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Outcomes for survivors of trafficking who return to the Philippines as their country of origin

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of original research on the outcomes for domestic worker survivors of human trafficking who return to the Philippines as their country of origin. It draws on 22 online interviews conducted in June-July 2022 with returnee survivors in the Philippines.

The report finds that domestic worker survivors of trafficking face prohibitive barriers to accessing support for sustainable reintegration in the Philippines, and are at severe risk of re-trafficking. Certain survivors are particularly exposed to the risk of re-trafficking due to stigmatisation and discrimination relating to characteristics such as gender, age, and a perception of domestic work as unskilled.

The report concludes that the Philippines cannot currently be considered a country of origin where effective, appropriate and accessible support is in place for survivors of trafficking, or where a "safe and dignified return" with "sustainable reintegration" is a likelihood. [1]

Key Recommendations

The report's primary recommendations are for the UK context, and the authors recognise that further research conducted locally in the Philippines would produce fuller recommendations in that context.

UK:

- Decision-makers must consider that support for a safe and dignified return with sustainable reintegration is not presently accessible to domestic worker survivors of trafficking who return to the Philippines.
- Freedom from Slavery legislation must consider domestic workers' "special vulnerabilities" and the discrimination they regularly face on return to their country of origin.
- All domestic workers in the National Referral Mechanism, irrespective of visa status, must be granted permission to work, assisting them in their recovery and enabling them to support themselves and their families sustainably.
- Reinstate the pre-2012 Overseas Domestic Worker visa, enabling domestic worker survivors of trafficking to rebuild their lives through safe, sustainable employment in the UK.
- Ratify the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (189), which calls for the global support and protection of domestic workers.
- Ensure that survivors are in leadership and consultation roles when designing anti-trafficking research and policy.

Philippines:

- Further research is needed to ascertain the needs and preferences of survivors and their families, and develop a reliable database for information on human trafficking and returnee survivors.
- Survivors of trafficking should be supported in leading plans to design and implement support for sustainable reintegration that is appropriate, effective and accessible.
- Reintegration programmes should in particular take into account barriers to access arising from the need to produce documents and travel to offices to avail of support, and support should be automatically allocated to returnees based on existing migration records.

Background to the study

UN Women noted in 2020 that it is "not known how many of the approximately 10 million Filipinos and Filipinas who work or live overseas are directly affected by trafficking in persons."[2] The Philippines' National Migration Survey notes that between 15% and 23% of migrants (in all work sectors) had experienced "involuntary work arrangements" (including trafficking indicators such as confiscation of documents and confinement),[3] but migrant domestic workers' "special vulnerability" to exploitation and abuse suggests that the number of trafficked domestic workers may be significantly higher than this.[4]

Since 2016, the Philippines has met minimum requirements to be classed as a Tier 1 country by the US Trafficking in Persons (TiP) report; however, in 2022 the TiP report notes that "reintegration follow-up services and job training and placement, remained inadequate to address the needs of adult trafficking victims."[5] The TiP report also highlights that no central database for information on illegal recruiters and human trafficking cases in the Philippines currently exists, giving rise to significant weaknesses in existing country of origin information.[6]

Method of the study

This study responds to calls for research on trafficking that is co-produced with survivors.[7] For this study, five co-researchers who are all domestic workers originally from the Philippines, survivors of trafficking, and members of the user-led organisation the Voice of Domestic Workers (VoDW) received training on research and ethics, co-produced the design of the research, and conducted 22 online interviews with survivor returnees in the Philippines in June and July 2022. The interviewees were not in contact with local charities or NGOs, but were instead approached through co-researchers' own networks. Where proximity between interviewee and co-researcher would have compromised the data or the relationship, interviewees were re-assigned to other co-researchers. Six co-researchers were facilitated in analysing the interview data and inputting into the final report and its recommendations. All names used in this report are pseudonyms chosen by the interviewees.

Livelihood, economic security and debt

59% (13) of our interviewees gained some income from employment or a small business (with others relying on borrowed money and family support) but the same number said that they could not meet the cost of basic needs, education or healthcare: **"Sometimes I borrow food just to have a meal for a day" (Sabrina).** Survivors whose salaries have been withheld, or who have not had the right to work while being assessed in systems such as the UK's National Referral Mechanism, are unable to save enough to start businesses or support sustainable recovery.

