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# Socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Overseas Filipino Workers and their left-behind families: a scoping review

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Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are considered *bagong bayani*, or modern-day heroes, as their remittances have a positive long-term impact on the Philippines economy. The Philippines ranked 10<sup>th</sup> worldwide in terms of net emigration from 2010 to 2020. The deployment of OFWs declined during the pandemic, and this was estimated to have adverse effects on remittances. As a migrant-sending country, the Philippine government had to deal with the mass of unemployed OFWs stranded in their host countries and organize large-scale repatriation of OFWs. This scoping review aims to assess the existing literature, identify research gaps, and propose future research directions concerning the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs and their left-behind families. The results indicate that the impact of the pandemic on OFWs was not uniform. It is evident that OFWs in precarious situations beforehand have become even more vulnerable. The loss of their source of income in the host country and the restrictions on international mobility during the pandemic had significant detrimental effects on their wellbeing and their families left behind, regardless of their income level or type of job. Upon returning to their home country, they often experienced anxiety, depression, discrimination, and difficulty in finding a job. Overall, this scoping review highlights the urgent need for greater recognition and protection of OFWs in times of crisis. It is crucial to address the systemic issues that contribute to their vulnerability and to ensure that they receive adequate support and protection in host countries and the Philippines.

## KEYWORDS

Overseas Filipino Workers, COVID-19 pandemic, scoping review, socioeconomic effects, responses and recommendations

## 1 Introduction

Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) have been considered *bagong bayani* or modern-day heroes by their fellow citizens as their remittances have a positive long-term impact on the Philippines economy (Neil and Seriño, 2012). In 2021, 60.2 percent of OFWs were women, with the highest proportion in the age group 30–34 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022). Region IV-A, located in Luzon, the country's largest island, has the highest proportion of OFWs, estimated at 15.9 percent of the total population. The top

destination regions were Asia (78.3 per cent), Europe (9.3 percent), and the Americas (8.9 percent). The top host countries were Saudi Arabia (24.4 percent), the United Arab Emirates (14.4 percent), and Hong Kong (6.7 percent), with total remittances reaching 34.9 billion US dollars in 2020, which represented 9.6 percent of the GDP (IOM, 2022). The Philippines ranked 10<sup>th</sup> worldwide in terms of net emigration from 2010 to 2020<sup>1</sup> (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019). The large number of OFWs has been a trend in the migration landscape of the Philippines since the 1970s. Labor export policies, processes and state mechanisms have supported a “culture of migration” which is present across socio-economic groups in the Philippines (Vilog and Ballesteros, 2015). The bilateral labor agreement of the Philippine government with different host countries spells out the recruitment, terms and agreements, regulations, and protection of OFWs. For instance, the Philippines’ bilateral labor agreements with the United Kingdom and Spain cover the deployment of health care workers (Rivera et al., 2013).

Based on the Philippine Statistics Authority (2022), the deployment of OFWs declined to 1.76 million in 2020 and 1.83 million in 2021, from 2.18 million in 2019. The decrease in deployment was estimated to have adverse effects on remittances. Most of the OFWs who were repatriated cited early termination of contracts during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a migrant-sending country, the Philippine government had to deal with the mass of unemployed OFWs stranded in their host countries, an unprecedented situation in the country’s history of sending economic migrants.

Exclusion of migrants from policy development in host countries has contributed to the spread of the COVID-19 infection (Wahab, 2020). This is exemplified in the Gulf countries, Singapore, and Malaysia, where migrants’ precarious living conditions and limited access to healthcare have facilitated the transmission of COVID-19 (Wahab, 2020; Shah and Alkazi, 2022).

In the home country, Republic Act No. 11494, known as the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act of 2020, was enacted to address the COVID-19 pandemic (Official Gazette, 2020). The act created the COVID-19 task force and identified the roles of key government agencies in responding to the pandemic. One section of the law specifically addressed migrants, which increased the budget of the Office for the Migrant Affairs’ Assistance to National Fund with an additional PhP 820 million (USD 16.5 million<sup>2</sup>).

Based on the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker<sup>3</sup> (Hale et al., 2021), the Government Response Index level of the Philippines falls within the 40–60 range, indicating a moderate level of government response. Scholars would eventually

describe the pandemic response in the Philippines as militarized (Hapal, 2021). The use of police and military personnel to lead the COVID-19 task force, strict lockdowns for up to 17 months, and harsh penalties for health protocol violations placed a burden on the poor and failed to contain the transmission and spread of the virus (Chiu, 2021).

There exists no synthesis of the studies regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs. This scoping review will address the following research questions: What are the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs and their left-behind families? What are the responses of different stakeholders to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on OFWs and their left-behind families? What are the research gaps in the current literature?

## 2 Methods

This scoping review followed the framework developed by Arksey and O’Malley (2005), Levac et al. (2010), and Peters et al. (2020), which consists of five stages: identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating, summarizing and reporting the results. It defines inclusion and exclusion criteria according to the population, concept, and context. A protocol was developed and uploaded to the Open Science Framework (Annex A).

### 2.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The review included studies focused on the experiences, impacts, and responses of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies addressing the family, workplace, community organizations, and efforts of both home and host countries were selected. Only peer-reviewed studies were included, along with reports by international and local organizations. Theses, dissertations, and conference proceedings were excluded. Only articles written in Filipino or English were selected.

### 2.2 Search strategy

A total of seven databases, gray literature, websites of organizations working on OFW issues, and the reference sections of the included articles were searched. The databases searched were the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences IBSS/ProQuest, Science Direct, EBSCO, JSTOR, SAGE, PubMed, and Web of Science. Initially, the search terms were “OFWs” AND “COVID-19 pandemic,” but most of the results were not related to the research questions. The search terms were then changed to “Overseas Filipino Workers” AND “COVID-19 pandemic.” Additional restrictions were applied: only articles and reports published after 1 January 2020 were included. The search and screening of studies took place from 22 October 2022 to 23 January 2023. A pilot selection was conducted to test the methodology. One author (KGM) performed the keyword search in one database, and the title, abstract, and inclusion/exclusion status of the first 50 articles were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. Another author

<sup>1</sup> Note from the International Migration Report 2019, “Data used in this chapter from the latest population statements and projections produced by the United Nations Population Division for five-year intervals (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019) p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Exchange rate set forth by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines) for 2020 (USD 1 = PhP 49.6 ). <https://www.bsp.gov.ph/statistics/external/Table%2012.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> OxGRT collects four indicators – containment and closure policies, economic policies, health system policies and vaccine policies. The four indices are aggregated into a single number ranging 0 to 100.

