

# ***The Lived Experiences of the Repatriated Overseas Filipino Nurses from Libya***

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## **Abstract**

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the Filipino Nurses throughout the repatriation process and to provide better understanding on their experiences. Thirty snowball-earned participants who were repatriated from Libya to the Philippines in different dates thru land and sea-routes from August 2014 to June 2015 were interviewed. There were various prompting factors pertaining to the existing situation, employment environment and personal choices suggesting that Libya was not a favorable working ground for nurses. The study revealed the honeymooning, reflecting, stabilizing and regenerating behaviors towards re-entry issues after repatriation. Challenges encountered include career anxiety, kingpin phenomenon, unmet personal expectations, employment rejection, age discrimination and being a penniless returnee. The diversity of the generated sample had revealed varied discernments towards the repatriation experience. The results emphasized that career anxiety prevailed among repatriates and that they had mainly resorted to self-determination measures to secure employability after repatriation.

**Keywords: nurse repatriation; transition; re-entry; career anxiety; self-determination**

## **1. Introduction**

Working overseas is a multi-faceted experience. Financial gains commonly drive Filipinos to secure job overseas withstanding the emotional stress of not seeing loved ones for a period of time. Challenges were endured during the overseas experience mostly aiming to secure a better future for the family.

Libya, an oil-rich North African nation, have been one of the grounds providing employment to Filipinos. For the year 2014 alone, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) had estimated around 4,395 deployed OFWs where 1,503 were newly-deployed and 2,892 were rehires. Presumably, the figures for the newly-deployed workers constituted only those sent prior to the Department of Foreign Affairs' (DFA) declaration of Alert Level 2 (Restriction Phase) and before imposing deployment ban in 2014. At this time, Libya is home to about 13,000 OFWs mostly medical-related professionals.

After the Civil War that ousted Muamar Gaddafi in 2011, civil unrest beset Libya. The country was unable to hold any peaceful resolution on a post-uprising situation and has not

been able to maintain any stable government to preside it. The mounting civil unrest led to unexpected circumstances especially for overseas workers. This led the Philippine government to declare a moratorium on sending OFWs after May 23, 2014 as Alert Level 2 was imposed on the conflict-stricken country (Locsin, 2014). Subsequently due to the massive deterioration of peace and security in Libya, the Philippine government raised alert status to Level 3 (Voluntary Repatriation Phase) on May 29, 2014. Under Alert Level 3, Filipinos staying in Libya were persuaded to leave voluntarily the earliest possible time with the Philippine government shouldering the cost for repatriation (Santos, 2014). As the situation worsened the DFA raised the alert to Level 4 on July 2014 which means Mandatory Repatriation of OFWs who were still in Libya. In the same month two Filipinos became casualties in the ongoing strife: a heavy equipment operator was kidnapped and beheaded by militia in Benghazi and a Filipina nurse was abducted and gang raped in Tripoli. However, only 1,625 OFWs of the estimated 13,000 have returned to the Philippines as of 2014 (Dela Cruz, 2014). Repatriation was still continuing at the time of this study. The DFA thru the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers' Affairs (OUMWA) estimated that the government had repatriated 5,331 OFWs from Libya with their dependents, as of June 27, 2015.

## **2. Statement of the Problem and Motivation for the Study**

The medical or health service sector of Libya has largely been dependent on foreign health professionals. Filipino nurses in particular constituted around 60% of this sector (Lamloum, 2014). It is therefore understandable that nurses constitute most of the repatriates from Libya.

Repatriation is an unexpected event in the life of an overseas worker. It puts the worker in a precarious situation where decisive action has to be made with so many factors to consider other than security from harm. This study was conceptualized based on the experience of one of the authors as a nurse and OFW. It endeavors to explore the lived experiences of the Overseas Filipino Nurses throughout the repatriation process from Libya and to provide insight on the repatriates' special situation through first-hand information of the general situation they have experienced.

Let the reader be aware, however, that this paper did not intend to present a critique of repatriation procedures or to analyze any shortcomings of the reintegration programs offered by the Philippine government. This research aimed not to generalize the experiences of the participants who joined the government-led repatriation conducted in various dates. It was not practical to draw specific set of assumptions and conclusions considering the diversity of the participants since they were from different geographical cities and towns in Libya. However, maximum efforts were utilized to collate, classify and analyze the information gathered to generate themes and concepts from the experiences of the repatriates.

