



Retrenched and Returned: Filipino Migrant Workers during Times of Crisis

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Abstract

Situating data from a pilot study conducted in the Philippines within the research literature, we examine the impact of the recent global economic crisis on the experiences of Filipino migrant workers and their families in the context of previous economic upheavals. In so doing, we highlight the gendered effects of shifts in the global economy and detail government response to the premature return of migrant workers to the Philippines primarily due to retrenchment impelled by the global economic crisis. While the current conditions of migration and return are significant, we argue that these are not the result of a new global economic crisis, but are instead the ongoing effects of neoliberal globalization that have resulted in sustained multiple crises with which residents of the Global South have had to contend. Moreover, the reputed solutions offered to returned migrants are rooted in the same faulty paradigm that will be destined to produce only further hardship.

Keywords

global economic crisis, migrants, the Philippines, return migration

Introduction

A banner hangs conspicuously in the departure hall of Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) in Manila celebrating the efforts of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their role in sustaining the Philippine economy. Among the thousands who pass

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underneath this banner each day are over 75,000 Filipinos who depart the country monthly to undertake predominantly temporary contract employment throughout the world (Ruiz, 2008). Meanwhile, the arrivals hall is packed with those waiting to return to their home communities. Some bear enormous bags stuffed with consumer items and consumables to share, but others return empty-handed. They include garment workers like Serena¹ who was working in Brunei until she was told she would be returned home before her contract expired: 'They know we are good workers for them, but they cannot take us to Cambodia, [where] they pay lower wages,' she shared. These individuals, who have been supporting family members while working overseas, face an uncertain future in the Philippines, a country that despite (or because of) its long history of labour migration has not managed to create sufficient employment opportunities at home to decrease the outflow of relatively consistent numbers of Filipino workers over the last 20 to 30 years. Indeed, '[i]n the period 1994–2001, more Filipinos actually found jobs overseas than were added to the number of employed persons in the local market' (Go, 2002, cited in Soriano, 2009: 14). And despite often stressful experiences and painful memories, many still hope to return to overseas employment to ensure a steady supply of remittances to their extended families.

Since what has been called the global economic crisis in 2008, labour migrants have had to contend with increasingly precarious work, reduced hours, lower wages, unpaid contracts, and employer bankruptcies (Cottle and Keys, 2010; Habib et al., 2010). This situation has resulted in retrenchment, leaving some workers not only without funds, but also indebted to individuals and loaning agencies for monies borrowed to cover costs of placement fees, visas and transportation. Some commentators and advocates refer to this situation as a modern form of slavery (Briones, 2009). Unlike under past forms of slavery, however, migrants today assume the costs of job placement. Resultantly, those who labour under modern forms of servitude are as cheap as never before (Bales, 2007).

Our article is based on findings from a pilot study that hoped to uncover the complex, interacting, multi-level sociocultural and politico-economic factors that impact the lives of temporary contract migrants – women and men from the Philippines – who had been prematurely repatriated from countries of employment due to retrenchment, with particular attention to the conditions of workers' return. However, results from interviews² conducted in the Philippines in 2011–2012, with informants recruited via network sampling with the aid of both a Philippine-based migrant support organization and our professional contacts with governmental and academic institutions, compelled us to broaden our analytical lens. Briefly, we learned that the response to this most recent crisis could not be extracted from the ongoing series of economic crises that Philippine workers and their families have faced at home and abroad for decades (cf. Bello et al., 2009).

To develop our argument, we provide a brief overview of the global economy and labour migration wherein we critique the western-based notion of a singular global economic crisis, and assert that the context for labour migration in Asia is a multiplicity of long-standing social, economic, and political crises of which the most recent crisis is merely one manifestation. Next, we focus on the Philippines, detailing the labour export policy and migrant experiences thereof, highlighting the gendered impacts of these shifts in the economy. Thereafter, we describe the conditions whereby migrant workers are returned to the Philippines and the nature of the reintegration programmes that are

offered to some of them. We conclude with a discussion of how Philippine reintegration programmes are reflective of the same neoliberal paradigm that has generated and sustained the multiple crises that engendered Philippine labour exportation and the myriad problems associated with it.