(CBJ) reviewed the Excel file and agreed with the application of the inclusion/exclusion criteria based on the protocol developed. Any disagreements regarding specific articles were resolved through discussion. If an article could not be categorized, the full text was included for further review.

KGM and CBJ jointly delineated the variables designated for charting and subsequently applied them to a subset of articles for initial validation. The delineated variables encompassed salient components such as title, authorship, publication year, host country, occupational sector, research questions/objectives, data collection methodologies, ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, responses elicited, and identified research gaps. Systematic scrutiny of the incorporated articles was undertaken by KGM to extract the specific variables useful to the charting process within each article. The extracted variables were recorded in a structured MS Excel spreadsheet (refer to [Annex B](#)), and the resultant file was subsequently uploaded into the Atlas.ti software for further analysis. The coding process entailed the development and refinement of codes, grounded in the data. After coding, a rigorous data analysis ensued, characterized by the construction of themes.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Overview of the included studies

The database search yielded 645 potential studies. The screening process is illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

Seven (7) studies focused on the United States of America, five (5) on Hong Kong, four (4) on the United Kingdom, two (2) on Italy and two (2) on the United Arab Emirates. One (1) study is available for each of the following countries: Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Israel, Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR) China, and Qatar. Four studies were cross-country (see [Figure 2](#)).

Of the 37 articles included, 29 (78.4 percent) were journal articles and 8 (21.7 percent) were research reports by international organizations, mainly the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Philippine-based organizations. In terms of research methods, twenty (20) studies were qualitative, eleven (11) were quantitative, and six (6) were mixed methods. A total of 29 (78.4 percent) discussed the experiences of OFWs in their host countries during the pandemic, while 8 (21.6 percent) dealt with the experiences of OFWs who had been repatriated. Most OFWs performed essential work, particularly as nurses, domestic workers, and caregivers/home care workers. Other occupations included seafarers, office workers, teachers, and musicians.

### 3.2 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The selected articles reported about employment and working conditions, health, living conditions, life satisfaction, and family relationships of OFWs who remained in their host countries. The scoping review comprised two articles that examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic not only on Filipinos nurses but also on a mixed-race population of Filipino-American (commonly referred

to as FilAms) nurses ([Litam and Oh, 2022](#); [Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022](#)).

#### 3.2.1 Employment and working conditions

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment and working conditions of OFWs differed according to the sectors in which they were employed, their status (part-time or full-time workers), and whether they had work permits. [Table 1](#) depicts the leading five countries in the deployment of land-based OFWs in 2015, segregated by occupation before the onset of the pandemic. The Philippines has a reputation as the world's largest exporter of nurses, having sent such professionals to the United States, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Ireland for decades ([Lorenzo et al., 2007](#)). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino nurses were often placed in high-risk environments ([Miraflores, 2021](#)), on the frontline of acute and long-term inpatient care, and exposed to patients with high-acuity illnesses ([Nazareno et al., 2021](#)). One study attributed the disproportionate deaths of Filipino nurses in the US to their over-representation in the healthcare system ([Escobedo et al., 2022](#)), while a report by National Nurses United (USA) found that 26.4 percent of the total registered nurses who died in 2021 were Filipino nurses, despite comprising only four (4) percent of the nursing population ([National Nurses United, 2021a,b](#)). Further, 54.1 percent (170 of 314) of those who have died of COVID-19 and related complications are registered nurses of color in the US, while 31% of the total 3,201 registered nurses in the US belong to diverse racial backgrounds, according to the [US Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2021\)](#). Issues such as employers' failure to inform nurses of their exposures in a timely manner, the reuse of personal protective equipment (PPE), and limited testing were identified as contributing factors to the high mortality rate among Filipino nurses. Nevertheless, Filipino nurses demonstrated a higher willingness to care for COVID-19 positive patients and to adhere to precautionary measures compared to nurses of other nationalities, despite their fears of the "unknown" ([Pogoy and Cutamora, 2021](#); [Nashwan et al., 2022](#)).

Four studies highlighted the ambivalent attitudes toward Filipino nurses as either carriers/transmitters or heroes ([Galam, 2020](#); [Nash et al., 2020](#); [Elmaco, 2022](#); [Tingson and Brazal, 2022](#)). In the early phase of the pandemic, some suffered discrimination and xenophobia because of their Asian background. Being hailed as heroes was not sufficient, as hospitals neglected their rights as workers ([Galam, 2020](#)), which manifested in the lack of adequate compensation, salary increase, hazard pay, and PPE. Some hospitals compensated their nurses by providing free transport and food for a limited time during their shifts in the COVID-19 ward ([Elmaco, 2022](#)).

Five studies shed light on the experiences of Filipino domestic workers in the US, UK, and Hong Kong. They indicate that Filipino domestic workers experienced job loss, shorter working hours (associated with wage cuts), longer working hours (unpaid overtime), delayed wages, non-payment of wages, and no severance pay ([Pandey et al., 2021](#); [Vilog and Piocos III, 2021](#); [Deinla et al., 2022](#); [Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022](#)). Some had no access to health insurance, sick leave, or PPE ([Lui et al., 2021](#); [Nasol and Francisco-Menchavez, 2021](#); [Pandey et al., 2021](#); [Vilog and Piocos III, 2021](#)).

