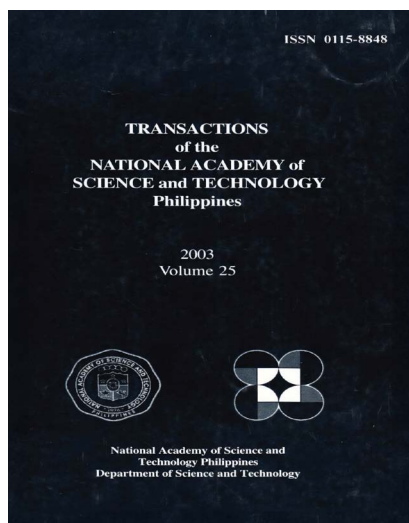


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## Women, Migration, and Reintegration

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## **WOMEN, MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION**

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### **Abstract**

The paper reports on the action research on the Social Cost of Migration and Possibilities for Reintegration conducted by Atikha-Balikabayani. The research was conducted among migrant women in Hong Kong and Italy and their families in San Pablo City, Laguna and Mabini, Batangas.

The objectives of the action research were: 1) assess the impact of migration on migrants, their families and communities and 2) mobilize the various stakeholders to work together and craft a comprehensive OFW Reintegration Program.

The research showed that despite years of hard work, majority of the migrant women do not have substantial savings and have no immediate plans of returning home for good. It was also noted that husbands of migrant women are unable to take on the "feminine responsibility" of managing the household. Migrant returnees had difficulty in adjusting to the estranged relations with their children and husbands and the lack of economic opportunities in the Philippines.

To enable the OFW to rejoin their families and maximize the gains from migration, the various stakeholders must provide community based assistance. The psychosocial and economic preparation of the OFWs for their eventual return must be addressed.

**Key words:** OFW, overseas Filipino workers, migration, reintegration

## Introduction

Most of the women migrant returnees we met in our work in the communities felt they have not achieved the goals they set when they left for abroad. Ellen, a mother of three who worked for 18 years in Hong Kong felt that she is in a far worse situation now than before she left. Two of her children have married young and are drug dependents. None of her five children was able to finish college. Her husband left her for another wife. She invested almost a million pesos in various businesses but not a single one succeeded. Now back in the Philippines, at age 60, ignored by her own children and with not enough funds to sustain her needs, Ellen asks, "Was the sacrifice of leaving the family behind and working in a foreign land worth it?"

That was also one of the questions of our 18-month research on the Social Cost of Migration and Possibilities for Reintegration. The research was done by Atikha-Balikabayani, a non-government organization devoted to migrant issues, welfare and reintegration. The results were published in the book, **Coming home: Women, Migration & Reintegration**. This paper in the main is a revised version of the Introduction of the said book written by the authors.

## Research Objectives

Atikha-Balikabayani have had plans of designing reintegration programs for the communities of San Pablo City, Laguna and Mabini, Batangas. Many migrant women in Hong Kong come from San Pablo City, while most migrant women in Italy are from Mabini.

Atikha-Balikabayani believes that any reintegration program should be based on an assessment of the impact of migration on migrants, their families and communities. Attitudes of migrants and their families on overseas migration and reintegration are also vital in the design of a reintegration program. Social and economic changes in communities brought about by migration must be taken into account in the conceptualization of community projects and enterprises that could lure migrants to come home.

This study is different from other researches on migration in the sense that this study was an action research. It did not only seek to gain insight on the situation of migrant women and the effects of their separation from their families and communities, it also made efforts to pool minds together on the issue of reintegration. This action research involved the various stakeholders in validating the research preliminary findings and conceptualizing reintegration and its programs.

### Research Methods

The research used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data and statistics were used to describe and discern trends in the responses of migrant women, children and caretakers. The study did not rely much on the statistics gathered. It drew its insights and analysis mainly from data generated from the qualitative methods employed such as interviews, narratives and case studies, focus group discussions and consultative meetings.

