort. In the Philippines, there is a lot of delicious food compared to here." (OFW6)

Giddens (1984) argues that individuals can generally resolve dilemmas by constructing their self and personal identity through interaction with others. Cultural social identity refers to a sense of belonging that affects other identities, such as ethnic and national social identities (Moha, 2005). Therefore, maintaining cultural identity fosters a positive self-image and provides a sense of belonging. Evidently, most OFWs maintained close ties with Filipino family and friends, as well as constantly attached to the symbolism of being a Filipino to combat cultural differences, loneliness, and social isolation.

Access to Provision

The fourth emerging theme highlighted in Table 2 is access to provisions. The study findings revealed that OFWs in Japan have significant access to essential resources, such as food, shelter, utilities, transportation, and health services, which are tangible tools that directly solve challenges related to financial difficulty and the complex landscape. With these supports, study participants effectively coped and navigated the socio-economic barriers in their environment.

"The company assisted us; our "kaisha" company has designated apartments in each branch." (OFW4)

"The company assisted me in getting an apartment and connecting to utilities. I usually eat at work because they give me free food." (OFW5)

"The company provides a fare allowance reimbursed at the end of the month." (OFW7)

"We have a company carpool, "Suyako," so I do not worry much about going to work." (OFW8)

"We have free vaccines and undergo monthly physical tests from the company." (OFW5)

Sen's capability theory on poverty addresses the issue of achieving freedom to access provisions such as food, shelter, health, and education, as these are essential for human development. The approach goes beyond the lack of resources or economic poverty, the deprivation of basic capabilities and freedom to lead a valued life (Sen, 1999). The results show that participants received substantial support from their Japanese companies.

Collective Support

The last emerging theme in Table 2 is collective support, which addresses challenges of financial difficulty, job insecurity, poor communal integration, and a complex landscape. The responses showed that peers and family offer emotional support and foster resilience, while assistance received from coworkers, the company, and the government provides direct, practical solutions to reduce and eliminate economic challenges and socio-cultural barriers.

"A friend helped me to apply for an apartment." (OFW2)

"When I arrived here, I shared a house with my friends from the Philippines. They helped me open a bank account and get a mobile number. I had no problem. It was difficult if I was alone; really difficult." (OFW6)

Set a schedule for meeting friends when there are events to celebrate, drinking, and karaoke (OFW1).

"Every day I call my family. Communicating with family is very important to me." (OFW3)

Sen's (1994) poverty theory emphasized that access to resources should extend beyond economic definitions; thus, support should be tangible and intangible, including access to information, language assistance, social networks, and various forms of functional, moral, and emotional support. It creates a safe space, fosters social connections and solidarity, and helps alleviate feelings of loneliness. Emotional support from loved ones is fundamentally an emotion-focused approach that alleviates the emotional impact of stressors. Abo-Rass et.al. (2025) argue that peer support fosters resilience, which is evident in the responses of OFW 2 and 6, who recalled their early struggles in setting up in Japan; they expressed gratitude to their friends for the functional support they received. Meanwhile, familial support is essential for the successful integration, as the presence of family can offer comfort, a sense of belonging, and stability in a new environment. The findings show that study participants maintain a strong connection with their families back in the Philippines. Most responses highlighted the importance of communication and sending remittances to their families.

"When I processed my documents at the city hall, the company broker assisted me. They're the ones who transact, because I am 0% in Japanese." (OFW8)

"If I have questions (at work), someone helps and translates for me." (OFW5)

"The Japanese government offers childcare assistance, which is especially helpful since I have my son and wife with me." (OFW8)

"I received financial assistance from Japan (government) during the pandemic. It was a big help since it was hard to find a job at that time." (OFW1).