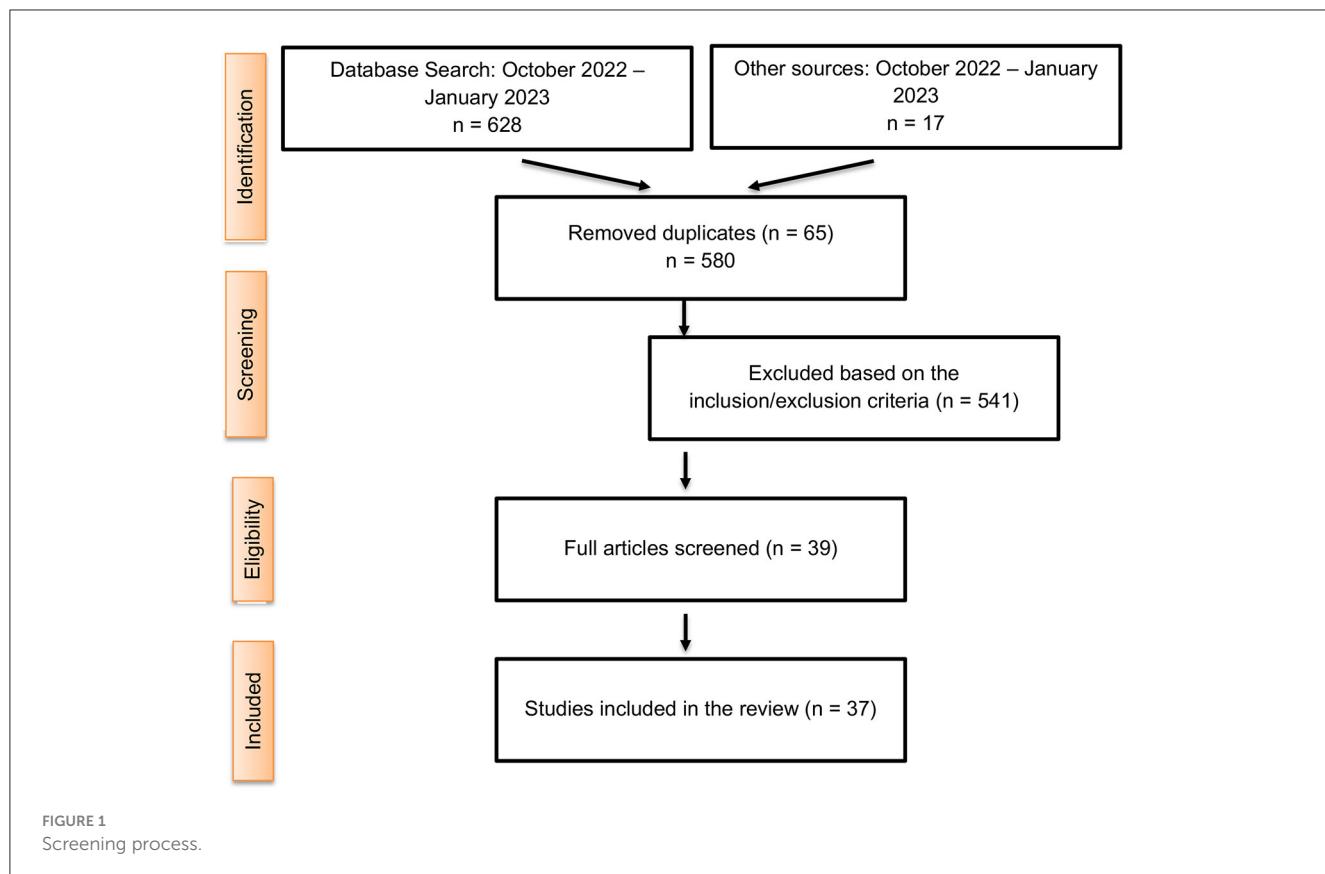


FIGURE 1  
Screening process.

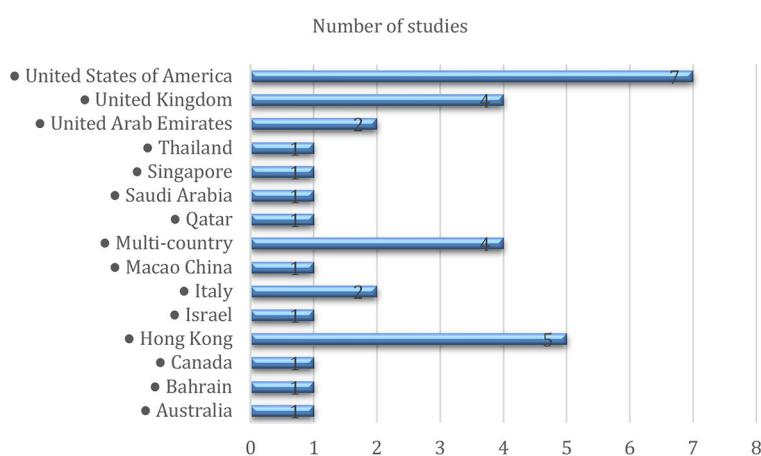


FIGURE 2  
Host country.

Border control measures prevented some of them to return to their host countries after a vacation, consequently leading to job losses (Lui et al., 2021).

The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) reported that there were 162,292 oversea Filipino domestic workers in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country (Mulingtапang, 2020). In Italy, the term “black labor” refers to workers without contracts who live on daily wages in factories or private households (Vilog and Piocos III, 2020, 2021). In the

early months of the pandemic, they needed a paper signed by their employer to be mobile, i.e., to go out and work; however, without a declared employer, their mobility, and therefore their income, were stopped. They became unemployed or their salaries were delayed (Sabar et al., 2022). They were reluctant to ask for information by fear it might reveal their irregular status (Vilog and Piocos III, 2020).

