

Legal Awareness and Access to Legal Assistance among Overseas Filipino Workers in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Basis for an OFW Legal Support Awareness Framework

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ABSTRACT

This study examined legal awareness and access to legal assistance among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, as a basis for developing an OFW Legal Support Awareness Framework. It addressed the practical gap between the existence of migrant worker support mechanisms and OFWs' ability to understand, locate, and use such assistance when legal or legally related concerns arise. Using a quantitative descriptive-correlational and predictive design, data were gathered through an anonymous online questionnaire from 60 eligible adult Filipino OFWs residing or working in Riyadh. Participants were recruited through online and referral-based sampling due to the absence of a complete public sampling frame; therefore, the findings are analytically useful but not fully generalizable to all OFWs in Riyadh. The questionnaire operationalized legal awareness, access to legal assistance, and barriers affecting access through five-point Likert-scale indicators and demonstrated excellent internal consistency for the major scales. Frequency, percentage, weighted mean, standard deviation, Spearman's rank correlation, and multiple regression were used to describe patterns and test relationships among variables. Results showed that the most common legal issues were employment disputes, contract-related concerns, unpaid or delayed salary/wages, and benefits or end-of-service pay concerns. Respondents reported high legal awareness but only moderate access to legal assistance, based on the study's benchmark scale. Barriers were also moderate, particularly lack of time due to work schedule, fear or hesitation in reporting concerns, and lack of required documents. Legal awareness had a significant positive relationship with access to legal assistance and significantly predicted access. The proposed framework emphasizes legal issue recognition, legal awareness strengthening, referral pathways, barrier reduction support, and community and digital dissemination.

Keywords: legal awareness, access to legal assistance, Overseas Filipino Workers, Riyadh, migrant welfare

INTRODUCTION

Overseas employment remains an important part of Filipino life because it supports family income, education, housing, and long-term security. At the same time, migration exposes workers to unfamiliar legal, cultural, and employment environments. For Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), legal concerns may arise from employment disputes, unpaid or delayed wages, contract-related concerns, documentation problems, immigration matters, recruitment issues, or workplace conflicts. These concerns become more difficult when workers are unsure about their rights, the available remedies, the complaint procedure, or the proper office to approach.

Saudi Arabia remains a major destination for Filipino migrant workers. The Philippine Statistics Authority reported that Saudi Arabia accounted for 21.9% of the total number of OFWs in 2024, making it the leading destination among Asian countries (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2025). This makes Riyadh an important setting for examining legal awareness and access to legal assistance, especially because the capital hosts many Filipino workers across different occupations and employment arrangements.

The Philippine legal framework recognizes migrant worker protection. Republic Act No. 8042, as amended by Republic Act No. 10022, provides for the protection and welfare of migrant workers and overseas Filipinos in distress, including legal assistance mechanisms. Republic Act No. 11641 later created the Department of Migrant Workers to strengthen and consolidate services for OFWs. These laws show that support mechanisms exist; however, the existence of such mechanisms does not automatically mean that workers know how to use them or feel confident seeking help.

Access to justice literature emphasizes that legal problems should be understood from the perspective of ordinary people who experience them in daily life. Access is not limited to courts or formal agencies; it also includes the ability to recognize that a problem has a legal dimension, obtain reliable information, seek advice, and pursue realistic remedies (OECD & Open Society Foundations, 2019; World Justice Project, 2019). This perspective is particularly relevant to migrant workers because legal problems often occur away from home and within an unfamiliar host-country system.

This study therefore examined legal awareness and access to legal assistance among OFWs in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Specifically, it identified common legal issues, determined levels of legal awareness and access to assistance, assessed barriers affecting access, tested the relationship and predictive effects among the variables, and developed an OFW Legal Support Awareness Framework based on the findings.