The study's choice, qualitative over quantitative methods, is premised on the belief that the issues of migration and its cost, and the prospects of reintegration are essentially, topics of qualitative research. The study has adopted the idea that these issues must be understood first and foremost from the primary stakeholders' perspective. That is, how the people directly affected, feel and view the topics of research. And because migration and reintegration are emotionally loaded issues, qualitative methods should be employed to elicit such perceptions and emotions.

From cut and dry quantitative and statistical analysis, not much valuable insight could be drawn. In fact, a lot of statistical information could not say much about the actual situation, about the anguish and other psychological dilemma of the respondents. For instance, statistics showed that 92% of migrant women wanted to come home for good. When the question of returning home was pursued in a number of qualitative interviews and focus group discussions, what came out was a general ambivalent attitude towards returning home. Children, when interviewed using the structured questionnaire, readily said that they were not beset with problems. But when in-depth interviews were conducted, children who were left behind by their mothers revealed their anxiety, fears and anger. Views on reintegration efforts of both non-government organizations (NGOs) and government organizations (GOs) would not have surfaced, had the researchers merely relied on the results of quantitative interviews.

This is not to say, however, that the use of a questionnaire and statistics in this study was in vain. In one case, statistics were useful. Caretakers and migrant women revealed a lot about marital problems caused by irresponsible husbands. Having been made aware of this, the research team delved into the situation of the husbands who were left behind.

A survey questionnaire was designed for migrant workers, caretakers and children to answer. Migrant women in Rome and Hong Kong, caretakers and children of San Pablo City and Mabini, Batangas were asked to answer the questionnaire. All in all, there were 128 migrant women, 144 caretakers and 102 children respondents. Some descriptive statistics and correlation tests were done to compare the responses of the three groups of respondents.

Qualitative and key informant interviews, case studies, focus group discussions and consultation meetings with migrant women, husbands, caretakers,

children, NGO and GO officers and personnel, community and religious leaders were done. Fourteen domestic helpers were qualitatively interviewed and seven focus group discussions with migrant women were conducted in Rome and Hongkong. Around 20 children, 20 caretakers and 15 husbands were interviewed in San Pablo City and Mabini. About 20 case studies of migrant returnees were drawn.

A total of 10 key informant interviews of Philippine embassy officials, Italian and Hong Kong agencies, leaders of migrant organizations and church leaders in Rome and Italy was done. In the Philippines, 20 key informant interviews of government officials, teachers, community elders and leaders were done. Two consultative meetings with community leaders of San Pablo City and Mabini and several discussion meetings with representatives of other NGOs and OWWA were also conducted by the Atikha-Balikabayani research group. Some documents on the experiences of Atikha-Balikabayani with children and on projects were also assessed and utilized in this study.

### Summary of Major Research Findings

The major findings of the research are categorized into three areas of concern: (1) the situation of migrant women, (2) the social cost of the feminization of migration and, (3) the possibilities of reintegration.

#### The Situation of Migrant Women

Feminization of migration is no longer simply a trend, it is a fact of life. Statistics show the growing feminization of migration. From a mere 12% share of the total deployment figure in 1975, women migrant workers comprised 47% of the total in 1987 (Figure 1). From 1992 until 2000, women workers constituted more than 50% of the total number of Filipino migrants abroad.

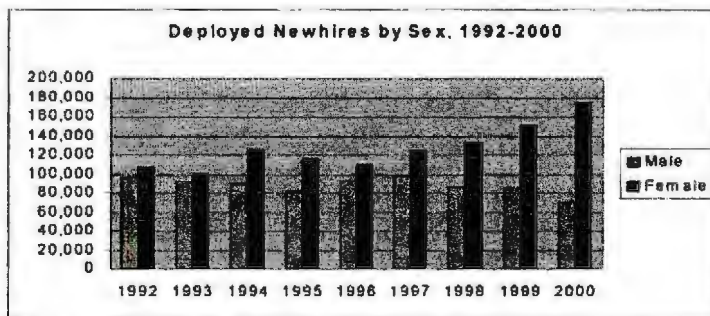


Figure 1. Deployed OFW new hires by sex, 1992-2000

Source: Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA)