Direct solutions, such as transactional and financial support, are effective problem-focused strategies that OFWs received from Japanese companies and the government. Due to language barriers, companies offer technical assistance when dealing with government offices. Brokers or company staff handle the complex procedures

involved in residence registration, insurance, and pension applications. The importance of language support has been evident in the case of OFW8 and OFW5. Also, the Japanese government supports families with children in Japan by providing child allowances, fee-free education, and medical subsidies. These programs are also available to foreign families who meet the necessary criteria. OFW8, who has been living in Japan with his family, expressed his gratitude for the childcare assistance he received from the Japanese government. This support has been helpful for their family. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, OFW1 expressed gratitude for the financial grant he received from the Japanese government, noting it was vital since he had been unemployed due to business closures.

Shared Insights of Filipino Migrant Workers in Japan

In Table 3, emerging themes in the shared insights of Filipino migrant workers in Japan are sustained well-being, cultural integration, financial stability, and societal inclusion. These insights were based on knowledge used for reflection and can be a basis for reappraisal. Reappraisal is a commonly used emotion regulation strategy that involves reframing the meaning of a situation to modify its emotional impact and assess an existing threat (Gross, 1988). The key themes highlighted the insights and realizations of Filipino migrant workers in Japan, showcasing the use of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Additionally, these OFWs applied their learning in practical ways, which are valuable for sharing with the global community.

Table 3. Shared Insights of Filipino Migrant Workers in Japan

Themes	Coping Strategies	Sub-themes	Representative Responses
Sustained Well-being	Emotion-focused	Stress management	OFW3
		Mental and emotional health	OFW7
		Facilitate personal growth	OFW2
		Cultivate positive values	OFW7
Cultural Integration	Problem-focused	Mastery of language	OFW1
		Cultural knowledge and events	OFW1
Financial Stability	Problem-focused	Financial Discipline	OFW8
		Cultivate good budgeting strategies	OFW8
		Safe savings and investments	OFW3
Societal Inclusions	Problem-focused and Emotion-focused	Socialization	OFW3
		Good interpersonal relationships "pakikisama"	OFW5

Sustained Well-being

The first emerging theme in the shared insights of Filipino migrant workers in Japan is sustained well-being, utilizing an emotion-focused approach. Most of the OFWs' realizations emphasized the value of sustained well-being, especially in maintaining good health and a sound mind. Participants underlined the importance of managing stress effectively by prioritizing mental health and emotional regulation. Moreover, OFW7 shared that challenging experiences facilitated personal growth and maturity. Also highlighted by OFW2 is the importance of cultivating positive values, including positivity, humility, and extending patience at work. Participants manage emotions by changing how they interpret challenges, as well as reframing their personal views and appraising how they should react. These are valuable coping strategies that they want to share with other migrant workers.

"I am trying to control my mind and emotions. After having anxiety, I started to focus on my mental health. I am focusing on being positive, too." (OFW3)

"Being healthy is a must." (OFW7).

"I have matured because of my difficult experiences. I learned not to easily give up." (OFW2)

"Remain humble at work and love your job; it is important to extend patience." (OFW7)

Cultural Integration

The second emerging theme, based on shared insights from OFWs, is cultural integration. Berry (1997) argues that acculturation theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the cultural transitions that migrants experience when moving from one cultural environment to another. Rooted in the theory of transactional stress and coping, examines the elements, processes, and consequences of migration and cultural transition. Indeed, cultural integration is vital for the effective transition and acculturation of migrant workers in a new, unfamiliar environment, as it helps them manage stress and navigate their daily life. OFW1 states that cultural knowledge and mastery of the language are necessary tools to cultivate before living in another country. Participants emphasized the need for the government's intervention to create opportunities for OFWs to receive cultural education, strengthen language skill development, and organize a solidarity fair promoting support sharing and respect for mutual co-existence.