Setting the Context: The Global Economy, Crises and Labour Migration in Asia

Contemporary globalization is characterized by, among other features, the disembedding of social life from local contexts, and the heightened turbulence, frequency, density, and content of global flows (Appadurai, 1991; Giddens, 1990; Inda and Rosaldo, 2002). The interconnectedness of labour, products, and consumption – reliant on flexible accumulation and a flexible labour force (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002; Spiegel et al., 2004) – is evidenced by the recent and ongoing upheavals in the global economy and the rapid and diffuse responses it has engendered. As far as the Global North is concerned, the current crisis gained world media attention in late 2008 with the sub-prime mortgage fiasco in the USA (Labonté, 2012). The downturn in the global economy, however, had already resulted in factory and business closures in the Global South (Elmer, 2008) – alerting us to the notion that what is currently referred to as the global economic crisis was predated by other economic (and subsequently social) volatilities and may hence be regarded as a construct of the Global North.

Current economic decline has resulted in an abrupt change in the demand for low-wage, flexible labour driving internal and international migration (Castles, 2011). In contrast to previous economic upheavals – where some regions were less affected than others thus allowing migrants to seek employment elsewhere – today's labour migrants contend with a narrower range of alternatives with regards to opportunities for legal migration, particularly given the rigidity of current migration policy-making around the world (Koser, 2009) and the prevalence of temporary contract migration (Wickramasekara, 2011). Furthermore, in a host of countries, migrant workers accused of usurping the jobs of local residents have become targets of resentment, and, in some instances, violence, (Blair, 2009; Eaglesham, 2009; Maven, 2008; Remington, 2009). Although the OECD (2009) has cautioned that countries cannot simply dispense with their migrant labour force as it can lead to both an erosion of social cohesion and a rise in irregular migration, migrant workers are still vulnerable to expulsion (Orner, 2008). Easily declared redundant, these workers are discarded as Bauman (2004) would opine, like human waste, compelled to involuntarily return to their homeland due to a drop in work demand coupled with anti-foreign/immigrant sentiments in what has been called 'recessionary racism' (Maven, 2008; Remington, 2009).

Filipino Migrant Workers in a Volatile Economy – the Multiplicity of Crises

Low-wage migrants, particularly those working in sectors dependent on foreign investment and/or export markets such as manufacturing and the highly labour intensive and

female-dominated textile and clothing industry (which is also prone to quick relocation), are particularly vulnerable to retrenchment (Beets and Willekens, 2009; Chandararot et al., 2009). Many of the countries most affected by the 2008 crisis were those that hosted large numbers of Asian migrant workers (Abella and Ducanes, 2009). For example, the Philippines, a country that is heavily dependent upon remittances to sustain its economy, anticipated the return of 50,000 to 100,000 workers from the USA alone (Blair, 2009). Moreover, countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and South Korea have tried to curtail some forms of labour migration, return foreign workers, and/or increase deportations of undocumented workers to reduce internal pressure from their citizenry (Abella and Ducanes, 2009; Bruck, 2009; Hector and Somwong, 2009; Spitzer, 2010).

Gender also figures highly in the global economic crisis and its impact on workers. As women, who comprise a large proportion of migrant workers in Asia, are most often relegated to lower waged jobs with less control and few benefits (if any), they are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns (Bruck, 2009; Mangahas, 2009; Otohe, 2011; Piper, 2011; Spitzer, 2011). For example, in the 1998 Asian economic crisis, a disproportionate percentage of women workers were retrenched and repatriated (Ariffin, 2004). The International Labour Organization estimated towards the onset of the current global economic crisis that the numbers of unemployed women would be inflated by 22 million (Bruck, 2009). Women workers in skilled female-dominated fields have also been impacted by the upheavals in the global economy. Remarking on the repatriation of and decrease in contracts for Filipino nurses, Nelson, an upper level bureaucrat in the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) shared:

Our nurses ... five years before were expecting to be deployed in the United States, because the United States, before 2008 October, before the recession happened, it was a very rich destination for our nurses. ... But you know what? Because of the closing down of the opportunities for nurses to work – Filipino nurses to work in the US – we now have an oversupply of unemployed nurses, numbering about 152,000. That's a *big* number.