Against a backdrop of high unemployment (over a third of the working age population in 2019, with women comprising 78% of the NEET population),[8] interviewees reported that age discrimination and a prevalent perception of domestic work as "unskilled" were barriers to finding work: **"In the Philippines when you reach a certain age, no one will accept you… How could I have experience when I had worked abroad for that long? It's really hard" (Weng).** This was confirmed by survivor co-researchers, who emphasised the importance of being protected by anti-discrimination laws in the UK.

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>
> (Beth)

Interviewees reported continuing cycles of debt and economic dependency on family members: **"We live from paycheck to paycheck here in the Philippines, which means that when you receive your paycheck today, tomorrow all of it will have been used and you will need to get a loan" (Weng)**. Beth ran a small shop, but her income from this was not enough to cover daily needs or to save for expenses such as healthcare: **"We might have to get a loan or be indebted to people we know, just to pay off, for example, the hospital bills" (Beth)**.

Several of our interviewees highlighted the chronic illnesses and disabilities (mental and physical) caused by trauma, malnourishment, overwork and withheld healthcare as a barrier to finding work. Two interviewees had become too physically ill to look for a job, and at least one interviewee reported suicidal thoughts. The absence of local access to professional therapeutic support meant that this interviewee had to be referred to online counselling through VoDW.

Support for survivors

73% (16) of our interviewees had not received any support since their return to the Philippines from government or non-governmental organisations. Interviewees and co-researchers generally perceived return to the Philippines as entirely unsupported: **"When you come back to the Philippines, you won't be able to get any help, especially from the government... No assistance at all from them. It was really hard. I had to start from scratch again" (Weng)**. The TiP report notes that trafficking "victims almost never received damages," and highlights "corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes" as a "significant concern."[9]

A key barrier to applying for support at all was the cost of travel and providing documents, which was mentioned by half the interviewees. Some interviewees were not in possession of documents such as their employment contract or medical certificates, with confiscation of documents and withholding of professional healthcare prevalent indicators of trafficking among domestic workers globally.[10] Some interviewees, especially those with caring responsibilities, were forced to choose between the travel time and costs involved in accessing support, versus their daily survival: **"I would rather spend my money on our daily needs than use it to inquire at their office" (Beth)**. IT literacy and the cost of internet data can be prohibitive to online access.

Animor was trafficked to Saudi Arabia and experienced excessive working hours of up to 20 hours per day, she was 'sold' between employers and attacked by one employer with a knife, and her food and healthcare was withheld, with her weight reducing from 71kg to 46kg. She became severely unwell and pleaded with her employer to repatriate her, saying, **"Sir, I want to go home, if I'm going to die, it is better to die beside my family in my own country" (Animor)**. On arrival, she applied for financial assistance through OWWA's DOLE-AKAP scheme to pay for the medical treatment she needed, but was unable to produce her contract as required, as it had been confiscated by her employer:[11] **"I begged them to give me the assistance to be able to have proper medication for my illness but they just ignored me. I haven't tried again because I always fail, they just ignore me" (Animor)**. She was unable to afford hospital bills, and shortly after the interview, Animor died of her illness.

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A further barrier arose from interviewees' perception that they were not eligible for support, at times because they did not recognise their exploitation as trafficking or abuse. The lack of a central database for information on trafficking cases and the scant uptake of government resources suggest that survivors of trafficking in the Philippines fall through the cracks and are unknown to support services.[12]

Trafficking can also result in broken family networks and stigmatisation that leave survivors isolated and unsupported. Interviewees reported being seen as failures if they returned to the Philippines without significant savings or could not make financial contributions to the community: **"They think that you are selfish because you cannot give them what they want, but they don't understand the situation. Sometimes it is worse because it's your relatives taking advantage of you" (Weng)**. This stigmatisation is frequently more severe for women, who are seen to have failed in their roles as mothers and daughters, and can be compounded by survivors' own feelings of shame and guilt.[13]

When asked what their ideal form of support would be, over half those who responded wanted financial assistance to start a small business. Financial assistance to cover basic needs, healthcare and the costs of dependents' education were also mentioned by half the respondents. A smaller number mentioned counselling and livelihood training, and Weng emphasised that **"after the training, maybe they could offer [financial] assistance. If you had the training but no assistance, the training would be useless" (Weng).**

Risks of re-trafficking

77% (17) of the interviewees said that they had plans to migrate again, and 7 of these had already taken steps towards this (such as submitting their passport to recruitment agencies). Economic and housing insecurity and the costs of education and healthcare were key factors in this decision.

