

# Ethics of Recognition: The Struggles of Ilongga Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)

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## ABSTRACT

This descriptive-qualitative-critical research aimed to appropriate Axel Honneth's theory in the Struggles for Recognition of the Ilongga Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) to understand the plight of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) particularly, the Filipina domestic helpers. This work was premised on the idea to help uplift their dignity by promoting their rights as empowered women in the Philippine society. The researcher argued that several Filipina domestic helpers had been victims of various forms of injustices such as sexual harassment, discrimination, and exploitation. Thus, the most that they can do is to struggle to recognize their rights and dignity as full-pledged members of the Philippine society. A phenomenological approach was employed, content analysis, researcher interview-guide-questionnaire, one-on-one personal interview through phone calls, messenger chats, and Focused Group Discussion (FGD) with OFWs were utilized. Three themes had emerged: Physical and psychological abuse, sexual harassment, and insecurity of financial stability. This paper recommended that the concerned government agencies provide concrete plans for Filipina OFWs in consonance with Republic Act No. 10022. These OFWs should be afforded training on livelihood skills and capital incentives and should be equipped with financial literacy through training and seminars to manage their hard-earned income properly.

**Keywords** — Social Science, Axel Honneth's Theory on Struggles for Recognition of Ilongga OFWs, Qualitative-descriptive- Phenomenological Approach, Iloilo, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

Overseas employment has been one of the mechanisms of the Philippine government to aid the country's economic problems. Overseas labor migration has significantly contributed to the country's economic growth (Presse, 2001). According to Banko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), in 2016, remittances from Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) have been a major driver of domestic demand and accounted for 9.8 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country (De Vera, 2020). Remittances help to lift households out of poverty (Ang et al., 2009). However, along with the country's growing economy, the migration of hundreds to thousands of Filipino workers rise leaving their families to work abroad has impacted the lives of their left-behind dependents and the OFWs themselves. According to orthodox immigration theory, "push" and "pull" factors are among the essential reasons to explain the phenomenon of Filipino Overseas Workers (Juan, 2001). However, Dalisay and Tan (n.d.) went beyond these factors by looking into the facilitating and constraining circumstances that affect and shape the essence and dynamism of OFWs and their families.

Moreover, in the work of Reyes (2007), she emphasized that parental absence creates displacements, disruptions, and changes in caregiving arrangements. She added that migration varies from economic benefits to social cost and well-being of the migrant families. Further, in the same work of Reyes (2007, as cited in Asis, 2000), it was emphasized that migration had given rise to family issues that go beyond the limits of laws and institutions.

Several forms of disrespect on OFWs have been recorded through the years (Delos Santos, 2003, as cited in De Guzman, 2003). According to Bautista (2020) in their work on the "Life Challenges of OFWs, they found that communication, finances, and work environment are among their major difficulties. These OFWs, particularly those Filipina domestic helpers (DH), have been victims of various forms of injustice. As emphasized by Delos Santos (2003), such difficult work conditions deprived them of access to communication. That made them feel deeply marginalized and disenfranchised; thus, the most they could do was to struggle to recognize their rights as full-fledged members of the Philippine society.

Despite implementing Republic Act No. 10022 of the Act amending RA 8042, otherwise known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of

1995, the OFWs, particularly the Filipina domestic helpers, are still defenseless when it comes to the abuses of their employers abroad. OFWs befits modern heroism (Fernando & David, 1996, as cited in De Guzman, 2003). However, despite some triumphs, several OFWs and their family's welfare are at stake (Asis, 2006). Though their migration gave them autonomy and control of their economic resources, the drawbacks outdo benefits (Anthias & Lazaridis, 2020). The support given by the Philippine government is not enough to protect the welfare of these marginalized and disenfranchised modern heroines. Their unending struggles exhibit such injustices; hence this study presents the social conditions of the Ilongga OFWs and their struggles for recognition. This is an advocacy of the researcher along with issues concerning gender and development. This work would be authentic empirical citations to philosophy students, enthusiasts, and social scientists.