The current volatile economy has not, however, signalled the onset of a crisis for migrant workers in Asia. We argue that the vulnerability of migrant workers in the current economy is not a new phenomenon, but is instead rooted in the exigencies of global capitalism and neoliberal globalization. In addition, for countries such as the Philippines, the structure of governmental, economic, and political institutions and relations is informed by the legacy of colonialism and its impact on resource exploitation and underdevelopment (Beeson, 2002).

Beginning with the oil crisis and recession in the 1970s that led to the movement of production to the periphery of northern industrial economies (e.g. Mexico), the quest for ever cheaper production costs led to the expansion of global commodity production chains that took advantage of cheap labour throughout the Global South (Phillips, 2011; Piper, 2011). With the pressure exerted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in resonance with multinational corporations and the support of select governments, Structural Adjustment regimes were implemented in coherence with the neoliberal agenda that led to a reduction in social expenditures and rampant privatization

(Bello, 1999; Delgado Wise et al., 2013). Moreover, urban centres in the Global South emerged as sites of massive rural to urban migration as agriculture had become increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer, wealthier people since the 1960s (Castles, 2011). Concomitantly, privatization facilitated increased exploitation of natural resources, contributing to environmental degradation and climate change, leading to further rural to urban migration and out-migration (Castles, 2011; Delgado Wise et al., 2013). Resultantly, a large reserve army of labour developed. These bodies lay in wait and many were inevitably deployed in migration scenarios driven by the lack of opportunities in their home countries (Delgado Wise et al., 2013).

In the Philippines, decades of neoliberal measures that opened doors for greater foreign financial investment and indebtedness, cheaper items from nearby countries that reduced demand for locally produced products, and pressures to devalue currency led to increased unemployment and poverty (Bello, 1999; Bello et al., 2009; Gaerlan et al., 2010; Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). In 1997–98, the Asian financial crisis intensified these negative effects, contributing to the burden of financial hardships shouldered by Filipino families – the consequences of which are ongoing and have continued through the recent global economic crisis (Cook, 2008; Cottle and Keys, 2010; Gaerlan et al., 2010). Employment instability is further enhanced by the pervasiveness of contract employment wherein workers are laid off after six months to avoid the need to enrol them as full-time permanent employees as per government legislation. Consequently, workers are compelled to shift from formal and informal sectors of employment (Gaerlan et al., 2010; Hewison et al., 2013).

This state of affairs demonstrates the multiple nature of the crisis that individual migrants find themselves embroiled in, which has to do with the specific – and shifting – factors driving migration and rigid migration policies that have gendered outcomes. It is the combination of three feminizations – of work, poverty and migration – that come together here (Piper, 2011). Feminization is the outcome of the increasing informalization, casualization and precarity of work and partly reflects men's inability to find employment in traditionally male-dominated jobs and sectors. Feminization is also linked to poverty in the sense that it is more often women who are shouldering the burden of securing their families' livelihoods (Spitzer, 2011). Importantly, in reduced economic circumstances, intra-household allocation of resources that favour male household members may become more common while more female children will be removed from school to either enter the labour market or take on more household and care-work responsibilities while their mothers are engaged in paid employment (Bruck, 2009; Otope, 2011; Spitzer, 2005, 2011; Wright and Black, 2011). Health problems, rooted in anxiety about money and depression about their circumstances, as well as intra-household tensions attributable to similar factors, are also on the rise at a time when families often have less access to health and social services due to their diminished circumstances, the loss of employment-related benefits, and reduced social spending by the state and/or international donors (Bruck, 2009; Spitzer, 2011; Wright and Black, 2011). Moreover, studies have shown that migrant women send home larger proportions of their remittances than men, indicating that women spend less money on personal items, which in turn must have implications on their own well-being (Piper, 2005; Spitzer and Torres, 2008).

In the Philippines, women in their roles as workers and as financial stewards of their families have also been dramatically affected by these economic upheavals. Women workers dominated Philippine industries most directly impacted by the global economic crisis (e.g. electronics, garment manufacture) resulting in their disproportionate job loss (Gaerlan et al., 2010; Seguino, 2010; Van der Meulen Rodgers and Menon, 2012). Furthermore, intra-country remittances transferred from urban to rural areas decreased as wages of working men declined and as female-dominated retrenchments proceeded which, coupled with rising food costs, impoverished millions more Filipinos, with rural families and female-headed households becoming most vulnerable to destitution (Habib et al., 2010; Van der Meulen Rodgers and Menon, 2012).

