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# Fragile dreams: Stories of migrant workers from the Philippines

Future of Work

News | Created by Brenda Pureza

Migrant workers from the Philippines leave home full of hopes and dreams; unknown to them are hidden costs of migration that can break their spirit. But help is sometimes at hand, at least for some of them.

*TRIGGER WARNING: Sexual violence*

Over 10 million Filipinos work overseas. FES Philippines, together with the Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA), is collecting international stories of migrant workers in a bid to popularize migrant issues. These are the stories of Jennifer, Jose and Mona:

Jennifer, 31, gripped the pregnancy test tightly.

It had been three months since the sexual abuse began. Back home, when she got her confirmation of work abroad, her mind had filled with possibilities. This wasn't one of them. She exhaled and looked at the test. Two lines were slowly forming, indicating a positive result.

Back in the Philippines, Jennifer lived with her parents and her three young children with little to no support from her estranged husband. Like many other Filipino migrant workers, Jennifer went out of the country packed with hopes and dreams; unknown to them are hidden costs of migration that can break their spirit.

She was deployed to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker in April 2019 with a two-year contract, but within months, she found herself begging to be sent home.

Jennifer was sexually harassed by her male employer. She refused to work and pleaded with her agency to send her home. This would waste the hefty amount they paid to place her, her agency said, and could not allow it.

"My whole world came crashing down. I thought about my children back in the Philippines and what my family will say about me." said Jennifer about her pregnancy in an interview conducted by CMA.

## Gender-based violence

They sent her to a new employer instead in Lebanon to continue her contract of work as a domestic worker. Jennifer painfully remembered how close she was to the two-year-old child she was taking care of, but this was taken advantage of by her male employer.

Jennifer saying no went unheard as her abuser escalated his own attempts. Her co-workers noticed the abuse, yet they remained silent, scared to lose their jobs. Jennifer begged her abuser to let her leave, but it was a time when cities all over the world were implementing community quarantines. COVID-19 cases were rising at an alarming rate. He used this as an excuse to trap her.

[Because of the pandemic, cases of gender-based violence among migrant workers are increasing](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19?gclid=CjwKCAjw9ailBhA1EiwAJ_GTSpstmXupPggdKomYfxnPj4cw7YZh36IKuguc--COvtlyfl3Z4NauUxoCwA0QAvD_BwE#facts) ([https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19?gclid=CjwKCAjw9ailBhA1EiwAJ\\_GTSpstmXupPggdKomYfxnPj4cw7YZh36IKuguc--COvtlyfl3Z4NauUxoCwA0QAvD\\_BwE#facts](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19?gclid=CjwKCAjw9ailBhA1EiwAJ_GTSpstmXupPggdKomYfxnPj4cw7YZh36IKuguc--COvtlyfl3Z4NauUxoCwA0QAvD_BwE#facts)). Locked down in their abusive homes, they are unable to report or escape these harrowing situations.

Jennifer wanted to abort her pregnancy. She was promised abortion pills, but they never came. During one of the many nights she was harassed, the act was finally recorded and reported to support groups enough to facilitate a rescue. She stayed in a shelter for almost three months before she was sent back home.

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### News

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(</news/philippines-migrant-workers>)

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## Unpaid wages

Aside from gender-based violence, migrant workers suffer from other unfair labour practices such as wage theft. Employers are also taking advantage of the various limitations set by the pandemic (<https://www.fes.de/en/displacement-migration-integration/article-page-flight-migration-integration/a-pandemic-reset-for-migrant-workers>).

Jose, 34, was a cafe supervisor in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Their sales plummeted due to the virus, his employer said. They needed to cut costs. After 1 year and 10 months, he was terminated.

He remembered the numerous tasks he did for the cafe which were way beyond his work scope. He thought about the numerous times his employer failed to give him his salary.

While working there, Jose experienced abdominal pain, change in his bowel habits and loss of appetite. He wanted to have the symptoms checked, but with no medical insurance, he couldn't shoulder the medical bills.

Jose decided not to report his employer to the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) as it means losing the accommodation provided by his company. He was sick, that much he knew, and could not afford to be homeless.

In July 2020, Jose was finally repatriated. He was later on admitted at a local private hospital where he was diagnosed with Rectosigmoid New Growth; a tumour was found in his liver. He needed to be operated on immediately.

Jose's medical bill amounted to 183,277.85 pesos. His total unpaid salary amounted to 1,813 USD or 90,008 pesos. Jose knew that if only he was paid right, he'd have something to start with.

He eventually contacted CMA Phils. Inc. in August 2020 to ask for assistance in processing his DOLE-AKAP, a cash assistance programme provided by the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment. He also wanted to file a case against his former employer.

## Exploitative agencies

Like Jennifer and Jose, Mona left the Philippines to pursue better opportunities abroad. But once deployed, she was abused by both her employer and the recruitment agency.

Mona was forced to clean other homes beside that of her employer. This was not part of her contract, as her employer already had five children to look after. Exhausted from being overworked, Mona oftentimes had nothing to eat. Her employer had no interest in making sure she ate. She could buy her own food, but she was also underpaid. The meagre amount she would receive also never came on time. Mona had barely enough money to send home.

Both her recruitment agency and employer were aware that Mona suffers from a kind of bone disease. She was hospitalized twice during her deployment. Her agency's only response was, "Magtiis ka dyan kasi malaki binayad niyan." ("Endure it because your employer paid a huge amount for you.")

Due to over exhaustion and malnutrition, Mona was unable to work. She begged her employer to send her back home, but instead, she was taken to the police.

Instead of a flight back to the Philippines, Mona was forced to stay with her recruitment agency.

Mona along with other domestic workers who had no place to go was forced to make the agency's office their temporary home. With no income and no support provided by the agency, the Overseas Filipino Workers had to eat only once a day. They were also subjected to forced labour within the office. To make matters worse, her agency threatened to physically hurt them if they wouldn't sign a document saying they will not file any charges against the agency. Fearing for their lives, Mona was left with no choice.

To escape this ordeal, Mona and her fellow migrant workers borrowed money for a one-way plane ticket. On 29 October 2020, she arrived back home.

## Finally home

Jose was once a driver in the Philippines. Now, recovering from his illness, Jose waits for OWWA's medical assistance to see his family through. Part of his hospital bills were paid by CMA. He also started a small fruit store with his partner and has been actively engaging in migration-related advocacies in his community.

Mona also filed a complaint against her recruitment agency, but due to the waiver she was forced to sign, they escaped settling her unpaid wages. She was offered a 5,000-peso settlement fee and she accepted. For Mona, it was better than the back-and-forth travel to regional offices in hearing her case.

Jennifer is now a mother of four, having given birth to a baby girl in September of 2020. KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation reached out to CMA to provide her with cash assistance, food packages, and assistance in livelihood applications. On 3 March 2022, will be her first virtual meeting with her lawyers for an outside court settlement.

These are only some of the issues that migrant workers face. One track that organizations such as CMA recommended is to explore how gender-based violence and exploitative employment practices can be treated as a transnational crime even after a migrant worker is back home—this means that workers can file cases even when they are back in their country of origin. These measures are lobbied through the “Justice for Wage Theft Campaign” initiated by Migrant Forum Asia.

As for wage issues, an effort to forming strong international migrant workers associations and unions through organizing across countries as an experimental model used by SENTRO, a Filipino labour and trade union center (also a partner of CMA and FES Philippines), connects migrant employers, their agencies, and workers themselves to settle wage disputes at the local union level. These measures are aimed to cultivate a culture of global solidarity for workers at the forefront of a changing world.

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