There were three questions addressed to gain insights on the experiences and perceptions of the repatriated nurses namely: a) *what prompted them to join the repatriation?* b) *What were their experiences during repatriation?* and c) *What were their experiences after repatriation?*

## **3. Objectives and Significance of the Study**

This study can be considered relevant as it gives insight on the actual experiences of the repatriated nurses from their own accounts and perspective. It exemplifies the experiences of

repatriated OFWs and represents the unheard voices of other health professionals and OFWs who had undergone repatriation or undergoing repatriation. It will yield information that could serve as a baseline in the formulation of strategies and policies related to repatriation of overseas workers. This is relevant with the fact that Filipino nurses and other health professionals constitute a great proportion of OFWs in the conflict-prone countries in the Middle East and North African region. It may also give insights to other nationalities on the effects of repatriation to migrant workers and spur concern to further enhance efforts to ensure safety of migrant workers. Additionally this paper can serve as a ready reference for future studies. This can draw an expansion of researches focused on OFW repatriation and to other related fields of interest dedicated to migration.

#### **4. Methodology**

Lived experience of the world of everyday life is the central focus of phenomenological inquiry. It is the lived experience that presents to the individual what is true or real in his or her life. Furthermore, it is this lived experience that gives meaning to each individual's perception of a particular phenomenon and is influenced by everything internal and external to the individual (Streubert& Carpenter, 2011).

Data for this study were elicited from 30 participants. It was essential to collect information from this sample as repatriation occurred in various dates from May 2014 up to the time of writing. Moreover, the country of Libya has a huge land area and Filipino Nurses were scattered in various towns and cities - the situation in one area may be different to another. Thus, specific criteria were set for the qualification of a participant. The inclusion criteria set were as follows: a) has been deployed to Libya and worked as a nurse, either in the government sector or in private institutions, and b) has joined the government-sponsored voluntary or mandatory repatriation program from May 2014 to June 2015.

Initially, purposive sampling was done to select participants. Invitation was posted on social media forum group *MOH Flash Updates*. It was done to generate initial volunteer participants together with the personal contacts and associates of the researchers. Online invitations were sent to various prospected respondents assuring their confidentiality and anonymity.

In order to trace additional participants or informants, the authors used snowball sampling to expand the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing. The online participants were also requested to convince their co-repatriates or former colleagues in Libya to join the study to increase the number of informants and likewise to substantiate the responses of the former.

Embraced with the nature of this type of study, semi-structured online interview method was used to collect definite descriptions of the remembered experience. The interview was composed of questions that sought to elicit the data needed. A pilot data gathering to two known associates of one of the authors was conducted before proceeding to send questions to others and looking for further participants. This was a valuable method that served as an opportunity to reflect on predetermined-questions raised and restructure them to a manner that will be easier to understand. Each of the participants was provided with the same main questions. However,

further data were extracted depending on the responses they have presented. Their responses were saved as a Word document file on a computer.

After earning the desired number of respondents and confirming that saturation of responses has been reached, personal interviews were performed to four purposively chosen members of the sample. The interviews were conducted in various locations and each done separately to seek clarification and explore the topic in greater depth. Two of the four chosen respondents joined the sea-route repatriation (Libya-Malta route) last August 2014, and the other two joined the land-route repatriation (Libya-Tunisia route) with different dates of occurrence. The purpose of collecting data from this manner is a form of triangulation to contrast the data and validate if it yields similar findings.

The demographic data and employment information were taken and used to describe the participants and assisted the investigators in deriving meaning to the experiences from the participants' perspective. These include the respondents' age, gender, civil status and number of dependents. Further, employment information consists the duration of stay, position, job placement and monthly salary.

Written narratives regarding the experienced program of repatriation were recorded. The qualitative analysis of data gathered was done by the researchers. The researchers had been constantly reviewing set of related literature regarding the current events in Libya and other theoretical and conceptual literature to associate the responses extracted from the informants.

The authors acquired an understanding of the lived experiences of the informants as contained in the constructs of the intuiting process. To ensure that data will be explicated accordingly, the author involves five phases according to Hycner (1999) as cited by Groenewald (2004).

## **5. Results and Discussions**

### ***Demographic and Employment Profiles of the Repatriates***

Respondents were mostly single females at the age range of 25-52 years with no dependents and were assigned as Staff Nurses at various government hospitals deployed thru employment agencies and have stayed in Libya for about 2-3 years earning P30,000 to P40,000.