In Italy and Hong Kong, Filipino women now outnumber the men who are working in these countries. Most of these women have toiled in these countries for about 10 years. How could one characterize their situation? The study gathered the following features of the migrant women's situation in Italy and Hong Kong:

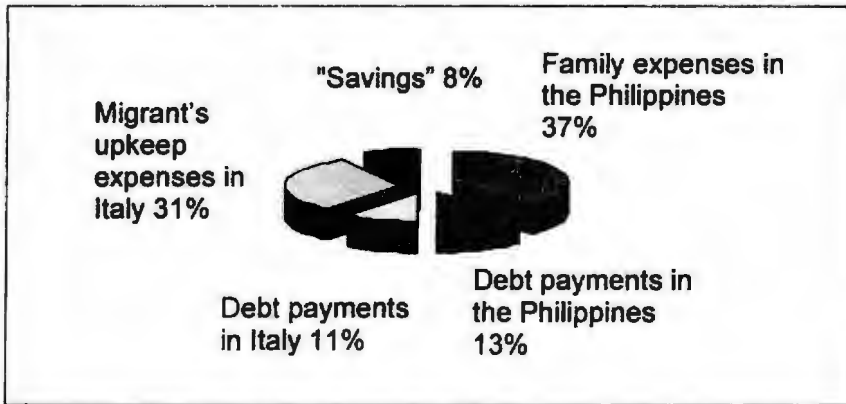
1. The patterns of migration have changed through the years. The feminization of migration in recent years is one obvious change. The second change, the result of which is the growing number of second- and third- generation migrants, is the active recruitment of relatives to work abroad by the migrants themselves. They help out with money, place of work and employer and residence. This was not so during the earlier years of overseas migration, which was mainly the result of active recruitment by illegal and legal recruitment agencies.

Migrants recruit and facilitate the foreign entry of their relatives for the following reasons: (a) a relative working in Italy and Hong Kong means a helping hand in meeting the growing needs of immediate and extended families, (b) the presence, warmth and support of relatives help migrants cope with their difficulties and homesickness.

2. Migrant women are able to cope with the separation from their families and home country. The import of *Pinoy* culture, their religious affiliation and faith, the company of relatives and support from formal and informal social networks have enabled migrant women to withstand the hard work, foreign culture and the physical separation from their loved ones.

3. The greatest source of anxiety and guilt feelings among migrant women is their separation from their children. Migrant women have made use of cellular phones to be always in contact with their families. Its frequent use, for many, is a form of long-distance mothering. The frequent voice contact, together with the sending of *halikbayan* boxes, are attempts to assuage the migrant women's guilt feelings for having left their children behind. Physical separation from their husbands and strained relationships due to marital infidelity and irresponsibility of husbands had led to an increasing number of cases of extramarital affairs and lesbianism among migrant women.

4. Despite years of hard work, most of the migrant women do not have substantial savings and immediate plans of returning home for good. The growing needs of their immediate and extended families, the increasing cost of living in the home country, the extravagant lifestyle that most migrant families are leading, families' dependency on migrant earnings and the debt trap that many of them are in, are the reasons why most migrant women are unable to save.



**Figure 2. Main avocation of income among migrant women in Italy**

Based on survey results, Figure 2 illustrates the main allocation of income among migrant women in Italy. OFWs religiously set aside a substantial amount (37%) for family expenses in the Philippines and 31% for their own personal expenses. Interestingly, a considerable amount is allotted for debt repayment (13% and 11% for debts in the Philippines and Italy, respectively). The wheel of debt keeps on turning, as more loans are made available to households with migrant relatives because they are considered credit worthy. Ironically, a lot of money wasted to pay debts could have been channeled to savings.

Without substantial savings to speak of and because of the lack of job opportunities in the country, most of them do not have immediate plans of returning home. Overseas work is growingly seen not as a temporary, but as the only solution, to meet the needs of the families back home.