Some live-out and part-time Filipino domestic workers had their salaries reduced or delayed and were struggling to pay bills

**TABLE 1** Land-based OFW deployment by top 5 destination countries and skill—new hires, 2015.

	Subtotal	Total
<b>SAUDI ARABIA</b>		<b>189,000</b>
Armed forces occupations	2	
Clerical support workers	2,750	
Craft and related trades workers	26,949	
Elementary occupations (including domestic work)	47,148	
Managers	545	
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	14,425	
Professionals (including nurses)	21,269	
Services and sales workers	61,037	
Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	167	
Technicians and associate professionals	14,701	
Others	7	
<b>KUWAIT</b>		<b>51,324</b>
Clerical support workers	397	
Craft and related trades workers	883	
Elementary occupations (including domestic work)	2,804	
Managers	79	
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	536	
Professionals (including nurses)	717	
Services and sales workers	45,001	
Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	21	
Technicians and associate professionals	886	
Others	0	
<b>QATAR</b>		<b>49,066</b>
Clerical support workers	1,202	
Craft and related trades workers	7,153	
Elementary occupations (including domestic work)	10,918	
Managers	226	
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	2,572	
Professionals (including nurses)	3,038	
Services and sales workers	20,345	
Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	16	
Technicians and associate professionals	3,576	
Others	0	

(Continued)

**TABLE 1 (Continued)**

	Subtotal	Total
<b>TAIWAN</b>		<b>45,867</b>
Clerical support workers	0	
Craft and related trades workers	0	
Elementary occupations (including domestic work)	35,879	
Managers	9	
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	0	
Professionals (including nurses)	158	
Services and sales workers	9,811	
Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	0	
Technicians and associate professionals	10	
Others	0	
<b>UNITED ARAB EMIRATES</b>		<b>29,445</b>
Clerical support workers	2,676	
Craft and related trades workers	4,947	
Elementary occupations (including domestic work)	4,210	
Managers	257	
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	1,235	
Professionals (including nurses)	2,930	
Services and sales workers	10,467	
Skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers	53	
Technicians and associate professionals	2,670	
Others		

Source: Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (2015).

(Vilog and Piocos III, 2021). To prevent transmission, some live-out domestic workers in Hong Kong had to adjust their working hours to walk to their employer's home due to the unavailability of public transport (Vilog and Piocos III, 2021). They also had to clean more than “usual” and some employers forced them to use strong chemicals to clean and disinfect, which sometimes affected their sense of smell and caused chest pains (Lui et al., 2021). Some were also seen as potential carriers of viruses (Vilog and Piocos III, 2021) and consequently dismissed. They often faced double standards, such as not being allowed to go out on their rest day, while their employers had more flexibility (Lui et al., 2021). The Hong Kong government has a strict law that domestic workers must live with their employers, when dismissed, they are given 2 weeks to find a new employer or face deportation.

In Asia, the Philippines stands as the primary source of both seafarers and ship officers (UNCTAD, 2021). Table 2 illustrates the deployment of Filipino seafarers by flags of registry before

**TABLE 2** Deployed Filipino seafarers by flags of registry, 2015 and 2016.

Skills category	2016	2015
Panama	73,008	69,502
Bahamas	58,327	50,272
Republic of Marshall Islands	41,722	36,057
Liberia	39,901	37,537
Malta	29,542	25,547
Singapore	25,746	24,011
Bermuda	17,590	17,324
Italy	14,604	12,960
Norway	13,571	11,724
Netherlands	12,760	10,657
Other Flags of Registry	116,049	110,940
<b>Total</b>	<b>442,820</b>	<b>406,531</b>

Source: Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (2016 vs. 2015).

the pandemic. However, there have been only two reports that briefly addressed the conditions experienced by Filipino seafarers amid the pandemic. Nash et al. (2020) relied on news reports to gain insights into the circumstances faced by Filipino seafarers. They discovered that those on board during the pandemic had their contracts extended because of their inability to disembark or undergo crew changes. Meanwhile, repatriated Filipino seafarers either had to await the reopening of shipping companies, or faced unemployment due to the difficulty of securing employment suitable for their “highly specialized skills.” The authors also observed that locating and aiding Filipino seafarers during repatriation posed the greatest difficulty for the Philippine government, in comparison to land-based OFWs, as it relied mainly on information provided by shipping companies. Asis (2020), on the other hand, cited travel restrictions to the Philippines as an additional factor preventing Filipino seafarers from returning home following their 10-month stint at sea.

One paper examined the experiences of Filipino migrant performers in Australia (Anacin, 2021). They were mainly affected by the closure of venues, which reduced the time they interacted with the Filipino community. The author stated, without going into detail, that “full-time performers felt the burden considerably more” (p. 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented diverse challenges for OFWs, including disproportionate mortality rates among Filipino nurses, adverse conditions for domestic workers, and difficulties for seafarers and migrant performers. OFWs in precarious situations, experiencing salary reductions, find themselves in even more vulnerable positions due to their inability to meet financial obligations, restricted mobility, being compelled to clean with potent chemicals, and facing stigma as potential virus carriers.

### 3.2.2 Health and access to healthcare

OFWs and FilAm nurses in the US who had access to health insurance and health providers reported poor physical and mental health, while those who do not have access to health care had to

“surrender the opportunity to care” for themselves (p. 1375, Nasol and Francisco-Menchavez, 2021; Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022). They reported feeling fear, anxiety, and constant worry about their own health, the health of their families living with them, and for their families left behind (Liao, 2020; Yeung et al., 2020; Cleofas et al., 2021; de Borja, 2021; Opiniano, 2021; Elmaco, 2022; Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022). They also experienced confusion about the health protocols of their host countries, which further exacerbated their poor physical and mental health.

A study that examined the academic literature on the mental health of Filipino seafarers resulted in the identification of four themes (Abila and Acejo, 2021). The fourth theme primarily focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study noted adverse impacts on their mental health, including mental exhaustion (73.3 percent), anxiety (21.9 percent), and depression (15.4 percent) due to extended periods of quarantine on their ships, during transit, upon arrival in the capital, Manila, and finally, upon their return home (Asis, 2020; Nash et al., 2020; Abila and Acejo, 2021).

Five studies looked at the health of undocumented workers. In the UK, they avoided seeking health care for fear of deportation (Galam, 2020; Vilog and Piocos III, 2020). They did not have health insurance and did not receive benefits during the pandemic. Data sharing between the National Health Service (NHS) and the Home Office, responsible for securing the UK border and controlling immigration, was a significant barrier to accessing healthcare for undocumented workers before and during the pandemic (Parry-Davies, 2020). Data sharing was legalized in 2017 but withdrawn in 2018. However, some forms of data sharing between the NHS and the Home Office still exist, including debt owed to the NHS (Parry-Davies, 2020). In non-English-speaking countries, language was also a barrier to seeking information; for example, all pandemic-related information was available only in Hebrew (Sabar et al., 2022) or Italian (Vilog and Piocos III, 2021).

