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Bridging Recruitment to Reintegration in
Migration Governance

THE UTILITY OF INDIGENOUS APPROACHES FOR STRENGTHENING MIGRANT WORKER ASSISTANCE

.....
by Michelle G. Ong, Ph.D.

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01

WHY INDIGENOUS APPROACHES?





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Human migration, even temporary labor migration, is a cultural experience—what norms there are around the particular work that one is doing, the expectations for men and women to fulfill certain roles, the similarities and differences of values between the worker and the employer, these are all shaped by culture—they vary, they can be shared widely or by only a small group, they become salient at different times and contexts, and they can change over time. As such, it can be detrimental to migrant worker services for solutions to be thought of as universal and unchanging, and as being able to produce the expected results for everyone if they have been found to be consistently effective for some.

Globally, there is growing recognition that policy should be informed by indigenous knowledge systems.

Indigenous knowledge frameworks and methodologies have been used productively to inform health policies, to support mental health and well-being, to foster sustainable development, and respond to climate change. These topics have some relevance for Filipino migrant workers, and we can therefore expect indigenous approaches to understanding their experiences and issues to be fruitful. Having a better understanding of context, culture, and patterns of communication can lead to improving our responses, their relevance, and their accessibility.

Locally, *Sikolohiyang Pilipino (SP)* has been advocating for and developing a psychological science that is grounded in Filipino experience, thought, and orientation since the 1970s (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). It is simultaneously a critique of and an alternative to how social sciences, in general, and psychology, in particular, remained Western and colonial in their orientation. An important contribution of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* is the development of psychologically-relevant concepts and theories based on local languages, which have been shown to have relevance for understanding and solving real-world problems of Filipinos and Philippine society. This policy brief proposes some ways that the indigenous knowledge developed by SP can be useful for strengthening migrant worker services, including reintegration programs.

02

PAKIKIPAGKAPWA **AS THE** **UNDERLYING** **ETHIC OF SERVICE**





Photo: UN Women/Norman Gorecho

Perhaps the most iconic and influential concept developed by *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* is the concept of *kapwa*, and the related *pakikipagkapwa*.

Kapwa, or a shared sense of self, is theorized to be the core value of Filipino psychology (Enriquez, 1978). All social relations, communications, goals, and aspirations are said to be shaped by this core value of seeing the self as not separate from others, even from individuals who are not kin or close friends. Filipinos are said to recognize in themselves and others, at the most basic, a shared humanity and dignity, which is then expressed in *pakikipagkapwa*—relating to another as *kapwa*. This way of relating underlines an ethic of mutual care and responsibility, where people interact in the hope of finding in themselves and in the other their shared humanity and of uplifting each other’s dignity (Enriquez, 1994).

In the provision of migration services, OFWs may be referred to as “clients,” “beneficiaries,” or “recipients,” which connote certain types of relationships between them and the offices and persons they encounter.

The word “client,” for instance, suggests a business-like relationship between the migrant and the institution, where the goal is to provide a service effectively and efficiently, that is, with the least

possible waste of time, energy, and money. The words “beneficiaries” or “recipients” suggest a somewhat paternalistic relationship, where the institution determines what is best, perhaps based on what they are able to offer, and migrants are passive receivers or dependents who have little or no contribution to their own development, or choice as to what they are to receive.

If migrant service provision is to be re-conceptualized as being based on *pakikipagkapwa*, there are several things that we can rethink in the effort to recognize the shared humanity of all migrants and service providers, which could result in the restoration of mutual respect and dignity through their interactions and the services provided.

How can we communicate respect and support for migrant workers as *kapwa*? How can we make them feel valued and heard? How agencies or offices that migrant workers visit throughout their migration journey communicate with them is a concrete manifestation of *pakikipagkapwa* (or the lack thereof).

Communication by individual staff who interact with migrant workers and formal communication through printed information materials, social media, and websites should, ideally, be consistent in their use of language that is easily understood by migrant workers, make them feel comfortable, and offer opportunities for feedback.

Part of improving communication for frontliners is training on **psychosocial first aid** (which can help staff better support migrants in distress), training on gender sensitivity and cultural sensitivity, and training on communication skills and conflict resolution.

More formal communication may be improved by a review of the communication policy, including a discussion of how language, social media, and traditional media use may be improved so that the communication process is not only made more effective but representations and images of the Filipino migrant and migration, in general, veer away from stereotyping and marginalization but, instead, reflect their actual complexity and nuances.