The study contributes to social science and migrant welfare research in three ways. First, it provides empirical evidence on the gap between legal awareness and usable access among OFWs in a major Gulf destination. Second, it integrates access-to-justice theory with practical service-use barriers experienced by migrant workers. Third, it translates statistical findings into an applied awareness and referral framework that may be adapted by OFW organizations, community leaders, and support institutions without replacing formal legal advice or official government assistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal awareness refers to a person's understanding of rights, obligations, remedies, procedures, and sources of assistance. In the context of OFWs, it does not require technical legal expertise. Rather, it means practical awareness that concerns such as unpaid wages, contract substitution, documentation problems, recruitment issues, or workplace disputes may require formal guidance, referral, or legal assistance. This is connected to legal empowerment, which focuses on helping people use legal information in practical situations (Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor & United Nations Development Programme, 2008).

People-centred justice stresses that legal systems must be assessed according to whether they respond to the actual needs and capacities of people (OECD, 2021). Legal needs research shows that people may fail to obtain justice not only because institutions are absent, but also because they lack knowledge, confidence, time, documentation, or practical support (World Justice Project, 2023). For migrant workers, such barriers may be intensified by employer dependence, unfamiliar procedures, language or communication constraints, and fear of consequences.

Studies on migrant worker protection identify wage theft, recruitment-related concerns, delayed salaries, contract issues, and limited access to remedies as persistent problems (Farbenblum & Berg, 2021; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). Research and policy literature on migrant workers also emphasize the importance of information, referral systems, documentation support, and worker-friendly access channels (ILO, 2024; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024). These themes support the present study's focus on the relationship between legal awareness and practical access to legal assistance.

The theoretical basis of the study draws from the Theory of Planned Behavior and Andersen's Behavioral Model of Services Use. The Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that a person's beliefs, perceived control, and intention influence behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In this study, legal awareness may support an OFW's confidence and readiness to seek assistance. Andersen's model explains that service use is affected by enabling and limiting

factors (Andersen, 1995), which aligns with the study's inclusion of barriers such as fear, lack of time, uncertainty about procedures, communication barriers, documentation issues, limited digital access, and lack of confidence.

Despite the availability of literature on migrant worker vulnerability, fewer studies examine how OFWs in Riyadh operationally understand legal assistance and how awareness, practical barriers, and access interact statistically. This gap is important because support mechanisms can exist in policy but remain underused when workers lack procedural clarity, documentation readiness, time-compatible channels, or confidence to seek help. The present study addresses this gap by measuring the constructs separately and testing their relationship and predictive value.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study used a quantitative descriptive-correlational and predictive research design. The descriptive component identified common legal issues, measured levels of legal awareness, access to legal assistance, and barriers affecting access, and identified preferred support measures. The correlational component tested the relationship between overall legal awareness and overall access to legal assistance. The predictive component used multiple regression to determine whether legal awareness dimensions, overall legal awareness, and barriers predicted access to legal assistance.

Respondents and sampling

The respondents were 60 qualified OFWs currently residing or working in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Inclusion criteria required that participants be Filipino citizens, at least 18 years old, currently residing or working in Riyadh, and willing to provide electronic informed consent. Participants were recruited through purposive online and referral-based approaches using OFW community contacts and digital communication channels. This approach was appropriate because there was no publicly accessible, complete sampling frame of qualified OFWs in Riyadh. To reduce inappropriate participation, screening questions were placed at the beginning of the form, and only responses meeting all eligibility criteria were included. The sample provides useful evidence from reachable and qualified OFWs; however, it is not claimed to be statistically representative of the entire OFW population in Riyadh or Saudi Arabia. This limitation was explicitly considered in interpreting generalizability and selection bias.

Table 1: Screening Eligibility of Respondents

Screening criterion	Qualified respondents	Percentage
Filipino citizen	60	100.00%
Currently residing or working in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	60	100.00%
At least 18 years old	60	100.00%
Voluntary consent to participate	60	100.00%

Note. N = 60. Percentages are based on the total number of valid respondents.