In the early stages of the pandemic, essential workers needed to protect themselves at the workplace. Some employers failed to provide PPE (Galam, 2020; Lui et al., 2021; Miraflores, 2021; Nasol and Francisco-Menchavez, 2021; Pandey et al., 2021; Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022) or limited it to only one type, usually a mask (Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022). This meant that domestic workers and carers, who have lower incomes than nurses, were forced to procure their own masks, disinfectants, and alcohol. Meanwhile, nurses who wore full PPE for extended periods, such as a 12-h shift, reported experiencing headaches due to dehydration and pressure sores (Elmaco, 2022).

In Sabado-Liwag et al. (2022)’s study, when vaccines became available in the US, 82.4 percent of their participants received at least one dose. This vaccination rate is in line with the high awareness (76.9 percent) of the importance of vaccination among the participants in the study. This perception is rooted in a strong sense of “personal responsibility” to protect those around them from potential infection.

### 3.2.3 Family life, remittances, and life satisfaction

Filipinos value close family ties, a culture they bring with them abroad. Living in multi-generational households overseas had a significant impact during the pandemic, especially when

one family member was a frontline worker (Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022). Quarantine, lockdown, and the closure of workplaces and educational institutions forced people to stay at home with their relatives. Transnational families, including OFWs, suffered as they worried about their loved ones (Cleofas et al., 2021; de Borja, 2021). Planned holidays and reunions were canceled, further prolonging the separation from their family (Cleofas et al., 2021).

The pandemic adversely affected the incomes of domestic workers, seafarers, and undocumented workers, leaving them with insufficient funds to cover rent, food, insurance, bills, and remittances (USAID, 2020; Vilog and Piocos III, 2021; Sabar et al., 2022). They were stressed by the increasing pressure to send remittances (Vilog and Piocos III, 2021), or by constant worries about income and debt repayment after displacement and repatriation (CMA, 2020; Astilla and Marcos, 2021; International Organization for Migration, 2021; Kang and Latoja, 2022; Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022; Asis, n.d.). The World Bank had estimated that global remittances would decline by 20 percent at the onset of the pandemic in 2020 (World Bank, 2020), and for the Philippines, the projection ranged between 14 and 20 percent (Murakami et al., 2021). In contrast, remittances decreased by only 0.76 percent (Opiniano, 2021), and even increased from 29.9 billion USD in 2019 to 31.4 billion USD in 2021 and 32.5 billion USD in 2022 according to the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines), the country's central monetary authority (2022). The data reported by the World Bank (2023) for 2022 is slightly higher at 38 billion USD. The US, which is the largest remittance corridor in 2018, also registered an annual increase in 2020, 2021, and 2022 (Bangko Sentral and Pilipinas, 2022).

The strength of remittance flow to the Philippines can be attributed to five factors (Almasara et al., 2022). Firstly, the diverse profile of OFWs played a crucial role, with individuals employed in the medical sector potentially remaining unaffected by the pandemic, thus enabling a consistent flow of remittances. Additionally, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that some OFWs augmented their income by engaging in second jobs, extending working hours, or changing their occupations. Thirdly, certain OFWs utilized their savings to sustain the continuous sending of remittances, particularly considering the severe economic challenges faced by their family members in the Philippines due to the impact of the pandemic. Fourthly, there has been a noteworthy shift in remittance channels from informal to formal, and from traditional cash-based methods to digital means. Lastly, repatriated OFWs, whether on a permanent or temporary basis, may have directed their savings and accumulated capital back to the Philippines to meet their financial needs.

In terms of life satisfaction among OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic, two studies found conflicting results. The first observed that increased racial discrimination among Filipino Americans was negatively related to life satisfaction, and positively related to anxiety and depression among this group (Litam and Oh, 2022). The second found that the better life satisfaction of OFW teachers in Thailand was positively correlated with psychological factors such as feeling safe and secure, experiencing love and belonging, and achieving self-actualisation (Go, 2022).

### 3.3 Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

The reviewed studies also provide findings on the different strategies developed to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. The first subsection provides a summary of the strategies employed by OFWs remaining in their host countries, their left-behind families, and civil society organizations in response to the pandemic. The second subsection focuses on the primary response of the country of origin, led by the Philippine government, which involved repatriation and reintegration efforts.

#### 3.3.1 In host countries

##### 3.3.1.1 Community of care

Sharing and pooling resources and services were the most common ways in which migrant groups mobilized to help fellow Filipinos. This included responding to material needs such as food packs, vitamins, winter clothes, COVID testing kits, masks and disinfectants, and offering temporary shelter or raising funds for housing for those who became homeless (Galam, 2020; Vilog and Piocos III, 2020; Pandey et al., 2021; Cheng and Vicera, 2022). These communities of care also offered a range of free services, including paralegal assistance, counseling, and food delivery, to Filipinos who had contracted the virus or were unable to go outside due to quarantine measures or the risk of arrest. Both donors and recipients felt a sense of belonging and connectedness that has been described as a "home away from home" (Pandey et al., 2021; Vilog and Piocos III, 2021).

With the adoption of physical distancing and isolation measures, migrant organizations recognized the significance of providing support to their fellow Filipinos. Check-in sessions, known as "kumustahan" or mutual catching up, were frequently integrated into their online meetings or conducted through social media (Galam, 2020; Vilog and Piocos III, 2020). OFWs would check the health and wellbeing of their fellow OFWs in their proximity, subsequently coordinating more structured and unified initiatives. Online peer support groups for domestic workers in Hong Kong emerged, offering emotional and practical assistance by sharing information on COVID-19 testing, vaccinations, dispelling misinformation, and providing credible sources (Cheng and Vicera, 2022). Some Filipino nurses engaged in conversations with each other as a means of stress relief (Elmaco, 2022). Migrant organizations played a crucial role in connecting migrant workers with government agencies and other relevant organizations (Cheng and Vicera, 2022). In collaboration with the government, they developed a mental health application called "Kamusta Kabayan" (How are you, fellow Filipino) (Liem et al., 2022).