In summary, what we see is not an abrupt appearance of a US-based financial meltdown that metastasized into a global economic crisis, but another upheaval in an increasingly interconnected global system that unleashed another series of reverberations into an already volatile system. For many migrant workers and their families, these most recent shifts are among the other groundswells of economic and social crises that have made their lives more precarious in recent decades and which many feel will not abate in the near future.

Filipino Migrants: Retrenched and Returned

Nearly 25 million Asian workers labour abroad (Mangahas, 2009). The Philippines is the predominant supplier of migrant labour in the region, with over eight million Philippine workers in 200 countries (Rodríguez, 2010; Ruiz, 2008), most commonly in the Middle East, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Italy. The Philippines has a well-established labour export policy supported by an extensive infrastructure that sees the government seek out foreign markets, oversee employment contracts, license recruitment agencies, provide support services for overseas workers, organize pre-departure orientation seminars, and aid in the reintegration of returned migrant workers – although the efficacy and intent of these efforts is under debate (Prieto, 2009; Rodríguez, 2010; Ruiz, 2008). Emigration is so common that over nine million Filipino children have at least one migrant parent (Parreñas, 2005). Over one million Filipino workers are deployed overseas annually in both marine and land-based occupations (POEA, 2011). The four most common occupational categories for land-based overseas workers are household service work, cleaning, nursing, and caregiving – job categories that are overwhelmingly occupied by women workers, while the vast majority of marine-based workers are men (POEA, 2011).

Notably, emigration is not the simple individual choice made by an independent neo-liberal subject. Poor wages and high un- and under-employment along with dense kinship ties that may lay moral claim to expectations of material support, and the stated desire of a better life for one's children, often precipitate migration (Parreñas, 2005). Specifically, gender, migration and economic regimes discursively and structurally support the preparation of docile bodies that can be enrolled in the flexible labour force, which in turn sustains the global economic system and helps normalize migration as a household strategy to address the difficulty of locating remunerative employment in their home country (Hugo, 2005; Spitzer, 2010, 2013; Wright, 2006). The transformation of Southeast Asian women into migrant workers requires preparation and training through

what Rudycky (2004) terms the ‘technologies of servitude’. Inscribing the values of self-abnegation, filial piety, and sacrifice for the good of the family onto the bodies of predominantly female migrant workers, the dominant discourses circulated by public and private stakeholders operate in tandem with migrant worker training centres and tap into widely inculcated gender and class ideologies to encourage the production and performance of malleable, obedient migrant worker subjects who embody, perform, and reinforce social stratification across global fields and local households (Spitzer, 2013). As Ilcan et al. (2007: 80, cited in Raghuram, 2009: 110) maintain: ‘The new citizen-subject is thus constituted as an assemblage of morality and economic rationality who acts in socially appropriate ways, not because of force or coercion but, because their choices align with their “community interests”.’

Philippine president, Benigno Aquino III, has committed in his *Social Contract with the Filipino People* to move from a:

... government that treats its people as an export commodity and a means to earn foreign exchange, disregarding the social cost to Filipino families to a government that creates jobs at home, so that working abroad will be a choice rather than a necessity, and when its citizens do choose to become OFWs, their welfare and protection will still be the government priority. (Aquino, 2012)

In reality, however, the government continues to encourage labour migration and counts on overseas remittances (which amount to an annual \$113 billion US worldwide) to sustain families at home (Mangahas, 2009) and to contribute to the Philippine economy. Notably about 60 per cent of the funds received by family members are expended on the purchase of daily necessities, while the government’s share of these transactions is directed towards servicing the national debt (Beets and Willekens, 2009; Gaerlan et al., 2009; Rodriguez, 2010). In actuality, the Philippine government is concerned with ensuring the flow of remittances. Discourses of thrift and dedication to the hetero-normative family are embedded in government initiatives that draw transnational families into the state’s migration and reintegration apparatus. Nelson, from the POEA, recounted their re-doubled efforts to keep a close watch on OFWs and their families to encourage them to adhere to the government’s stated agenda:

We’re trying to develop a family tracking system of the OFWs, so that we can in partnership with the local government authorities and the churches and the NGOs, we can reach the families and guide them on financial discipline, frugality and entrepreneurship. We have to do that.