"If they didn't master the language, they'll face difficulty expressing themselves. Know the language and culture before deciding to work and live abroad." (OFW1)

"I hope the government could have a platform for a support system of migrants, organize community events we can attend, and seminars on Japanese culture, to help us cope." (OFW1)

Financial Stability

The third emerging theme on the shared insights of OFWs is financial stability. To survive during financially challenging times, it is essential to adopt a problem-focused approach by applying practical and direct solutions, and moderating behaviors, such as being thrifty and financially disciplined. OFW8 stated the importance of cultivating good budgeting habits. At the same time, one OFW offers a valuable strategy that emphasizes the importance of securing a personal bank account in the home country and allocating even small savings. OFW3 highlighted the importance of preparing for the future, investing in personal development, and saving money.

"Need to be strict with finances. You need to be thrifty and practical. It is effective to have a separate bank account in the Philippines and save even a little." (OFW8)

"Prepare for the future, invest in yourself, and save." (OFW3)

Societal Inclusions

The last emerging theme in Table 3 is societal inclusions. The fundamental right of individuals to access a safe and inclusive community was evident in the responses of most OFWs. OFWs encouraged the incoming migrants to be proactive in seeking connections and maintaining positive relationships, and to cultivate the Filipino spirit of solidarity, "pakikisama." These entail framing how they cultivate and incorporate personal values to alleviate feelings of loneliness and navigate the complexity of social relationships.

"Try to socialize at work, this will help you cope." (OFW3)

"The lesson here is that you really need to establish a good relationship, need to have "pakikisama". (OFW5)

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study examined the challenges and coping strategies of Filipino migrant workers in Japan. The researcher employed qualitative methods, specifically phenomenology, to gain an understanding of the lives of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Key challenges affecting their well-being include poor community integration, job insecurity, language barriers, financial problems, and a complex environment. To cope with these challenges,

OFWs use both emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies, such as improving mental health, adapting better, maintaining cultural identity, accessing resources, and seeking support from others. The workers also shared four main insights for future migrant workers and others: maintaining well-being, cultural integration, financial stability, and social inclusion. Overall, this study serves as a valuable resource for improving welfare programs to assist the Filipino migrant worker community in Japan.

The study recommends that the Philippines Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) implement policies focusing on three key areas: Tap, Provide, and Create (T-P-C). 1. Tap: tapping and engaging support networks for shared responsibilities and collaborative dialogues. Promoting and strengthening cooperation among key stakeholders, including home and host governments, civic organizations, employers, agencies, intermediaries, and migrant workers, to address labor issues, health and safety, discrimination, and access to legal support. 2. Provide: providing essential tangible and intangible services and assistance. To bridge current gaps in support services, the DMW should mobilize groups in Japan to provide information, education, and emotional support. Designated personnel should monitor these initiatives and gather data from OFW communities. It is helpful to institutionalize help hotlines and create spaces for sharing experiences, intensifying collective support. For instance, establishing a structured environment for sharing experiences, emotions, and conducting stress debriefing activities can help mitigate the effects of emotional and mental strain and traumatic incidents, facilitate normal recovery processes, and identify individuals who may require additional support. 3. Create: creating opportunities for personal development, solidarity, and economic resilience. The study emphasizes the importance of financial literacy programs and recommends exploring financial cooperatives as an alternative resource to mitigate financial struggles and eliminate debt issues. In addition to overcoming the challenges of isolation, language, and cultural differences, the study advocates the formulation and regulation of a government-owned digital or media platform that promotes socio-cultural orientation, language education, and psycho-social support. The platform would promote solidarity and help strengthen cultural identity. By concentrating on T-P-C areas, efficient and effective assistance can be provided to alleviate the challenges faced by Filipino migrant workers in Japan. Furthermore, to enhance the overall efficacy, transferability, and application of the research findings to a large scale, the study encourages replication on the challenges and coping mechanisms of a more diverse group of Filipino migrant workers across different occupations, regions, and migration durations. Utilizing a mixed-method approach to correlate qualitative findings with quantitative measurements of well-being is highly recommended. Future research focusing on the development of central capabilities among migrant workers, along with related theories of well-being and relevant interventions mentioned in this study, is strongly recommended.

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