##### 3.3.1.2 Campaigning for protection and accountability

Some migrant organizations recognized the need to protest and campaign for OFW and FilAm nurses' rights. They led unions such as the National Nurses United in the US, lobbying for better working conditions, demanding government accountability, and campaigning for residency and citizenship for undocumented migrants (Sales, 2021). In the UK, the online campaign "Status Now!" protested the government's inadequate care and called for the granting of Leave to Remain visas to all undocumented and migrant individuals. The "I was a Foreigner" campaign in Italy

advocated for permits for undocumented non-European foreign citizens (Galam, 2020; Vilog and Picos III, 2020). Instead of portraying heroism in a romanticized manner as seen with nurses (Sales, 2021), certain organizations redefined heroism as “activism,” which involved advocating for labor rights, human rights, and transnational solidarity (Sales, 2021).

### 3.3.1.3 Family support and reliance on technology

During the COVID-19 pandemic, left-behind families reframed their communication and caregiving practices (Cleofas et al., 2021), becoming more active agents in the care network. They monitored the health and wellbeing of their loved ones abroad, avoided pressuring OFWs to send remittances, and adopted stricter budgeting measures (Vilog and Picos III, 2021). Many families installed CCTV cameras at home and established regular virtual communication channels (Cleofas et al., 2021). Technology played a crucial role in alleviating anxiety, worry, and feelings of loneliness, with mental health apps being particularly helpful.

### 3.3.1.4 Spirituality and faith

Three authors have highlighted the significance of spirituality and faith as responses of OFWs to the anxiety brought about by the pandemic, emphasizing that it is faith that sustained them and enabled them to persevere (Miraflores, 2021; Elmaco, 2022; Tingson and Brazal, 2022). For example, some nurses relied on their spiritual beliefs, particularly the cultural belief of “bahala na” or hopeful risk-taking, to carry on with their lives and work (Tingson and Brazal, 2022).

## 3.3.2 In the country of origin

Repatriation assistance program, within the context of Philippine migration, refers to the process of bringing back “distressed OFWs” and his/ her “remains or personal effects” (Philippines Overseas Employment Agency, 2018; OWWA Citizens’ Charter, 2020). During the pandemic, the repatriation process required extensive coordination at both national and local levels, with the Philippine government and private recruitment agencies providing funding for the repatriation of OFWs from their host countries, including transportation until they arrived in their local communities (Philippines Overseas Employment Agency, 2018; Asis, 2020; Liao, 2020; Kang and Latoja, 2022).

The repatriation process can be summarized into three stages (Zoleta, 2020). The first stage occurred in the host country, where OFWs had to register at the embassy to request a flight and complete the electronic case evaluation form (e-CIF) and the OFW Assistance Information System (OASIS). Chartered government flights were arranged to bring them back to Manila, Cebu, or Clark.

The second stage took place upon arrival, where OFWs had to complete the Health Declaration Form, Arrival Card, and Inter-Agency Task Force Declaration Form. They had to attend a mandatory quarantine briefing, go through a verification process, get tested for COVID-19 infection, undergo immigration clearance, and be informed of their assigned quarantine facility. All OFWs were required to stay in quarantine at a government-designated facility or a Department of Health-accredited hotel while awaiting the results of their swab tests. OFWs with symptoms were

immediately referred to quarantine facilities. Even after completing the required quarantine period, OFWs were not allowed to leave the quarantine hotel until they had received clearance for a negative swab test. The 14-day quarantine was sometimes prolonged because they had to undergo quarantine at different stages (upon arrival while waiting for swab results amidst limited testing facilities; another 14 days in their home community; and another 14 days on the ship if they were seafaring OFWs).

The third stage involved arranging transportation back to their hometown, which was coordinated by the government since public transportation options were limited due to lockdown measures. OFWs had to register with the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration’s *Uwian Na* (Let’s go home) website or mobile app if they needed transportation back to their local communities.

The scoping review included reports from the International Organization for Migration Philippines, which, in the absence of government data at the time of writing, provided a profile of repatriated OFWs (IOM, 2022; Asis, n.d.). Table 3 illustrates the profile and reasons for return of OFWs in the early phase of the pandemic.

After successfully returning to their families and local communities, one of the main concerns of OFWs was income (CMA, 2020; International Organization for Migration, 2021; Kang and Latoja, 2022; Asis, n.d.). A significant proportion (78%) expressed a desire to find a job or engage in income-generating activities. However, despite several months passing since their return, the majority remained unemployed (Kang and Latoja, 2022; Asis, n.d.). This was corroborated by the Center for Migrants Advocacy’s report (Philippine-based organization), which indicated that 85.4 percent of OFWs were actively seeking employment or aspiring to start their own businesses in the Philippines (CMA, 2020). To alleviate the economic burden caused by the pandemic, the Department of Labor and Employment-AKAP (DOLE-AKAP) Financial Assistance Program, established under the Bayanihan Act, offered a one-time financial aid amounting to Php 10,000 (USD 200). However, only a few OFWs reported receiving this financial aid, and there were often delays in the disbursement process (USAID, 2020; IOM, 2022; Kang and Latoja, 2022). Although the government implemented livelihood programs for repatriated OFWs (Kang and Latoja, 2022), many faced challenges due to a lack of funds and limited entrepreneurial knowledge and skills required to establish their own business (IOM, 2022). Consequently, OFWs in vulnerable situations, as well as their families who relied on remittances, were at risk of falling into poverty (Kang and Latoja, 2022).

In addition to enduring a lengthy and exhausting repatriation process, OFWs also faced stigmatization within their local communities (Astilla and Marcos, 2021). OFWs who returned during the pandemic were perceived as carriers of the virus and this has resulted to problematic social relations among neighbors. An unintended consequence of the large-scale repatriation was the unexpected reunification of the OFWs with the families they had left (Opiniano, 2021). The experience of anxiety and depression was further intensified by the inability to support their families, unfulfilled aspirations of working abroad, and the pressure to repay debts accumulated during the recruitment and

TABLE 3 Profile of returned OFWs, N = 8,332.