Instrumentation and operationalization

Data were gathered through an anonymous online questionnaire containing screening and consent questions, a checklist of common legal issues, Likert-scale items on legal awareness, Likert-scale items on access to legal assistance, Likert-scale items on barriers affecting access, and preferred support measures for the proposed framework. The Likert items used a five-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire avoided collection of names, employer names, case numbers, passport numbers, iqama numbers, or other personal identifiers.

Table 2: Operationalization of Key Variables and Measures

Variable	Operational definition in the study	Measurement/indicator
Legal awareness	Practical understanding of rights, obligations, remedies, procedures, official channels, and referral points relevant to OFW legal concerns.	Five Likert dimensions: basic rights and responsibilities; employment-related remedies; complaint procedures; Philippine government assistance channels; proper referral points.
Access to legal assistance	Respondents' ability, confidence, and readiness to obtain legal information, contact channels, seek referral, and use support mechanisms.	Five Likert dimensions: obtaining legal information; contacting assistance channels; seeking advice or referral; confidence in support services; actual or intended use.
Barriers affecting access	Practical, emotional, procedural, communication, documentation, digital, and confidence-related constraints that may discourage help-seeking.	Seven Likert dimensions: fear/hesitation; lack of time; uncertainty; language/communication barriers; lack of documents; limited digital/information access; lack of confidence.
Common legal issues	Legal or legally related concerns encountered or perceived by OFWs in Riyadh.	Multiple-response checklist of employment, contract, wage, benefit, documentation, immigration, workplace, termination/resignation, and recruitment concerns.
Preferred support measures	Practical support tools considered helpful for an OFW Legal Support Awareness Framework.	Multiple-response checklist of document checklists, contact directories, FAQs, referral flowcharts, Tagalog explanations, confidential inquiry options, webinars, infographics, and community campaigns.

Note. The operationalization links the research questions, questionnaire items, and statistical analyses.

Validity and reliability

Content validity was addressed by aligning the questionnaire items with the study objectives, literature review, operational definitions, theoretical framework, and the specific variables measured in the study. Item wording was kept simple and non-technical so that respondents with different educational and occupational backgrounds could understand the questions. The anonymous design and avoidance of personally identifying details were intended to reduce response fear and improve the likelihood of honest answers. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for the three main scales.

Table 3: Reliability of the Main Survey Scales

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	Interpretation
Legal Awareness	0.927	Excellent internal consistency
Access to Legal Assistance	0.931	Excellent internal consistency
Barriers Affecting Access	0.941	Excellent internal consistency

Note. Cronbach's alpha values above .90 indicate excellent internal consistency for the three major scales and support the reliability of the questionnaire for the present sample.

Data analysis

Frequency and percentage were used for checklist-type items because respondents could identify multiple legal issues and support preferences. Weighted mean and standard deviation were used for Likert-scale dimensions to describe central tendency and variation in legal awareness, access to legal assistance, and barriers affecting access. For legal awareness and access to legal assistance, the scale benchmarks were interpreted as follows: 4.21 to 5.00, Very High; 3.41 to 4.20, High; 2.61 to 3.40, Moderate; 1.81 to 2.60, Low; and 1.00 to 1.80, Very Low. A High rating means that the construct is generally present but can still be improved, while a Moderate rating means that the construct is only partly present and requires targeted strengthening. For barriers, the same numerical ranges were interpreted as Very High Barrier to Very Low Barrier. Spearman's rank correlation was selected because the study used Likert-scale survey data and examined a monotonic relationship between awareness and access. Multiple regression was used to determine whether the dimensions of legal awareness, and later overall legal awareness and barriers, significantly predicted access to legal assistance. A .05 level of significance was used in all inferential tests.

RESULTS

Common legal issues

Respondents were allowed to select more than one issue. The most frequently reported legal or legally related issues were employment disputes, contract-related concerns, unpaid or delayed salary/wages, and benefits or end-of-service pay concerns. The multiple-response pattern suggests that OFW legal concerns may overlap and are not always limited to a single issue.