### ***Prompting Factors to Repatriation***

There were various factors that prompted the nurses to join the repatriation. These were factors related to the existing situation, employment environment and personal choices. Nurse-repatriates were challenged by the prevailing circumstances brought about by the civil unrest. They were confronted with the question on whether to *stay and hope for a coming resolution* or *to leave, get unemployed and start anew*.

The prompting factors related to the existing situation of civil unrest pertain to the circumstances experienced by the repatriate that indicate *foreseeable and eminent threat* including a wide-eye experience of seeing presumed ISIS men marching on the street, and gun fires and bombings in the city of Tripoli, *violence and irrational treatment to foreigners, devaluation of the Libyan currency and "the feeling of worthless dinars."* Aside from the worsening security situation, there were problems encountered by the repatriates that pressed them to leave

particularly the devaluation of Libyan currency due to unstoppable rising rate of US dollar and the inclining prices of commodities, and the massive difficulty of sending remittances and closure of remitting bank outlets. It is empirical to note that the Libyan currency is not an acceptable foreign denomination in the Philippines, and the only way to transform the hard-earned dinars was to send to remitting centers or buy local goods or gold which became highly priced as well.

Meanwhile, employment-related factors were the unfavorable circumstances faced by the respondents related to their work and remuneration. These include *delayed salaries, understaffing and increasing workloads and unavailability of return tickets*. Very evident among all the participants is the delay of salary that ranged from two months to a year even before the outburst of the civil unrest. The dilemma worsens when the political instability occurred. There were repatriates who went home and were unable to secure their due compensations.

As mentioned earlier, 60% of the foreign health professionals in the medical sector in Libya are Filipino nurses (Lamloum, 2014). Thus with the increasing number of Filipinos going home, it has drastically affected the workforce of the institutions. There were repatriates who finished their employment contracts, however, their employing hospital cannot provide their return tickets and it usually takes months before it will be handed to them. Repatriation which is shouldered by the Philippine government had been a sort of short-cut alternative for these repatriates.

The personal factors were related to the repatriates' intentions particularly regarding their families, career and perception towards the repatriation. The *family over money principle* which was manifestly affirmed by most of the participants reflects the concern to the worrying loved ones left in the Philippines. They opted to leave their current posts even though dreaded to foresee unemployment. There were notable responses emphasizing the acceptance of the unfulfilled expectations and had expressed an explicit plan to direct a reconstruction of the career like going back to the school or starting to establish own business.

With the previous experiences shared by their counterparts who joined the repatriation, some repatriates recognized that the travel with colleagues and co-Filipinos was also a delightful experience, motivated them to participate instead of taking other commercial flights.

The current study had exposed the negative experiences of Filipino Nurses deployed in Libya. There was an immense threat within the context of safety among foreign workers. However, the uncertainty may not be posed directly but in some extent felt indirectly among Overseas Filipino Nurses.

### ***The Repatriation Process***

The study included participants from different repatriation dates and highlighted varying experiences. The earliest encountered set of participants was repatriated on August 14-17, 2014 and the latest were on June 20-23, 2015. Unfortunately, no single repatriate joined the voluntary repatriation conducted on May to July, 2014 from among the respondents.

From the data gathered from the repatriates, there were two major routes of repatriation - through the Libya-Malta exit (sea route) and Libya-Tunisia exit (land route). The sea-route was conducted only once which started on August 13 with a ship docked from ports of Benghazi then to the port of Misurata on August 14. On the other hand, the land-route repatriation was conducted since May 2015 and has continued up to the time of study. It was conducted depending

on the number of willing Filipinos who enlisted and coordinated with the Philippine Embassy in Tripoli.

The authors were able to secure sample from sea-route repatriation. There were nine (9) Filipino nurses who joined the sea-route repatriation and all of them were enlisted through the Rapid Response Team based in Misurata, Libya. This constituted 30% of the sample. These repatriates were mostly from central or western cities of the country. Unfortunately, there was no secured informant with the repatriation conducted in Benghazi who joined the same ship with those from Misurata.

On the other hand, there were 21 informants who joined the land-route repatriation from August 2014 to June 2015 or 70% of the whole sample. Schedules of repatriation were commonly announced by the Philippine Embassy in Tripoli. Enlistment and coordination process were done by the repatriates especially for those who were far from the embassy location. Repatriates were asked to stay at least two days prior to the scheduled date of travel and submit their passport. They were required to stay in the embassy at least the night before the scheduled travel to Tunisia.

