

DLSU RESEARCH CONGRESS 2023

MANILA, PHILIPPINES

JULY 5-7, 2023

Fostering a Humane and Green Future: Pathways to Inclusive Societies and Sustainable Development



Caring for Carers: Health and Social Protection among Filipino Domestic Workers in Singapore

Evangeline O. Katigbak-Montoya¹

¹ *Department of International Studies
De La Salle University*

**evangeline.katigbak-montoya@dlsu.edu.ph*

Abstract: This paper locates the experiences of Filipino migrant workers in Singapore concerning their literacy and access to health and social security systems in the home and host countries. The paper primarily questions how care, which in this context refers to health and social protection, is extended to and experienced by foreign domestic workers in their capacity as carers, or those people who perform care work and social reproductive duties at different scales and spaces. Drawing on the results of the research entitled “Scoping Study on the Health and Social Security Systems Literacy of Filipino Migrant Workers in East Asia”, and interviews with Filipina domestic workers in Singapore, the paper argues for the need to pay attention to the literacy and access of low-waged migrant workers to health and social protection systems in both countries that they navigate. The scarcity of studies that deal with the problem of migrant literacy on health and social security systems points to the unwarranted inattention to the knowledge of migrant workers on these care and protection regimes. Such inattention shapes the ability of foreign domestic workers to access relevant healthcare and protection programs, leading to further vulnerabilities of migrants. In shedding light on this issue, the paper aims to address theoretical and practical (including policy) slippages regarding migrant literacy, and access to health and social protection in the hopes of making societies more inclusive to migrant domestic workers.

Key Words: migrant health; migrant social protection; migrant health and social security literacy; OFW, domestic worker

1. INTRODUCTION

Elementary occupation, which includes domestic work, constitutes the biggest percentage of work for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in 2020 (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2020). Overseas domestic work employs many Filipino women, which often means economic support for their families. Abroad, domestic work contributes to plugging the care drain in many households. Given the importance of this sector in different spaces and scales, it is necessary to ask about foreign domestic

workers' literacy and access to health and social security services in both the home and host countries they navigate. This paper contributes to existing studies on migrant health and social protection by investigating the literacy and access of Filipina migrant domestic workers in Singapore to the health and social security systems in both the Philippines and Singapore. The paper aims to address theoretical and practical (including policy) slippages regarding migrant literacy, and access to health and social protection in the hopes of making societies more inclusive to migrant domestic workers.

Fostering a Humane and Green Future: Pathways to Inclusive Societies and Sustainable Development



Given the importance of migrant domestic workers in both the Philippines and Singapore's economies as well as in the everyday social fabric in both societies, it is imperative to unravel the health and social security systems that cater to them. In seeking to shed light on this concern, this paper draws from the results of the project "Scoping study on the health and social security systems literacy of Filipino migrant workers in East Asia". This research aimed to understand the social and health security systems literacy in migrant-receiving countries in East Asia, specifically Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines, as the counterpart migrant-sending country. Social security system refers to "all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized groups." (Sabates-Wheeler and Waite 2003). It includes migrant workers and their access to a pension, living subsidies, legal, educational, and employment assistance, as well as other social services (ILO 2013). Meanwhile, the study used the definition of a health security system by the World Health Organization, referring to it as "the activities required, both proactive and reactive, to minimize the danger and impact of acute public health events that endanger people's health across geographical regions and international boundaries." Migrants' literacy on health and social security systems is defined as the ways migrant workers are familiar with, understand, and use the information they can access about health and social policies, programs, and initiatives in origin and destination countries (Celero, Garabiles, Katigbak-Montoya, 2022).

In the subsequent section, I discuss the methods and methodology underpinning this study. The empirical discussion which follows is based on the results of the scoping review, focus group discussion with Singapore-based OFWs and interviews with Philippine government offices tasked to look after the welfare of OFWs. I conclude by underscoring the need to address the multiscalar inattention to migrant health and social security literacy. Protection of migrant workers must include literacy on health and social security systems in both home and host countries.

2. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the Singapore bit of the larger scoping study on the health and social security systems literacy of OFWs in East Asia, specifically Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore. The scoping review was guided by the Six-Stage Methodological Framework for Scoping Review adapted from notable social researchers (Arksey & O'Malley 2005; Levac, Colquhoun & O'Brien 2010; Liu et.al. 2015) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses-Extension for Scoping Reviews or PRISMA-ScR. The framework consists of six stages: (a) defining the research question; (b) identifying relevant studies or search strategy; (c) selecting studies; (d) charting the data and assessing the quality of studies included; (e) collating, summarizing, and reporting the data; and (f) consultation. The study used Covidence, a web-based software used to screen, extract and analyze references for systematic review. The relevant studies gathered from the review were saved in Zotero reference manager software.

The study searched for studies that look at the health and social security systems literacy of Filipino migrants in East Asia in the following scientific and gray literature databases: EBSCO, JSTOR, Project Muse, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The keywords list and search mechanics were tweaked depending on the search character of the database. The search utilized a combination of keywords such as "Filipino migrants", "Singapore", "social security", "health policy", and "literacy". From the 2,985 studies during the title and abstract screening using the keywords, only 121 met the inclusion criteria and went to the full-text review. A full-text review was done to identify empirical studies and policy notes/reviews that explain the health and social security systems literacy of Filipino migrant workers in Singapore. The majority of papers in this stage of the review, however, were about the general conditions of migrant work(ers) in Singapore. Only eight studies were finally extracted, and these do not specifically relate to the health and social security policy literacy of Filipino migrant workers in Singapore. Of the eight, two examined health (Lorenzo, Guinto, Curran, Suphanchaimat & Pocock, 2015) and social security (Pasadilla and Abella, 2011) in ASEAN member countries, where both Singapore

Fostering a Humane and Green Future: Pathways to Inclusive Societies and Sustainable Development



and the Philippines belong. Although these studies do not meet all the eligibility criteria, I decided to include them as they highlight the related systems that are in place for migrant workers in the city-state.

The search has revealed that there is a massive gap in the current scope of knowledge on health and social security systems for migrant workers, in general, and among OFWs in particular. The scant literature on this topic underscores the need to shed light on this important, but still currently neglected, dimension of transnational migration. Even more surprising is the absence of a single work that pertains to the literacy of migrants about the health and social security systems that are supposed to benefit them, whether provided by the home or destination country. In what follows, I elucidate the health and social security systems for migrants in Singapore before I discuss the results and findings from a focus group discussion (FGD) that I conducted with Singapore-based OFWs and interviews with officials from the Philippine Migrant Health Network (PMHN), Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth), Social Security System (SSS) and Insurance Commission (IC). Five female Singapore-based OFWs who have been in Singapore for at least two years were included in the FGD. They were recruited via my personal contacts in Singapore. This qualitative study corresponds to consultation, which is the final stage in the review protocol used to guide this study.

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Singapore has been an important destination country for foreign workers from various nationalities and skill groups. While immigration has been an important backbone in the global city's prosperity, there is limited knowledge of the health and social protection systems literacy of migrant workers in the country. Studies that deal with these migrants' health and social protection, in general, are, at present, scarce and more oriented toward access and not literacy. The majority of the literature screened from the scoping process talked about the general conditions of migrant work, characterized mainly by precarity and risk. Indeed, across the globe, precarity underpins temporary migrant working conditions (Matias, da Silva, Farago, 2020; Piper, 2022).

Precariousness, Wise (2013) argues, denotes an unstable nature of employment by which flexible work arrangements are used. Several studies reviewed in the scoping process described the lack of job mobility and security, especially the fear of repatriation, as the essential character of migrant employment in Singapore (Anjara et al., 2017; Choi & Lyons, 2012; Dutta, 2021; Guinto et al., 2015; Kneebone, 2012; Schumann & Paul, 2019; Wee et al., 2018; Yeoh et al., 2020). While there are regulations and policies in the host country that protect migrants from unreasonable dismissal, asymmetry or the imbalance in power relations between the employer and the migrant worker characterizes the work environment (Cheng, 1996; Koh et al., 2017; Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018; Wee et al., 2018; Yeoh et al., 2020). This stems from some rules and regulations that are left in the hands of employers, employment agencies, and market forces even while Singapore has strict regulations on hiring and maintenance of foreign labor.