Table 4: Common Legal Issues Encountered by OFWs

Common legal issue	Frequency	Percentage
Employment dispute	26	43.33%
Contract-related concern	24	40.00%
Unpaid or delayed salary/wages	21	35.00%
Concern involving benefits or end-of-service pay	19	31.67%
Documentation concern	18	30.00%
Immigration-related concern	18	30.00%
Workplace conflict	16	26.67%
Concern involving termination or resignation	14	23.33%
Recruitment-related problem	9	15.00%
Others	5	8.33%

Note. Multiple responses were allowed; therefore, percentages do not total 100 percent.

Level of legal awareness

The overall legal awareness mean was 3.79, interpreted as High under the 3.41-4.20 benchmark. This means that respondents generally recognized their basic rights, remedies, procedures, assistance channels, and referral points. All five legal awareness dimensions were rated High. Awareness of basic rights and responsibilities received the highest mean, while awareness of complaint procedures received the lowest mean among the awareness dimensions, suggesting that procedural guidance remains a priority area for improvement.

Table 5: Level of Legal Awareness among OFWs

Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Awareness of basic rights and responsibilities	3.90	0.64	High
Awareness of employment-related legal remedies	3.81	0.64	High
Awareness of complaint procedures	3.67	0.64	High
Awareness of Philippine government assistance channels	3.86	0.63	High
Awareness of proper referral points for legal concerns	3.73	0.56	High
Overall legal awareness	3.79	0.52	High

Note. Weighted mean interpretation: 4.21-5.00 Very High; 3.41-4.20 High; 2.61-3.40 Moderate; 1.81-2.60 Low; 1.00-1.80 Very Low.

Level of access to legal assistance

The overall mean for access to legal assistance was 3.32, interpreted as Moderate under the 2.61-3.40 benchmark. A Moderate result means that access was present but inconsistent or only partly usable. The ability to seek advice or referral was rated High, but the ability to obtain legal information, contact assistance channels, use support services confidently, and actually or intentionally use assistance mechanisms remained Moderate. This pattern indicates that awareness does not automatically translate into practical access.

Table 6: Level of Access to Legal Assistance among OFWs

Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Ability to obtain legal information	3.24	0.66	Moderate
Ability to contact assistance channels	3.27	0.73	Moderate
Ability to seek advice or referral	3.42	0.70	High
Confidence in using legal support services	3.32	0.69	Moderate
Actual or intended use of legal assistance mechanisms	3.36	0.64	Moderate
Overall access to legal assistance	3.32	0.59	Moderate

Note. Weighted mean interpretation: 4.21-5.00 Very High; 3.41-4.20 High; 2.61-3.40 Moderate; 1.81-2.60 Low; 1.00-1.80 Very Low.

Barriers affecting access

Barriers affecting access obtained an overall mean of 3.11, interpreted as a Moderate Barrier. A Moderate Barrier means that the constraint is not extreme but remains strong enough to limit timely and confident help-seeking. The highest-rated barrier was lack of time due to work schedule, followed by fear or hesitation in reporting concerns and lack of required documents. These results indicate that access concerns are not only informational but also practical, procedural, and confidence-related.

Table 7: Barriers Affecting Access to Legal Assistance

Barrier dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Fear or hesitation in reporting concerns	3.23	0.66	Moderate Barrier
Lack of time due to work schedule	3.36	0.65	Moderate Barrier

Barrier dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Uncertainty about procedures	3.02	0.72	Moderate Barrier
Language or communication barriers	2.95	0.72	Moderate Barrier
Lack of required documents	3.18	0.65	Moderate Barrier
Limited digital or information access	2.99	0.70	Moderate Barrier
Lack of confidence in seeking formal assistance	3.03	0.60	Moderate Barrier
Overall barriers affecting access	3.11	0.55	Moderate Barrier

Note. Barrier mean interpretation: 4.21-5.00 Very High Barrier; 3.41-4.20 High Barrier; 2.61-3.40 Moderate Barrier; 1.81-2.60 Low Barrier; 1.00-1.80 Very Low Barrier.