Working Overseas

Philippine labour migration is facilitated by a sophisticated state apparatus that encompasses activities ranging from the ongoing surveillance of the global economy with a view to identifying emerging markets for Filipino labour, the pre-departure preparation of OFWs who were hired directly by their employers or governments, to the accreditation of recruitment agencies. The government’s support for – and facilitation of – labour migration as a tool of economic development has been effective in encouraging Filipinos to labour overseas (Rodriguez, 2010).

Temporary labour migration is aided by labour recruitment agencies whose industry operates in the interstices between the government, overseas employers, and Filipino workers. The POEA (2012), the agency responsible for licensing, currently lists just under 2600 recruitment agencies focused on land-based work. Notably, the operational status of the businesses included on the POEA's listing of accredited agencies is not guaranteed as the number includes those whose licenses have been cancelled or suspended for violations ranging from false advertising, altering contract conditions, or charging unlawful fees, among other issues (Prieto, 2009).

While government representatives promise stricter surveillance of agency practices, unlicensed agencies operate with impunity and illegitimate practices are common. For instance, according to government regulations, recruitment agencies may charge migrant workers up to the equivalent of one month's salary as a placement fee for securing an overseas position for them; however, agency personnel, OFWs, and government representatives interviewed in 2011–12 confirmed that these levies often exceed this amount. Moreover, workers sent to countries that specifically prohibit payments for placements, such as Australia, Canada and the UK, still report paying these fees albeit sometimes under different names. Furthermore, agencies may contribute to the blurring of categories between documented and undocumented workers through such practices as sending workers overseas on visitors' visas (cf. Yeoh et al., 1999) or altering identity documents to enable previously banned workers to return to overseas employment. Importantly, mode of emigration has a significant impact on the kind of assistance workers can access on return from overseas deployment, as is described shortly.

Although overseas employers are required to pay for travel costs and visas as well as the OWWA's (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) and the POEA's processing fees, OFWs still face considerable expense securing overseas employment. In addition to the placement fees, prospective migrant workers are often required to travel to Manila or other cities in their region for their visas, pre-departure orientations, or medical examinations. Some countries demand that migrant workers in certain occupations enrol in training courses to prepare them for overseas labour, necessitating long-term stays in the capital region that add considerably to the overall cost of temporary out-migration. Resultantly, migrant workers are often compelled to assemble funds from a variety of sources ranging from personal savings, contributions from family members, and from loan sharks.

As of 2009, 230 countries were deemed suitable to accept Filipino workers because they complied with at least one of three provisions: the presence of a bilateral agreement to protect OFWs, ratification of multilateral conventions pertaining to the protection of workers, and the establishment of measures to protect the rights of foreign workers (Prieto, 2009). Despite these measures, the ability of migrant-sending countries to protect their overseas workers is limited, particularly given the relative power disparities between migrant-sending and receiving countries, the former of which is dependent on the latter to enhance its economic prospects (Piper, 2005).

Return

According to POEA (n.d.) regulations, recruitment agencies bear the primary responsibility for returning OFWS, including covering the cost of transportation for the worker, his or her personal effects or, in the event of death, his or her remains. When a worker is

deemed culpable for his or her termination, the recruitment agency may demand repayment from the worker upon his or her return to the Philippines (Prieto, 2009).