What opportunities can we give Filipino migrants to feel that their knowledge, skills, and experiences are valued?

This is a challenge particularly in reintegration services where, more often than not, returning migrants are regarded as not having sufficient competencies or capacities for local jobs, therefore, requiring further training.

Is it possible to find or even create job opportunities that maximize what returning migrants bring? Their experience with particular cultures and languages, for instance, might be useful for training new, outbound migrant workers, in local tourism and hospitality, and in enriching the educational experiences of students in certain professions. Might there



Photo: UN Women/Norman Gorecho

be volunteering opportunities that returning migrants might find meaningful and rewarding even as they pursue further training to take on new employment or entrepreneurship?

Pakikipagkapwa as the underlying ethic of service necessitates advocating for OFWs in the wider community in order to realize the reintegration of migrant workers as a whole-of-society endeavor. While OFWs are perceived to contribute significantly to nation-building and the economic well-being of their families and communities, it is unfortunate that some of them, for instance the elderly and the ailing, find little support upon their return. Such support should be extended by society not just out of a transactional obligation based on their economic contributions as OFWs but more so out of a recognition of OFWs as kapwa, as deserving of a life of dignity as everyone else.

03

GINHAWA AS THE GOAL OF MIGRATION SERVICES





Photo: Media Active / Nopporn Liengjai

GINHAWA

Ginhawa is well-being conceived as being securely embedded in a network of relationships that helps one live a meaningful life, one where one is able to give and receive comfort, through one's multiple identities and multiple strands of relationships (Paz, 2008). Consistent with the notion of *kapwa* as being a shared sense of self, decisions to further one's *ginhawa* are seldom made alone and never without regard for how they will have an impact on the people one cares about.

For example, the decision to migrate, for how long, what to do in case of problems, and what to do upon return are ideally made in a way that respects and strengthens these networks, without foreclosing the possibility that new relationships and new networks can be developed over time. That is, plans and strategies can change with a change in one's networks of support (which can later include formal agencies and organizations) and the resources and opportunities that can become available. Programs to assist migrant workers would do well to aim to develop such networks in both the migrant's community of origin and in the host or employer's community, and to develop and support diverse networks (e.g., hometown organizations, gender-based groups, interest or hobby groups, religious groups).

Ginhawa, being multifaceted, involves not just economic stability—a **prime concern of migration services**—but also stability and harmony in one's relationships with one's family, community, spirituality, and nature. The more areas or aspects are found to be stable and satisfying, the less likely a person will be overwhelmed by challenges in life.



Photo: UN Women/Norman Gorecho

A recent study on the types of programs available for reintegration services found that a large proportion (**about 6 in 10**) of programs available are related to **income security** (Parreño, 2022).

However, problems in reintegration after migration, especially for those who have been migrant workers for many decades, can include difficulties reconnecting with spouses, children, and other family members, finding meaningful activities to engage in (even if these are not necessarily about securing an income), and health issues—all of which can have an impact on one’s state of well-being or *ginhawa* (Ong, 2021).

For new, repeat, and long-term labor migrants, return and reintegration can be more full of *ginhawa* if migration services also reflect the multifaceted nature of migration and support growth and development in its different aspects.

The complexity and diversity of services required implies that coordination and sharing of resources between organizations and agencies, the public and private sectors, and civil society organizations will be an important strategy.



Photo: UN Women/Staton Winter

RECOMMENDATIONS



CONDUCT TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS

for staff with the objective of improving the experience of both migrant workers and the frontline staff in their interactions.

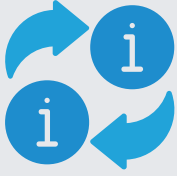


REVIEW COMMUNICATIONS POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

with the aim of improving how social media and traditional media are used and of using appropriate language to ensure better communication with migrant workers and their families, and better representation of migrants and the migration experience.



COLLECT FEEDBACK from migrant workers on services they have accessed and use it to enhance these services.



GENERATE AND PUBLICIZE INFORMATION on how feedback from migrant workers has been used to improve migration services.



SUPPORT AND PROMOTE EFFORTS by civil society organizations and local government units to collaborate on programs, share resources and databases, and conduct research that improves their capacity to help migrant workers.

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