Interviewees were aware of the risks of being re-trafficked, but felt that economic and familial pressures made a future in the Philippines impossible. They were therefore willing to ignore or put up with the possibility of abuse: **"I am also unsure of what could happen to me in the new place I'll be working at. Fear itself is triggering my sadness because I have no idea what to expect there. I don't know if I will be able to return home alive" (Maribel)**. Of those planning to migrate, 2 brought up the risk of age discrimination at the hands of recruiters, which may limit their options for regular migration and therefore make them more susceptible to traffickers. Survivor co-researchers emphasised the risks of internal trafficking to themselves and their dependents in the Philippines (such as trafficking for sexual exploitation, and Online Sexual Exploitation of Children), and their specific vulnerability to this as low-income women supporting families.[14]

Interviewees and survivor co-researchers emphasised that overseas migration could not always be considered a choice: **"Domestic workers are always told, it's your choice to leave the country, it's your choice to leave your family, to work overseas. For me it's not a choice, because it's the only option... If only everything in the Philippines was in order – from support to protection – why would we leave the country?"**

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Conclusion

This report finds that the Philippines cannot currently be considered a country of origin where effective, appropriate and accessible support is in place for domestic worker survivors of trafficking, or where safe and dignified return with sustainable reintegration is a likelihood. Data shows that survivors face significant barriers to economic security and reintegration support, and are therefore faced with a choice between migration and destitution that puts them at severe risk of re-trafficking.

References

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[2] UN Women, 'Gender at the Nexus of Violent Extremism and Trafficking in Persons in Muslim Mindanao' (2020), p21.

[3] Philippine Statistics Authority, '2018 National Migration Survey' (2019), p.151.

[4] James Ewins, 'Independent Review of the Overseas Domestic Worker Visa' (2015), p.10; Joyce Jiang, 'A Special Vulnerability: Migrant Domestic Workers Enslaved by the Non-Renewable Overseas Domestic Worker Visa in the UK' (2019).

[5] US Department of State, 'Trafficking in Persons Report' (2022), p.448.

[6] Including UK Home Office, 'Country Policy and Information Note: Philippines: Human Trafficking' (2022).

[7] Sue Lockyer, 'Beyond Inclusion: Survivor-Leader Voice in Anti-Human Trafficking Organizations,' (2022) *Journal of Human Trafficking* 8:2, pp.135-156; Laura Cordisco Tsai, 'A Survivor-defined Framework for Economic Empowerment: Findings from A Photovoice Study with Survivors of Human Trafficking and Gender-based Violence,' (2022), *Journal of Human Trafficking;* Kimberley Hutchison, KJ and Nancy Esiovwa, 'Agents for Change: Survivor Peer Researchers Bridge the Evidence and Inclusion Gap' (2021).

[8] World Bank, 'Philippines Jobs Report: Shaping a Better Future for the Filipino Workforce' (2023) p.21.

[9] US Department of State, 'Trafficking in Persons Report' (2022), p.447-48.

[10] 100% of interviewees had had their documents confiscated in Hagar ElDidi et al., 'Reducing Vulnerability to Forced Labor and Trafficking of Short-Term, Low-Skilled Women Migrant Workers in the South Asia to Middle East Corridor' (2021), p.2.

[11] See MENA Report, 'Philippines: OWWA releases guidance on DOLE-AKAP for OFWs' (April 22, 2022).

[12] Government of the Philippines, Department of Foreign Affairs, 'Submission of the Voluntary National Review for the Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration' (2022) p. 8–10; US Department of State, 'Trafficking in Persons Report' (2022), p.448.

[13] Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, 'Sustainable Reintegration: What Do Women Migrant Workers in the South Asia-Middle East Corridor Say?' (2022); Temilola Salami et al., 'What Therapies are Favored in the Treatment of the Psychological Sequelae of Trauma in Human Trafficking Victims?' (2018) *Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 21:2 pp.87–96.

[14] Melinda Gill, 'Online Child Sexual Exploitation in the Philippines: Moving beyond the current discourse and approach' (2021) *Anti-Trafficking Review* 16, pp. 150-155.