Migrants may return or be returned to their home countries for a variety of reasons; however, they have differential access to social and economic supports to aid them in return and reintegration. First, migrant workers who are trafficked, brought into a country for employment on a tourist visa, or who slip into undocumented work where there are no legal alternatives due to unsatisfactory working conditions, low- or non-payment of wages in documented employment, may be apprehended by state authorities, resulting in repatriation. Furthermore, foreign domestic workers in particular who are isolated within the confines of their employers' households (Spitzer and Torres, 2008) may flee physically, verbally and/or psychologically abusive employers and seek shelter provided by embassies or migrant support organizations or, as with other workers who are bound to a single employer, slide into undocumented, hence increasingly precarious, status. In concordance with published reports (e.g. Abella and Ducanes, 2009; Chew et al., 2013; Ng, 2014; Osaki, 2013), various study informants opined that workplace raids were stepped up in a number of Asian countries in response to complaints by the populace that migrant workers were usurping needed jobs in their struggling economies. Notably, if the recruitment agency or employer does not provide for the return of an OFW, the OWWA is mandated to provide assistance (OWWA, 2012; POEA, n.d.); however, undocumented workers are ineligible to avail themselves of OWWA services (Prieto, 2009). In these instances, migrant workers are compelled to either pay for their own return home, often borrowing from family and friends, or to re-pay any government assistance they may have received on their return.

Second, employers may abrogate the contracts of migrant workers due to retrenchment where companies declare bankruptcy and/or relocate to another country where they hope to find cheaper labour. In these instances, workers are often not paid their full salaries in advance of retrenchment nor are they awarded the paid return travel as stipulated in their contracts; because of the high recruitment fees, many return highly indebted. In the event that a contract is terminated without cause, as has commonly occurred under current economic conditions, employers are responsible. Employers are well aware of these obligations, and of ways to discharge their responsibilities towards their workers, as Aleck's story of being returned from Taiwan indicates:

Our boss opened three companies in China so they retrench Filipinos and Vietnamese. ... And then in the early part of 2009, that was the start of the global crisis, our company again make some schemes for us to be repatriated legally ... They just give us hope that, after the three-months vacation leave, they will re-hire us. ... No guarantee and no financial expenses, no length of service. There is no plane ticket. And then according to our contract, upon leaving the Philippines, our employer should pay the plane ticket from the Philippines to Taiwan. And after finishing the contract for two years, the company is responsible to pay the plane ticket from Taiwan to point of origin. ... In 2009, when 30 of our co-workers are being forced to sign the forced vacation ... They are being encouraged to sign the documents otherwise they will be forcefully repatriated and then will be banned to [sic] Taiwan. They intimated [sic] by the broker. 'If you don't sign, we will ask the Council of Labour, the Labour Department of Taiwan, that you will banned from entering and applying for a job in Taiwan' ... Only three days from my repatriation, they gave us the document stating that I had a problem in my family in the Philippines, so I want to go back home.

Migrant workers who return to their home country under any of the previously mentioned circumstances can become engaged with a network of organizations and programmes meant to offer social protection and aid them in their reintegration into their home communities. Importantly, participation in these programmes can be restricted to certain workers (i.e. documented) while others may favour some workers (i.e. male) over others (Ariffin, 2004; Prieto, 2009).

Government Programmes

Supported by institutional partners, the Department of Labour and Employment and the OWWA, the National Reintegration Centre for OFWs (NRCO) provides pre-departure orientation programmes to departing workers and their families that are meant to teach skills such as financial literacy and to reinforce the values of thrift, hard work, and familism. Upon return from overseas, NRCO offers financial support and small business training in line with the Philippine government's efforts to increase employment opportunities in the country – a target of five million jobs in five years according to federal government informants. Although the government has set its sights on securing the Philippines' position as the premier destination for call centres, reaching this employment goal is in part the unstated responsibility of returned OFWs who are encouraged to embrace entrepreneurship. As an informant from NRCO shared: 'We always tell them (OFWs) that now all Filipinos can be an entrepreneur at once. All of us can be an entrepreneur, but not all of us can be a *successful* entrepreneur.'

To engage returned workers in these efforts, OFWs are eligible to receive a 10,000 Pesos (\$236 USD) grant and may qualify for additional loans from 3000 Pesos (\$71 USD) up to 200,000 Pesos (\$4700 USD) at seven per cent interest. But as Nelson from the POEA cautioned:

These [funds] are not going to be a dole out ... the OFWs who are availing of these business loans must be willing to be trained by the government. They must submit a business plan and the business plan must pass and be approved by the Development Bank of the Philippines and the Land Bank of the Philippines. ... They are going to teach the OFWs the basic lessons in preparing a business plan, in production, in marketing, as well as in accounting. The whole gamut of running a business. So that it's not going to be money wasted.