Relationship and predictive effects

Spearman's rank correlation showed a statistically significant positive relationship between overall legal awareness and overall access to legal assistance ($\rho = .663$, $p < .001$), indicating that respondents with higher legal awareness tended to report better practical access. Multiple regression also showed that the five dimensions of legal awareness significantly predicted access to legal assistance as a group. Awareness of basic rights and responsibilities and awareness of employment-related legal remedies emerged as significant individual predictors. A second regression model using overall legal awareness and barriers was also significant; however, legal awareness was the only clearly significant individual predictor. These results support the conclusion that awareness is a central driver of access, while barriers must still be addressed through practical support tools and flexible assistance pathways.

Table 8: Relationship and Regression Summary

Analysis	Key statistic	Interpretation/decision
Overall legal awareness and overall access to legal assistance	Spearman $\rho = 0.663$, $p < .001$	Significant positive relationship; reject H01
Legal awareness dimensions predicting access	$F(5, 54) = 13.57$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .557$	Significant model; reject H02
Significant individual predictors in awareness model	Basic rights and responsibilities: $B = 0.323$, $p = .013$; employment-related legal remedies: $B = 0.301$, $p = .026$	Both were significant positive predictors
Overall awareness and barriers predicting access	$F(2, 57) = 33.57$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .541$	Significant model; legal awareness significant, barriers marginal/non-significant

Note. Significance level = .05. Dependent variable for regression analyses: overall access to legal assistance. H01 and H02 refer to the first and second null hypotheses, respectively.

Preferred support measures

The respondents preferred practical, accessible, and easy-to-understand support measures. The highest-ranked measures were document preparation checklists, a list of proper assistance channels and contact points, frequently asked questions, and a step-by-step referral guide or flowchart.

Table 9: Preferred Support Measures for the Proposed Framework

Preferred support measure	Frequency	Percentage
Document preparation checklist for legal concerns	48	80.00%
List of proper assistance channels and contact points	46	76.67%
Frequently asked questions about common OFW legal concerns	45	75.00%
Step-by-step referral guide or flowchart	45	75.00%
Simple OFW legal awareness guide	44	73.33%
Filipino/Tagalog explanations of legal assistance procedures	43	71.67%
Confidential or anonymous inquiry option	39	65.00%
Online orientation or webinar on legal awareness	38	63.33%
Digital posters or infographics for OFW groups	37	61.67%
Community-based legal awareness campaign	32	53.33%
Others	2	3.33%

Note. Multiple responses were allowed; therefore, percentages do not total 100 percent.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that legal concerns among OFWs in Riyadh are strongly connected to employment and contract-related matters. Employment disputes, contract concerns, unpaid or delayed wages, and benefits or end-of-service pay concerns were the leading issues. These findings are consistent with migrant worker literature identifying wages, contracts, recruitment practices, documentation, and access to remedies as recurring areas of vulnerability (Farbenblum & Berg, 2021; ILO, 2022; IOM, 2024).

A key finding is the difference between legal awareness and actual access. Respondents reported high legal awareness, but only moderate access to legal assistance. This suggests that knowing rights, remedies, or assistance channels does not automatically translate into the ability to contact offices, prepare documents, follow procedures, or confidently use available services. This supports people-centred justice literature, which emphasizes that legal information must be practical, reachable, and usable from the standpoint of the people experiencing the problem (OECD, 2021; OECD & Open Society Foundations, 2019).

The significant positive relationship between legal awareness and access to legal assistance indicates that OFWs who have higher awareness also tend to report better access. The regression findings further suggest that awareness of basic rights and responsibilities and awareness of employment-related legal remedies are especially important predictors of access. This implies that awareness-building efforts should begin with practical rights and common employment remedies rather than technical legal explanations alone.

Barriers were moderate overall and were led by lack of time due to work schedule, fear or hesitation in reporting concerns, and lack of required documents. These barriers show that access is affected by real-life conditions. OFWs may know assistance exists but may still find it difficult to act because of time limitations, fear, uncertainty, or lack of preparedness. Therefore, an effective framework should not only raise awareness but also reduce barriers through flexible digital access, document checklists, Filipino/Tagalog explanations, confidentiality options, and clear referral guides.