	Male	Female	Overall
Classification	56%	44%	
• Land-based (80%)	47%	53%	
• Sea-based (20%)	97%	3%	
Average age (years)			
• Land-based	38	36	
• Sea-based	37	33	
Top 3 host countries			
• Kingdom of Saudi Arabia			24%
• United Arab Emirates			21%
• Qatar			6%
Reasons for return			
• Termination and non-renewal of contracts because of COVID-19			45%
• Told to leave the country by the employer			24%
• Lost their jobs or could not find work			20%
• Worried because of the pandemic			11%
Average family size of the OFW per household (members)			5
Intention to remigrate			
• Plan to remigrate abroad			48%
• Plan to stay home			35%
• Plan to migrate internally			2%
• Undecided			15%

Source: International Organization for Migration (2021).

deployment process (Opiniano, 2021; IOM, 2022; Kang and Latoja, 2022).

In the Philippines, the economic lockdown had a substantial impact on the employment of citizens, as evidenced by the rise in the unemployment rate which culminated at 17.7 percent in April 2020 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). The influx of repatriated OFWs, particularly those who found themselves unemployed due to the lockdown and closures brought down by the pandemic in their host countries, further exacerbated local unemployment. Securing overseas employment stands as one of the primary motivations behind the departure of OFWs from their homeland. However, following their repatriation, their numbers have contributed to the burgeoning ranks of unemployed Filipinos within the Philippines. The provision of employment remained a significant challenge, as the jobs created during the pandemic were predominantly characterized as part-time, informal, and of poor quality (IBON Foundation, 2023). The notable rise in the inflation rate pointed to a deteriorating quality of life for Filipinos within the country. The pandemic thus placed poor Filipino families in a difficult socio-economic situation and forced

them to increase their reliance on remittances from OFWs (Harm Reduction International, 2021). A cycle of poverty ensues as repatriated OFWs experience heightened anxiety and depression due to their inability to meet their family's expectations. Hence, the implementation of livelihood reintegration programs became a crucial responsibility for both the national and local governments.

Two studies examined the comparison of pandemic responses between host and home countries from the perspective of OFWs. In one study, OFWs expressed anxiety about their families left behind and voiced their frustration and disappointment with the Philippine government's perceived inadequate response to the pandemic (de Borja, 2021). On the contrary, another study found that 49 percent of OFWs reported satisfaction with the response of the Philippine government (Deinla et al., 2022). However, the authors cautioned that this result should be analyzed critically and considered in the context of the Philippines' COVID Performance Index (CPI) relative to other countries. During this specified period, the Philippines had a CPI of 30.6 and ranked 79<sup>th</sup> (Tan, 2021). OFWs were more likely to express satisfaction when the Philippines' CPI was higher than that of their host country, as observed in the cases of Indonesia (CPI = 24.7, ranked 85<sup>th</sup>) and the USA (CPI = 17.3, ranked 94<sup>th</sup>) (Magsambol, 2021; Tan, 2021). Meanwhile, OFWs in Thailand (CPI = 84.2, 4<sup>th</sup> place) exhibited lower levels of satisfaction (TAT Newsroom, 2021).

### 3.4 Research gaps

There are still numerous understudied aspects of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs. Table 4 summarizes the main research gaps grouped by themes reported in the included studies. This could inform future research on this topic.

Overall, return migration in the Philippines, despite being a major sending country, has received limited research attention. Further studies are needed to explore other sectors such as seafarers, international students who have transitioned into irregular laborers, and undocumented OFWs. Comparative studies involving multiple countries, an examination of gender-specific repercussions, and exploration of diverse geographical contexts would contribute significantly to a more comprehensive understanding of this issue. For example, despite a substantial number of repatriated OFWs originating from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, research within these host countries has been notably lacking. Furthermore, it is crucial to investigate the ramifications of the health crisis on transnational families and the wellbeing of left-behind children. Additional research is warranted to gain insights into the reintegration experiences of OFWs and to evaluate the efficacy of programs and services provided by both national and local governments, as well as the efforts of civil society organizations in addressing support gaps.

## 4 Discussion

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first scoping review to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs as a

**TABLE 4** Research Gaps grouped by themes and authors.

Health	- culture-based mental health issues of Filipino seafarers ( <a href="#">Abila and Acejo, 2021</a> ), mental-help-seeking behaviors of migrants ( <a href="#">Yeung et al., 2020</a> ), integrating gamification principles to mental health phone app for migrant domestic workers, and the role of online support groups in the current pandemic ( <a href="#">Cheng and Vicera, 2022</a> ; <a href="#">Liem et al., 2022</a> ).
Family and remittances	- the short and long-term effects of the pandemic on OFWs, their families, the exchanges between them, and the impact of remittance inflows on household spending and the quality of life of migrant workers and their families during COVID-19 ( <a href="#">Lui et al., 2021</a> ; <a href="#">Murakami et al., 2021</a> ).
Repatriation and reintegration	- the experiences, reasons, and timing of repatriated OFWs ( <a href="#">Astilla and Marcos, 2021</a> ; <a href="#">Sabar et al., 2022</a> ) as well as the effects of various economic, social, and psychological programs offered to OFWs by the Philippine government and host countries ( <a href="#">Galam, 2020</a> ; <a href="#">Astilla and Marcos, 2021</a> ).
Diversity of experiences	- additional dimensions such as the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to OFWs nurses ( <a href="#">Elmaco, 2022</a> ), the collection and analysis of data based on disaggregated Asian subgroups ( <a href="#">Litam and Oh, 2022</a> ) or by geographic location ( <a href="#">Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022</a> ).

distinct migrant population. Other scoping reviews have examined the health, access to health services, and social protection of migrant workers during the pandemic, but they did not specifically consider the nationality of the workers ([Istiko et al., 2022](#); [Oliva-Arcas et al., 2022](#)). While several scoping reviews have focused on OFWs health, they did not examine health in the context of the pandemic ([Villarroel et al., 2019](#); [Burns et al., 2021](#); [König et al., 2022](#); [Urrego-Parra et al., 2022](#)). Therefore, this study contributes to the understanding of the COVID-19 impact of a specific population from a country with a significant history of labor migration.