While loan beneficiaries are required to undergo entrepreneurship development training, former household service workers are able to avail themselves of additional opportunities for livelihood training in specific fields. Notably, these training programmes are highly gendered with women offered training in pedicure and nail polishing while men are given opportunities to open cart-racing venues. Groups of migrant workers may also be eligible for the community-based livelihood programme that facilitates the development of enterprises that benefit a multitude of households.

Those who enthusiastically support these initiatives recognize that there are numerous challenges in facilitating their uptake and ultimate success. In particular, OFWs who have been returned may face considerable financial pressure from family members they have supported or from individuals or organizations that have lent them money to secure a position overseas. OFWs who fail to follow through with business plans or to re-pay loans can engender distrust among bureaucrats as Pami, a NRCO employee, explains:

Most of our OFWs, who were affected by the global financial crisis, stayed in Taiwan for three months only. And then they left here with a debt. Because they have to pay for their placement fee, so most of this is: 'I need money, I need money to pay my debts that I had before I left.' ... Then, after three months they have to be retrenched. ... The three months they stayed, they were not paid ... then they have to go back ... They went there with the hope and then they went back with nothing, empty-handed. So they really wanted us to ... they really wanted us to help them to start again here and not abroad. So because of that trauma they experienced, they don't want to go abroad any more. They just wanted to start their business. Some even doesn't want to go back to their family because they are afraid that they might be able to give back the money that they have borrowed. And then some said that my family is depending on me and I have nothing to help them. ... Because really we wanted to help all of them, but to tell you the truth, ... some of them ... we were not able to give them any assistance, mainly because of the budget. And then because you cannot avoid and some of them are lying. Some of them said, 'I wanted to start a business,' but then after a while, after giving them the money, they do not start the business. They just use again for their placement fee. So sometimes it really discourages us.

While NRCO's support for entrepreneurship may be useful for some, informants in our study opined that the programmes remained somewhat ineffective. The livelihoods that had been targeted – for example, sausage making, lipstick preparation, marinating chicken – required not only ongoing access to affordable supplies, but, even more importantly, a market for these products, something that the government could clearly not provide for them. Coupled with demands for debt-repayment and the need to provide for their family's basic necessities, the government reintegration strategies did not appear to these individuals to offer timely, adequate or appropriate support. To date, no comprehensive evaluation of these reintegration programmes has been conducted; however, our small sample indicated that all such entrepreneurial endeavours failed, echoing the results of a larger-scale survey conducted by the Balikabayani Foundation that found 70 per cent of small businesses initiated by OFWs went bankrupt (Weekley, 2006). Moreover, these initiatives appear to echo both the programmes offered to retrenched workers in the 1990s, which were also found to be generally unhelpful (Battistella, 1999), and the Comprehensive Livelihood Emergency Employment Program (CLEEP) that was rolled out to assist locally retrenched workers in this recent crisis, which has been likewise panned (Van der Meulen Rodgers and Menon, 2012). Reintegration programmes such as this one are predicated on the idea that migration will lead to poverty reduction as returnees will contribute both financial and social remittances in the form of human capital to their homelands (Faist, 2008). As is evident from this study and previous research (e.g. Weekley, 2006), low waged migrants are generally unable to garner sufficient resources to sustain a new enterprise and it is difficult to determine what kinds of skills are in fact developed overseas that could be useful in promoting entrepreneurial activities at home, calling into question the logic of the current migration and development paradigm.

The failure of formal support systems to ease OFW reintegration and to bolster Philippine employment has meant that many returned OFWs must rely on informal kin-based support networks to ensure the survival of their families. Benny described how his mother managed their financial resources when his father lost his job in Dubai:

My mother is always thinking about budgeting but the money don't come that's why she is always stressful and try to borrow some money from relatives. But the relatives also borrow money from the others. That's why my mother is also experiencing stress too.