5. Many migrant women have assumed unfamiliar roles and faced difficult conditions abroad. Their experiences as the main breadwinners of their families and as migrant women without a family in foreign lands have made them strong-willed, courageous, resilient, expressive and self-confident. Some have been bold in expressing their emotional and sexual needs and have engaged in extramarital affairs and lesbian relationships. A few among have transcended the domestic helper stereotype and have engaged in other activities, including organizing their fellow women abroad.

### **The social cost of the feminization of migration**

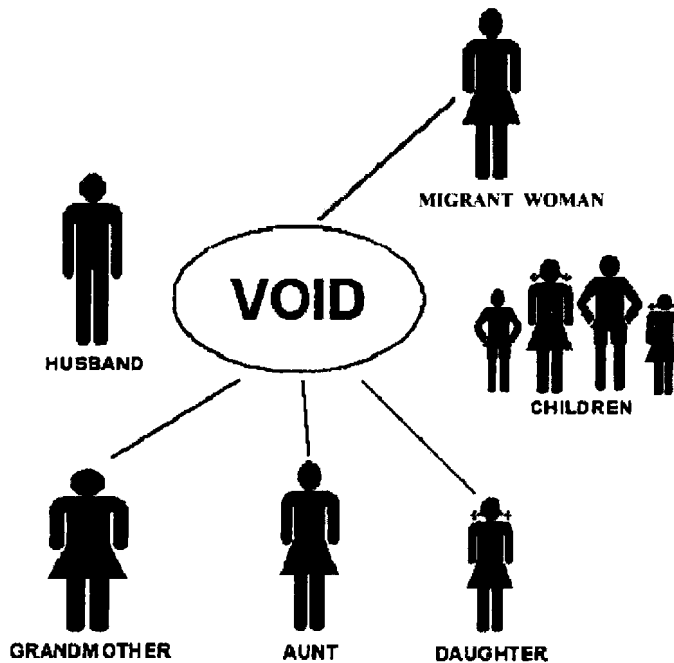
Without doubt, work overseas has raised the standard of living of the migrant women's families. But the feminization of migration has left an yawning void to be filled and work to be done—not only of managing the household and raising the children, but more importantly, of holding the families together. In the absence of mothers, the families have adjusted and reassigned roles among its members. Such adjustments have had its effects on the families left behind. In addition, the migration of a large number of people has affected the social and economic life of a number of communities in the country.

The following findings describe the effects of the feminization of overseas migration on the families and communities left behind:

1. Most husbands of migrant women are unable to take on the “feminine responsibility” of managing the household and taking care of the children. Their socialization as men in the traditional and cultural mold, makes it difficult for them to assume the role left behind by their wives. Worse, most of them are jobless and have become totally dependent on their wives' earnings. Their macho egos hurt by their diminished role in the family, some husbands turn to wayward ways. Husbands' marital infidelity and irresponsibility have been a major cause of marital strain and break-ups. Such behaviors are concrete manifestations of the husbands' inability to face the challenge of a role shift in the absence of their wives. There are, however, exceptional husbands who have swallowed their macho pride and became “housebands” or “ideal husbands”, and in so doing have challenged the stereotypes.
2. The feminization of migration leaves a big void in families. With the absence of the mother, questions on who will take care of the children, manage the finances and the household come to the fore. The mother is irreplaceable. The caretaker phenomenon is thus an offshoot of the feminization of migration. They fill the void left by migrant women. Figure 3 shows the adjustments and changes many families have to go through.

It is the women relatives of migrant women---their mothers, sisters and older daughters---who fill the void that the migrant women have left. These women have become mother substitutes to the children of migrants. Despite their efforts, the yearning of children for their real mothers could not be quenched and the consequences of the physical separation of mothers and children could not be eliminated. However, children and families of migrants could have been in a worse situation if not for the efforts and sacrifices of the women caretakers.