Risks in migrant workplaces and work arrangements also add to the lack of social security in temporary migrant work in Singapore. Restrictive labor conditions manifest in ways such as institutional or employer-executed regulations on mobility (Choi & Lyons, 2012), workplace abuses (Kneebone, 2012), the general intolerance of the state on labor organizing (Lyons, 2007; Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018), and the weak migrant power in judicial negotiations (Wise, 2013; Avato et al., 2010), among others. All of these factors reflect the systemic character of the risks faced by the temporary migrant workers in Singapore, including Filipinos. Moreover, the precarity, risks, and lack of fundamental labor rights, especially faced by work permit holders, preclude migrant workers' access to possible work entitlements. Even inadequate and unstable salary payments to low-waged migrants limit their ability to seek health and social security services (Shimanuki, 2021).

Further reinforcing the economic inadequacy of migrant workers, and thus their possible exclusion from health and social benefits, are the existing dominant narratives on migrant work. Huang (2012:211) highlighted the factors of embodied and gendered narratives in domestic work, challenging the "triple casting of eldercare as feminine, dirty, and migrant work if we are to raise its value". The layering of identities reinforced by stereotypes in the health

Fostering a Humane and Green Future: Pathways to Inclusive Societies and Sustainable Development



service industry also allows for the unequal provisioning of rights and benefits, essentially cutting costs by keeping migrant workers in lower positions (Choi & Lyons, 2012; Yeoh & Huang, 2014). In particular, Choi & Lyons (2012) noted the pernicious impact of “othering” between Filipino workers themselves, undermining potential alliances that may be formed to assert better wages and working conditions, including health and social benefits.

Narratives tend to condition behavior, thus diluting one’s understanding of their economic rights and asserting them. In the matter of weekly off-day, for example, Schumann & Paul (2020) discussed the narratives from employers that condition migrant workers into passivity, unable to negotiate their off-day entitlement. Such narratives may be based on fear or are oriented to make this supposed right arbitrary. In addition to the precarious conditions migrant workers face, narratives on the nature of work or the benefits also influence the information-seeking and rights-assertion behavior of migrant workers.

The contrast in the literacy of Singapore-based OFWs on the health and social security regimes for migrants in their host country vis-a-vis the Philippines’ is palpable. The lack of knowledge of the OFWs on the health and social protection that the Philippines affords them ranges from zero to a nominal understanding of the instruments of protection, such as PhilHealth or SSS.

Moreover, there is a sense of frustration regarding the long process necessary to access these protections. This leads to feelings of distrust towards the Philippine government and suspicion of whether the government cares about the OFWs’ welfare. Such ill feelings are further aggravated by scams and news about corruption in related agencies.

Cognizant of these difficulties, PhilHealth plans to set up representative offices in Philippine embassies in different countries in the coming years, in partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). A representative from the agency claimed that the mobility restrictions during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic delayed this but they will soon be able to push through with this plan. This follows SSS which had its representative offices since 1998. These satellite offices abroad aim at making their services more accessible to OFWs. Moreover, these

agencies disseminate relevant information through the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) that every OFW has to attend before they leave the Philippines. Admittedly, however, representatives of these agencies note the ineffectivity of these activities since PDOS is done a few days before OFWs’ departure. Hence, OFWs attending this do not pay attention to their seminars.