Concluding Remarks

The involuntary repatriation of migrant workers due to the retrenchment of various industries reliant on cheap, flexible labour has become a common feature of temporary migrant work, particularly in Asia (Abella and Ducanes, 2009). Moreover, data from current and previous economic upheavals indicate that women workers overseas and in the Philippines will continue to be most adversely affected (Ariffin, 2004; Bruck, 2009; Otake, 2011; Piper, 2009; Piper and Lee, 2013). Under neoliberal globalization, a worker's location within the global labour market is configured by the dynamic intersections of gender, racialized status, socioeconomic class, nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, geographic location, immigration/documentated status, and citizenship, among other social identifiers. While the outcomes of social location are reflected in employment status, they are also implicated in the access that different types of migrant workers have to Philippine government assistance while abroad or at home. Regardless of their formal status, however, the drivers of migration that propelled migrant workers to seek overseas employment and their experiences of precariousness are rooted in the same effects of global capitalism.

While the Philippine government initiated programmes to reintegrate migrant workers returning home prior to this most recent global economic crisis, the instability of the world economy has increased the urgency with which the government is encouraged to move to enhance social protection mechanisms for returned workers and their families, and to focus on local development to enable both former and potential OFWs to remain in the Philippines. A centrepiece of the government's current efforts to stimulate the economy and create more jobs in the country is the focus on entrepreneurship. Under the auspices of the OWWA and the NRCO, returned workers may be eligible for a small grant and for entrepreneurial training designed to enable individuals to become economically self-sustaining. OFWs who have been deemed national heroes for their contribution of foreign currencies to the Philippine Treasury (Parreñas, 2005) are now increasingly responsabilized for stimulating the economy with their entrepreneurial activities upon their return as 'agents of development'.

Echoing perspectives in the published literature, informants in our study felt these programmes provided them with no alternatives beyond business and left them ill-prepared for entrepreneurship at that. Neither were the markets for their enterprises sustainable nor were the workers sufficiently skilled in business management to facilitate the success of their endeavours (Weekley, 2006). Demands from creditors and both the need and desire to continue to contribute to the welfare of family members accustomed to receiving remittances can be overwhelming. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the funds provided by the government to returned documented workers are often spent on what are deemed as more pressing matters rather than on developing business opportunities. Furthermore, those who underwent entrepreneurial training and who did invest their time and funds in a business eventually relinquished their entrepreneurial activities because they were unprofitable.

These programmes and policies cohere with the tenets of neoliberal globalization that heralds the primacy of economic life, the privileging of private enterprise over social investment, and that promotes the myth of the individual who can gain wealth in a 'free

market'. Rather than laying the groundwork for fundamental shifts in the Philippine economy and society to counter the ravages of capitalism, these programmes merely replicate the failed model that may at best provide some financial reward for a minority of participants. Most have been working for low wages or were unpaid, leaving no or little money to adequately finance operation of a business.

Resultantly, OFWs relied on fictive or non-fictive kin-based networks to share material, emotional, and instrumental support in order to sustain themselves and their families. It appears in this example, therefore, that some of the most egregious effects of current global economic upheavals are borne by economically marginalized migrant workers who are left to rely on informal networks to obtain support resources due to the absence or the failure of formal support mechanisms.

The failure of neoliberal solutions to address the problems engendered by neoliberal globalization is not lost on all. Organizations that challenge the Philippine labour export policy and the neoliberal agenda that underpins it are expanding. Even a spokesperson for NRCO offered a more collective proposal when asked what she would do to enhance reintegration of returned migrants, if she had the power:

Community economic development. I think it's better to help a community and not only an individual. I believe there's a bigger chance of helping a lot of people, not only in giving them a livelihood, but also giving them jobs. And let them stay and not opt to work abroad.

It is in this overall context that we hope to complicate the current notion of global economic crisis that is often both western-centric and ahistorical, in favour of a conceptualization that attends to the historically situated, interpenetrating, and multiple crises affecting the Global South in general and many migrant workers in particular.

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Notes

1. All informant names are pseudonyms.
2. Spitzer interviewed 12 workers who had been involuntarily repatriated due to the global financial crisis, two family members of workers who had been impacted by the global financial crisis, three government representatives, six recruitment agency personnel, and representatives from four civil society organizations engaged with migrant workers. Interviews were conducted in Manila; however, several of the workers and their family members hailed from Pangasinan.

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