**Figure 3: Feminization of overseas migration and the need for caretakers**

3. Children are the most vulnerable to the physical separation and the family adjustments made in the absence of their mothers. Many of these children, not only suffer psychologically but also have to contend with the irresponsibility of their fathers and nurturing a relationship with their caretakers. Many children in such situations have shown remarkable resilience. But a number have not been able to cope and have turned to deviant ways as a way of expressing their anger and discontent. Resilient or not, children of migrants, because of years of separation, have slowly developed estranged relationships with their real mothers. And in spite of their experiences as children of migrants, they still dream of a life abroad. Most of them, after college graduation, would opt to work abroad, even as domestic helpers just like their parents. From these children of migrants, who have equated life abroad with prosperous life, would come the third- and fourth- generations of migrant workers.
4. Communities of migrants and their families in the Philippines have been affected in several ways. This could be discerned from the preliminary assessment of the impact of migration on the town of Mabini in Batangas. Although work overseas has raised the standard of living of families, it has not contributed substantially to the economic development of Mabini. The local government has been unable to tap into migrant earnings and social

capital for economic projects and activities. Dependency on migrant earnings and the diminishing value placed on hard work and education were observed in the community. Crass materialism is quite obvious and for many, working abroad has become a be-all and end-all. resilience. But a number have not been able to cope and have turned to deviant ways as a way of expressing their anger and discontent.

### **Possibilities of Reintegration**

The following findings highlight the attitude of migrant women and their families toward migrant return. Also described are the efforts of GOs and NGOs in the reintegration process of OFWs. The requisites of successful migrant return as drawn from case studies and results of GO and NGO discussions are also summed up here.

1. There is a prevalent ambivalence towards migrant return among caretakers, children, husbands and migrant women. A strong desire for the migrants' return was expressed and yet no concrete plans have been made by migrant women and their families. Such a dilemma is caused by fear of losing the lifestyle made possible by overseas work once the migrants return home. They are fully aware of the lack of job opportunities and the general economic difficulties that the country is facing.
2. Both government and non-government organizations have initiated programs that addressed the economic and social requirements for OFW reintegration. Some of these projects are noteworthy and could serve as models for the future. However, the efforts of both government and non-government organizations have not made a significant impact.
3. There is a growing number of migrant self-help groups, savings groups and cooperatives. A number of migrant organizations have also made contributions to community development projects. Although these initiatives are still few and are in an experimental stage, they show the potential of migrant groups and organizations as key players in reintegration and community development.
4. Because of lack of preparation for their return, migrant returnees have difficulty reintegrating. They experience difficulty in searching for employment and investment opportunities. They have to adjust to the slow and laid-back way of life in the community.
5. A number of OFW returnees had a hard time coping with their estranged relations with their children and husbands. Some expressed their resistance in assuming the role they had before migration, which was that of being an unemployed, dependent and submissive wife. The majority of the migrant returnees interviewed said they had difficulty adjusting to their families and communities. Failed business endeavors push them to work abroad again.

5. From the case studies of migrant returnees and discussions with GOs and NGOs, the following are seen as requisites of a successful return: (1) the family must set the goals and time frame of overseas work and define responsibilities among its members, before the parent leaves for abroad. (2) while abroad, the OFW should set achievable goals, enter a forced-savings program, prepare herself for future employment or investment opportunities in the Philippines, and continuously express emotional support for her family back home; (3) the family left behind should have a responsible husband and/ or caretaker at the helm, contribute to the family income and maintain communication with the OFW; (4) when the OFW returns home, an economic and social program for reintegration must be in place; 5) in all the phases of migration—pre-departure, on site and return— the NGOs, the local and national government agencies and other community organizations must provide support for the OFW and their families.

### Summary of Activities

Designed as an action research, the project included a number of meetings with various stakeholders and interest groups on the twin issues of migration and reintegration. These meetings were held so that the research findings could be shared with various groups. The research group was surprised to learn that its modest plans of research validation had stirred great interest among NGOs, GOs, community leaders, migrant women and their families. This led to important activities that were not in the original plan. The following major activities were pursued and accomplished:

#### 1. Community Leaders' Meetings

Two community leaders' meetings were held in San Pablo City and Mabini, Batangas. The initial findings of the research were presented to municipal government officials, *barangay* captains, religious leaders, teachers, representatives of community organizations and NGOs. The findings showed that most of the participants shared the research group's insights on the situation of migrants and the impact of migration on the families and communities. The discussions focused on ways to address the problems caused by migration. The community leaders were willing to form working groups that would discuss and implement activities and projects at the community level. The participants' proposals ranged from socioeconomic projects for families of migrants to value formation activities for children of migrants. The participants wanted to see the municipal and *barangay* units make concrete plans for the children left behind and for the reintegration of returnees.