Policy and practice implications

The findings have direct implications for migrant welfare programs and community-based support initiatives. Awareness activities should focus on the issues most frequently reported by respondents, particularly

employment disputes, contract concerns, unpaid or delayed wages, and benefits or end-of-service pay. Assistance materials should not merely state rights in general terms; they should explain what workers can prepare, which channel they may contact, what documents may be useful, and how confidential inquiry can be initiated. Because lack of time was the highest-rated barrier, digital, after-hours, and mobile-friendly information channels are especially important for OFWs whose work schedules limit access to offices during regular hours.

Proposed OFW Legal Support Awareness Framework

Based on the findings, the proposed framework contains five connected components: legal issue recognition, legal awareness strengthening, access pathway and referral, barrier reduction support, and community and digital dissemination. These components are intended to help OFWs recognize legal concerns early, understand basic rights and remedies, locate proper assistance channels, prepare documents, and use accessible information materials through community and digital platforms.

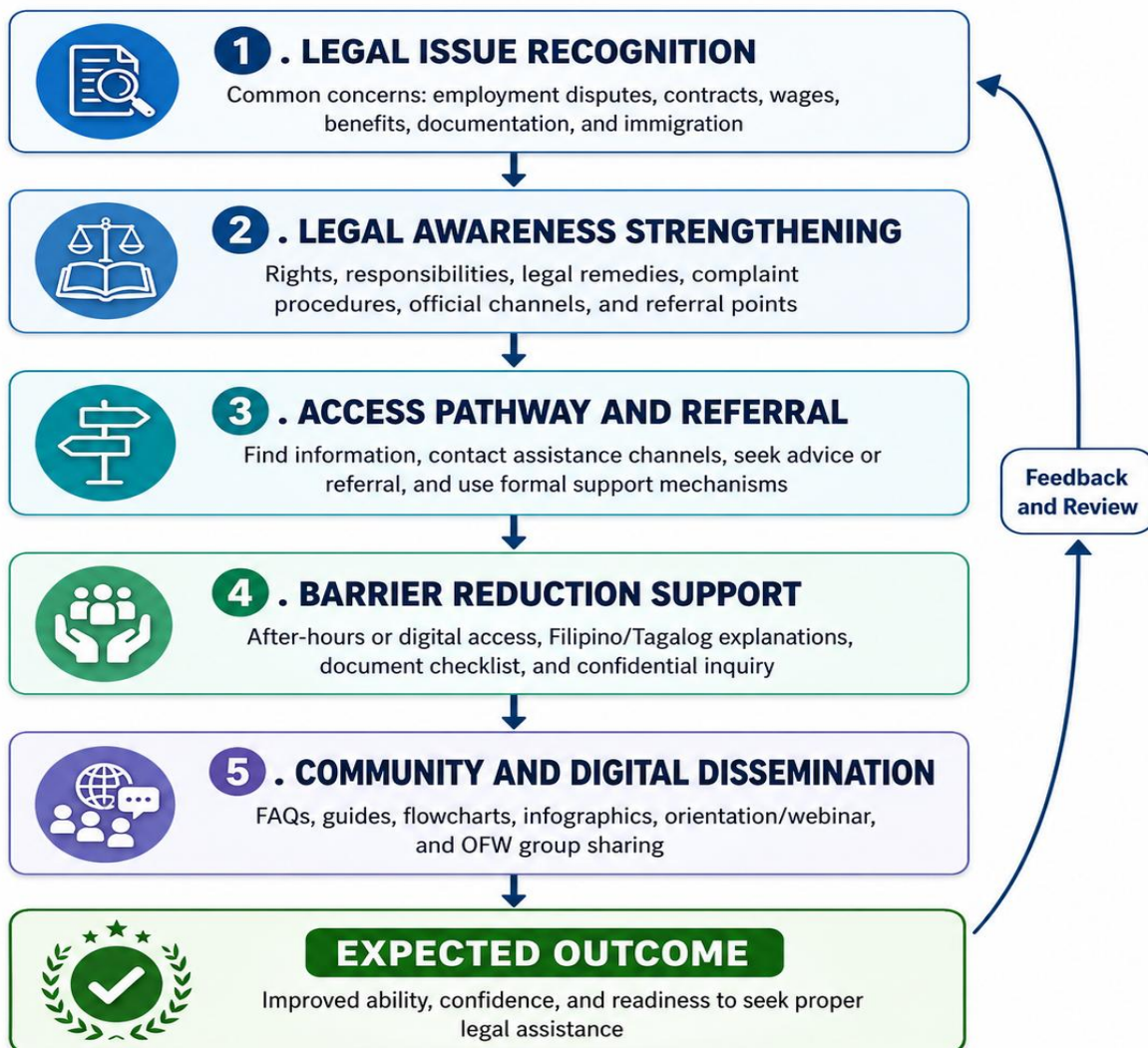


Figure 1: Proposed OFW Legal Support Awareness Framework Based on the Findings

Source. Developed by the researcher based on the findings of the study and the supporting theoretical and legal foundations.

Limitations And Future Research

The study has limitations that should be considered in interpreting the findings. The sample consisted of 60 OFWs reached through online and referral-based recruitment, which may introduce selection bias and limits statistical generalization to all OFWs in Riyadh. Respondents who had internet access, community links, or

greater interest in legal concerns may have been more likely to participate. The data were also self-reported and may be affected by recall, personal interpretation, and sensitivity of legal issues. These limitations do not invalidate the findings, but they define the scope of the conclusions. Future studies may use larger samples, mixed-method designs, interviews with OFWs and support personnel, and comparative analyses across Saudi cities or other destination countries. Future research may also validate and test the proposed framework as an intervention tool.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that OFWs in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia experience legal or legally related issues primarily involving employment, contracts, wages, benefits, documentation, immigration, workplace conflict, termination or resignation, and recruitment-related concerns. The respondents demonstrated high legal awareness but only moderate access to legal assistance, indicating an important implementation gap between knowing that support exists and being able to use it confidently and effectively. Practical access remains limited by work schedules, fear or hesitation, documentation concerns, uncertainty about procedures, and confidence-related barriers.