Such initiatives from the Philippines are akin to the idea of home states “claiming their diaspora” (Ho, 2011). In this sense, the sending state is performing its obligation towards its citizens by offering them health and social security protection beyond the borders of the nation-state. While such strategies from the Philippines’ end may be reputable, their value should be measured by how well migrant workers are truly able to benefit from these. The benefits, in turn, should also include migrants’ literacy on these protections as well as their accessibility to the migrants as effectiveness measures.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper uncovers the lack of attention that migration scholars, particularly those that focus on Filipino migrant workers, have paid to the migrants’ literacy on health and social security systems. The cases of Singapore-based Filipino OFWs have laid bare the disparity of their literacy of the health and social protection that are available to them in the home and host country. The difference points to the efforts of the state in reaching them. In particular, the infrastructures of communications employed by Singapore and the Philippines to disseminate related information among migrant workers are not comparable. Singapore relies on digital technologies and social media, making migrant workers highly aware and literate on the benefits that are available to them while also making access to such benefits easier for them. In contrast, the Philippines, while making health and social security protection mandatory for all OFWs, has not supported this mandate with effective infrastructures to make migrant workers literate on these protections. This results in contradictions in expectations and obligations between migrant workers and the agencies that make up these migrant health and social security regimes of the state.

DLSU RESEARCH CONGRESS 2023

MANILA, PHILIPPINES

JULY 5-7, 2023

Fostering a Humane and Green Future: Pathways to Inclusive Societies and Sustainable Development



The illiteracy of Filipino migrant workers in Singapore on health and social security systems further compounds their vulnerability when they toil away from home. Precarity and risk negatively affect migrants' literacy and information-seeking behavior while illiteracy also limits their capability to confront vulnerabilities, thus leading to a downward spiral in terms of access to health and social benefits.

There is a need to strengthen the infrastructures of health and social security systems literacy of migrants in both the home and host countries. The dependence of both sides of the migration corridor on migrant labor: home countries rely on remittances for development and host countries augment their local labor pool with foreign labor underscores the importance of making migrants' health and social security systems, especially their literacy on these protections, a priority.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The "Scoping Study on the Health and Social Security Systems Literacy of Filipino Migrant Workers in East Asia" from which this paper is based received funding from the Philippine APEC Study Center Network (PASCN) – Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS). My thanks to my co-researchers in the scoping study project, Dr. Celero and Dr. Garabiles, and JB Bagano who was the research assistant for the Singapore section of the project. I am grateful to the Singapore-based OFWs who participated in the study.

6. REFERENCES

Celero, J.O., Garabiles, M.R., Katigbak-Montoya, E. 2022. Scoping Study on Health and Social Security Systems Literacy of Filipino Migrant Workers in East Asia (Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore), PIDS-PASCN Discussion Paper Series No2022-46.

International Labour Organization. N.d. Decent work. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-en/index.htm>

_____. 2013. Online discussion on access and portability of Social Protection for Migrant Workers from 11 – 22 March 2013. Online

discussion on access and portability of Social Protection for Migrant Workers from 11 – 22 March 2013 (ilo.org)

Jabar, M.A. 2021. Factors influencing health-seeking behavior among overseas Filipino workers. *Int. J. Healthc. Manage.* 14, no. 1 (2021): 10–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20479700.2019.1603665>.

Opiniano, J. 2010. International migration as social protection mechanism in the Philippines: Issues and implications. *Global Crossroads in Social Welfare: Emergent Issues, Debates and Innovations across the Globe*, 2010, 63–93.

Orbeta Jr, A.C. 2019. Migrant workers and social protection: The Philippine experience. *Towards a More Resilient Society: Lessons from Economic Crises*, 2019, 19.

Pasadilla, G.O. 2011. Social security and labor migration in ASEAN. ADBI Policy Brief. Asian Development Bank.

Pasadilla, G. and M. Abadillo. 2011. Social protection for migrant workers in ASEAN. CESifo WorkingPapersNo.3914 www.cesifo.org/wp

Philippine Statistics Authority. 2020. 2019 Survey on overseas Filipinos. <https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/2019%20Survey%20on%20Overseas%20Filipinos.pdf>

Philippine Statistics Authority. 2022. 2020 Overseas Filipino Workers (final results). <https://psa.gov.ph/content/2020-overseas-filipino-workers-final-results>

Sabates-Wheeler, R. and M. Waite. 2003. Migration and social protection: A concept paper. Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, December 1645: 1980–2000.