## **2. First National Conference on OFW Reintegration**

The consultations and interviews with government officials, NGOs and church based-institutions have underlined the need to unite on a common concept of OFW reintegration.

On August 16, 2001, Atikha-Balikabayani invited several NGOs and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) to form the organizing committee for the First National Conference on OFW Reintegration. There was a meeting of minds in the first organizing committee meeting because OWWA and the Episcopal Commission for the Migrant and Itinerant People were also thinking of holding a conference on OFW reintegration among their stakeholders.

The First National Conference on OFW Reintegration was held in Manila last April 12-13, 2002. The conference achieved the following: First, it was able to unite government and the NGOs involved in migration issues on the concept of a comprehensive reintegration program. Second, it was able to draft a resolution that bound all participating organizations to the task of creating an enabling environment for OFW reintegration.

## **3. Council on OFW Reintegration**

After the conference, an ad hoc task force was formed to spearhead the formation of a Council on OFW Reintegration. The forum was envisioned to lay down the organizational structure that will ensure that the concept of a comprehensive program and the conference resolutions would be followed and implemented by all stakeholders.

The coordination of efforts of government and NGOs was finally realized. It was a bold step that recognized the value of trust and cooperation. The working relations between GOs and NGOs will not always be smooth, but the first step towards the right direction had been taken.

## **Recommendations**

From the cited major research findings and activities, *Atikha-Balikabayani* recommends the following:

1. The reintegration of OFWs must be a national government policy concern. A comprehensive reintegration policy must be part of the national development agenda. It must optimize the earnings of overseas employment for social and economic development.
2. There must be a national council for OFW reintegration that will spearhead the work on OFW reintegration and ensure cooperation of the various stakeholders in implementing OFW reintegration programs.
3. A comprehensive OFW reintegration program should be community based. The program should be incorporated in the municipal development agenda.

Plans for reintegration should be initiated starting from pre-departure, to on-site and up to the return phases of migration. A reintegration program should have economic and psychosocial components.

The social capital of migrants (or the capacity of organizations of migrants to cooperate and work together for a common good) and migrant earnings should be harnessed for establishing business ventures and social enterprises that will generate long-term employment and development of their communities. Business and management training and other services that would ensure the viability of enterprises of migrants and migrant returnees must be provided.

The social preparation of the community and families of OFWs is important. Support services such as counseling and value formation activities should be in place in the community. Professional psychological help such as family counseling, must be extended to OFWs, their husbands and children who have been adversely affected by the long separation. Schools and churches should be tapped to support the families of OFWs.

4. Pilot communities should be identified and adopted by the national and local government agencies, private enterprises and non-government organizations, where strategies and methods for reintegration could be tested.
5. Various organizations of OFWs and their families must be encouraged and supported. Self-help and savings groups and cooperatives of migrants should be established. Caretakers, husbands and children should be organized to help them cope with separation and direct their energies towards meaningful and productive projects for the family and community.
6. Develop savings and investment schemes for OFWs. Credit and loan programs and packages should also be developed as an alternative to those offered by users and unscrupulous financing institutions.
7. Information, education and value formation activities must be conducted among OFWs, husbands, caretakers and children. The concept of comprehensive OFW reintegration should be popularized for all stakeholders. Seminars and other activities must include, among others, the promotion of savings, importance of hard work and value of education. Nurturing of relationships and gender sensitivity must also be stressed.
8. Community impact assessment of reintegration programs and further studies on the plight of husbands and caretakers must be pursued. Research on the mobilization of social capital towards community development must be undertaken.

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