Legal awareness was significantly and positively related to access to legal assistance and significantly predicted access, particularly through awareness of basic rights and responsibilities and employment-related legal remedies. The findings therefore show that awareness-building is not merely informational; it is a practical access strategy. However, awareness should be combined with tools that reduce barriers, including document checklists, contact directories, FAQs, flowcharts, Filipino/Tagalog explanations, confidential inquiry options, digital posters, webinars, and community-based dissemination.

The proposed OFW Legal Support Awareness Framework provides a structured and applied model for organizing awareness-building and referral-support efforts for Filipino migrant workers in Riyadh. It is not a substitute for legal advice, legal representation, or official government assistance, but it can support early issue recognition, procedural readiness, proper referral, and more accessible legal support information. With further validation, the framework may serve as a practical model for OFW communities and migrant welfare stakeholders in similar contexts.

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Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

The study involved adult respondents who voluntarily participated through an anonymous online questionnaire. Electronic informed consent was obtained before participation, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protections. The questionnaire did not request names, employer names, company names, case numbers, passport numbers, iqama numbers, or other personal identification details. No animal subjects were involved. No formal institutional ethics approval number was available at the time of manuscript preparation; if the journal requires formal ethics clearance documentation, the author should provide the applicable institutional approval or exemption details during final submission.

Conflict Of Interest

The author declares no known conflict of interest related to this study.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Data Availability

The questionnaire, variable descriptions, and summarized statistical results are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The raw dataset is not publicly available because of confidentiality considerations and the relatively small community context of OFWs in Riyadh, even though no direct personal identifiers were collected.

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