The results of the scoping review can be analyzed at three levels: comparing experiences among OFWs with different employment types and status; cross-country comparisons, with a focus on OFWs in precarious situation, such as domestic workers; and comparison with other citizens and migrant workers.

## 4.1 Among OFWs

The results of the scoping review indicate that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs is not uniform, but rather dependent on various factors, such as their employment sector. The economic lockdown and border closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to massive unemployment in the non-essential sectors where the majority of OFWs worked. The massive displacement had to be addressed by the Philippine government, and mass repatriation of migrant workers became a strategy. Repatriation also became the last resort for OFWs who had lost their source of income. Despite the support provided by various

organizations, many OFWs were unable to afford staying in their host country. The Philippine government faced significant challenges in managing the repatriation and reintegration process, which involved a record-breaking number of 809,374 OFWs as of November 20, 2021 ([Department of Labor Employment, 2021](#)). The repatriated OFWs experienced variations in their social networks and differential access to economic resources, which in turn influenced their reintegration outcomes ([Spitzer and Piper, 2014](#)).

## 4.2 Cross-country analysis with a focus on OFWs in precarious situation

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability and precariousness of Filipino domestic workers and undocumented migrants, consistent with findings from other countries ([Dutta, 2020](#); [Yee et al., 2021](#); [Gupta et al., 2022](#)). Undocumented migrant workers feared seeking healthcare because of the risk of deportation or compromising the outcome of regularization ([Burton-Jeangros et al., 2020](#)), highlighting the need for health care systems to engage with migrant communities and collect disaggregated data to ensure sensitive care for the undocumented ([Genovese et al., 2023](#)). In seeking health care, OFWs relied on their own personal networks, community organizations, and social media platforms ([Oktavianus et al., 2022](#)), ([Liem et al., 2020](#)). The scoping review emphasized the role of social support, often referred to as a “community of care,” in mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic, aligning with studies conducted among Vietnamese and Cambodian migrant workers in South Korea ([Kim et al., 2022](#)) and exploring the significance of faith and spirituality among migrant workers in Singapore ([Yee et al., 2021](#)).

## 4.3 OFWs, citizens and other migrant workers

The health, including mental health, of OFWs employed in the health sector was at greater risk during the pandemic, as was that of other health workers ([Rakhshan et al., 2023](#)). Now that the World Health Organization has declared the pandemic over in May 2023, emerging studies show a positive association between burnout and post-traumatic disorder symptoms among nurses 2 years after the pandemic ([Liu et al., 2023](#)). In the US, foreign-born healthcare workers, including a substantial 70 percent who were considered “unauthorized,” surpassed their native-born counterparts in playing essential roles on the frontline ([Allen et al., 2023](#)). The scarcity of PPE, which is attributed to the flaws in neoliberal policies, became more evident as many countries relied on imports of critical equipment necessary for the protection of frontline workers ([van Barneveld et al., 2020](#)). In this respect, migrant labor is essential but often lacks adequate protection, leaving it vulnerable to exploitation ([Istiko et al., 2022](#)). Burnout and deployment in the frontlines without adequate protection are challenges not exclusive to Filipino nurses; they also affect nurses and other frontline medical and non-medical personnel of diverse ethnic backgrounds (including mixed race, or in this case FilAms),

those from non-host countries, and to some extent the native-born healthcare workers (Karagöl and Zulal, 2022). Moreover, addressing these issues can take the form of financial compensation for their hard work, improved working conditions, and sufficient social support (Karagöl and Zulal, 2022). As a result of the pandemic, the global demand for nurses has intensified, leading the country of origin to pass new policies to keep nurses at home, for instance, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration implemented a ban on the deployment of Filipino nurses after reaching the annual cap of 6,500 in 2021 (Cervantes, 2022). Subsequently, the cap was increased to 7,500 a few months later. However, the ban has affected the migration trajectories of aspiring Filipino nurses (Ortiga et al., 2022).

The findings of the scoping review corroborated previous studies highlighting that the loss of income and health issues, including anxiety, increased susceptibility to COVID-19, and stressors related to quarantine, were significant consequences of the pandemic experienced by migrant workers and their families (Yee et al., 2021; Poletaev, 2022; van Hout et al., 2022).

Some qualitative studies have shown methodological limitations, likely due to the challenges in data gathering posed by the remote setup during the pandemic. To gain a better understanding of the situation of repatriated OFWs, it is important to consider diversity and representation of experiences across various host countries and origin communities in the Philippines.

This scoping review has certain limitations. Although efforts were made to search for relevant articles in gray literature, no articles written in Filipino, the official language of the country, were found. Additionally, articles published in languages other than English were excluded, as well as those published after the search phase despite the increase of published materials on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic to migrant workers, which may have provided valuable insights into the experiences of OFWs.

## 5 Conclusion

The results of the scoping review indicate that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OFWs is not uniform. However, it is evident that OFWs in precarious situations have become more vulnerable. Losing their source of income in the host country had significant detrimental effects on the wellbeing of migrant workers and their families left behind. The restrictions on mobility during the pandemic also had negative effects on the mental health of OFWs, regardless of their income level or type of job.

Overall, this review highlights the urgent need for greater recognition and protection of OFWs and other migrant workers, particularly in times of crisis. It is crucial to address the systemic issues that contribute to their vulnerability and to ensure that they receive adequate support and protection in both host and home countries. The pandemic has now ended, but the impact it left on OFWs and their families has affected their lives and will keep having consequences. OFWs with stable employment, sufficient finances and social support have shown resilience. In contrast, OFWs in precarious situations, who suffered the most after the pandemic, are the ones who can benefit more from the Philippines' reintegration program. Therefore, the call for a comprehensive post-pandemic reintegration program remains relevant, especially in this period

of high inflation, unemployment, and underemployment. Without viable economic opportunities in the aftermath of the pandemic, OFWs may feel compelled to seek employment abroad once again to meet the needs of their families.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

KG-M: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. CB-J: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. YJ: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1320021/full#supplementary-material>

### ANNEX A

Protocol for a scoping review of the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs).

### ANNEX B

Charting of studies included in the scoping review.

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