Interestingly, based on the responses earned from the informants, the land-route repatriation has shown higher degree of satisfaction among the repatriates than the sea-based repatriation. The Rapid Response Team that headed the repatriation program both through sea-route and land-route had been effective in assuring the safety of the participants.

### ***Implied Definitions of Repatriation***

Repatriation to the respondents was defined as an *escaping measure*, as the *last alternative* and as *a way to start a new beginning*. Repatriates consistently stated the intense violence and were apprehensive for the continuing deterioration of safety and security in the country. There were informants who experienced direct hostility among the locals. Repatriation was believed to be the means to escape from the unfavorable circumstances in the country.

Most employers were unable to provide return tickets. The non-existence of guaranteed flights and the frequent threats at the country's airports instilled fear among the respondents. They believed that repatriation was a short-cut to secure a trip going back to the Philippines as repatriation schedule was frequently announced.

A number of the respondents have already accepted the fact that they need to start from the beginning again. Most of the participants were much concerned for unemployment. They were willing to undergo series of job hunting again, particularly searching overseas employment, even though not knowing which next country they will be destined again. They have anticipated that they will be going to start the long process of applying and waiting for another overseas stint.

### ***Attitudes After Repatriation***

It was observed that repatriates have varied approaches on how they identify the repatriation experiences. These approaches were evident from the generated responses. These embody their behavior on how they slowly go through the process of reintegration and can be classified according to the following stages:



*Honeymooning.* This period is characterized by intense excitement in returning home and in experiencing home country environment. It includes the gratifying set of activities and experiences by the repatriates right after their arrival in their home country. *Re-establishing social networks, vacationing, indulging to missed experiences and getting monetary claims* are some remarkable themes from the responses.

*Reflecting.* The period characterized by unfavorable emotions towards the negative effects of repatriation. This includes the feelings of *reverse homesickness, chopping board situation and devaluing of experience.*

*Stabilizing.* The period characterized by re-adjustment to challenges during the re-entry period. This includes *counteracting alienation and re-adapting to present social situation.*

*Regenerating.* The period characterized by slowly adapting to the re-entry issues and utilizing positive coping measures towards securing an employment. This includes *career reframing and reconfiguration, and seeking employment information.*

### ***Challenges Encountered***

The life after repatriation entailed challenges that were faced by most of the repatriates. These were generally related on the sudden employment transition and re-entry issues. Challenges encountered include career anxiety, *kingpin phenomenon*, unmet personal expectations, employment rejection, age discrimination and being a penniless returnee.

The repatriation experience posed difficulties among the repatriates. These had been the resultant of the loss of job, the undervalued earnings and the inability to obtain their earned money. The repatriates who had the least time of preparation for repatriation presumably bore the least understanding of what will transpire in the reintegration period and had proceeded to a rougher post-repatriation experience. Limited number of career possibilities were regularly been mentioned. Looking for a new placement for work, both for local and overseas, was seemingly difficult among aged and seasoned repatriates and for those who were not able to secure employment documents from their employers.

### ***Coping Strategies***

Gradually the repatriates developed strategies to cope with difficulties and recovery towards adaptation. Adaptive measures utilized include *maintaining family and seeking social support, searching for career alternatives, proactive thinking and diversion of attention.*

The participants were able to utilize positive adaptive measures after the repatriation experience. Most of them focused on counteracting unemployment. The major concern of the repatriates was the desire to procure a sustainable income after repatriation. Through self-determination, support by the surrounding individuals and the government, repatriates were able to counteract the challenges present. The ability to recognize valuable opportunities, positive experiences, and learning outcomes were also observed to be helpful strategies for reintegration.

## **6. Conclusions**

The situational and employment-related factors reflect the repatriates' negative experiences on their work positions and to the existing conditions in Libya. Personal factors

constitute the driving or pulling force in leaving Libya and to return to the Philippines. Joining the repatriation program was a multi-causal judgment among the repatriated Overseas Filipino Nurses.

The diversity of the generated sample had revealed a varied discernment towards the repatriation experience. The results emphasized that career anxiety prevailed among repatriates. There were varied reintegration adjustments experienced by the repatriates but they had mainly resorted to self-determination measures to secure employability after repatriation.

The results of this study can provide insights toward a more desirable program and policy changes concerning the Overseas Filipino Workers and this can be a positive initiative for more researches dedicated to this population.

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