### **Theoretical Background**

The researcher appropriated Axel Honneth's (2000) theory of recognition to analyze the social condition and struggles of the Ilongga OFWs from the different injustices they experienced. The theory provided the sound basis for the OFWs' struggle for social justice as presented by Van den Brink and Owen (2007) in their "Recognition and Power: Axel Honnoeth and the tradition of critical social theory. In their work entitled, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Axel Honneth (1995) gave any moral grammar or basis for a struggle for social justice and equality in the contemporary world. Ikäheimo (2009), argues that recognition is so important to all human persons and that all persons have all the reasons to work for it. He argued that recognition is an inherent and vital factor for the individual to be free and be called "person" in its full-pledged sense. Deranty (2011) employed Honneth's model to emphasize a quasi-anthropological dimension of social mediation that provides a conceptual approach to the pathologies of modern society, its impact on subjective experience, and its importance in the emergence of social movements. Honneth's model offers a theoretical solution to structural and economic inequalities and provides a basis for self-respect and subjectivation that defy all technologies of social control. (Oliveria, 2009). Petroal (2020), citing Deranty and Renault (2007), imparts that Honneth's theory laid down moral grammar for political action, leading to social justice in societies.

Honneth's theory of recognition is grounded on the notion that individuals' or groups' feelings of injustice are a driving force in their struggle for freedom. Thus, this would provide an understanding of the struggles of the country's

modern-day heroines and contribute to promoting social justice for the OFWs.

Honneth's theory emphasizes that the struggle for liberation in modern societies is moral. Thus, the emancipation of the oppressed hinges on the idea of the recognition of their rights and deep-seated claims. His theory entails the full recognition of individuals' identity, their importance in the community, their democratic views and opinions, and their rights as co-equals with all other members of the society.

Honneth's model was applicable to the Ilongga OFW because it provided a concept that the moral grammar for the Ilongga OFWs' struggle for social justice is not only economical but primarily moral. The appropriation of philosophical grounding using Honneth's theory of recognition to understand the plight of the Filipina domestic helper is an authentic contribution to the field of philosophical and social science researches.

The researcher is convinced then that every Ilongga OFW, like any other Filipino, deserves full recognition and respect for the rights of a human. This research argues that the OFWs' struggle for social justice is motivated by their experiences of injustice and social control from the agents of globalization. Hence, as in Ilonggas' case, social justice could be attained by granting them full recognition of their deep-seated claims and expectations. In this manner, applying Axel Honneth's theory of the struggle for recognition to the Ilongga OFWs' struggle for social justice could shed light on understanding the plight of the oppressed Ilongga OFWs and pave the way for their emancipation from social control and domination.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The various stories of continued disrespect of Filipina domestic helpers proved that society is doing something unjust to them; thus, the researcher believed that theory-backed solutions should be considered to provide authentic resolutions to the issues on OFWs. For this reason, the researcher hoped to address the following objectives, (1) to identify the current social conditions of Ilongga OFWs who experienced social injustice, (2) to discuss how these Ilongga domestic helpers affected by their experiences of abuses, and (3) to describe how these experiences of injustice motivate their struggle for recognition of their rights as co-equal members of the society.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study utilized a descriptive-analytical qualitative design, making use of a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is an educational qualitative research design that gives rise to the philosophical investigation as posited by Padilla in 2015 (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Descriptive research involved collecting data on the current social conditions of the Ilongga OFWs who confessed to having experienced social injustice. They were referred and personally introduced to the researcher. They illustrated how their negative experiences had motivated their struggle to recognize their rights as co-equal members of society. Analytical research determines the significance of Honneth's theory of recognition in understanding the struggle for social justice of Ilongga OFWs. According to Welmar and Kruger (1999, as cited in Groenewald, 2004), phenomenologists understand social and psychological phenomena from the people involved.

This qualitative research employed descriptions of human behavior, understand the members of the population being studied, and their experiences of their own world (Austin & Sutton, 2014). A core assumption is that personal experiences gathered through qualitative data and the collective strength of content and critical analyses would better understand the research study.

### Participants

The key informants of the study were the ten (10) Ilongga OFWs previously and presently working abroad. These ten OFWs, who confessed having experienced forms of disrespect, regardless of their age and civil status, were chosen through referrals by friends, co-workers, and relatives and were personally introduced to the researcher. They came from different towns of Iloilo province, namely, Dingle, Dueñas, Janiuay, Miag-ao, Pavia, Pototan, San Rafael, Sta. Barbara, and Iloilo City. Moreover, for the confidentiality of their identities, coding was utilized using the names of flowers.

Table 1. Respondents

Code	Age	Local address	Workplace abroad
Camia	32	San Rafael , Iloilo	Hong Kong
Dahlia	31	Dingle, Iloilo	Hong Kong
Gumamela	34	Sta. Barbara, Iloilo	Qatar, Dubai and Hong Kong
Margarita	33	Bakhaw, Mandurriao, Iloilo City	Singapore
Orchid	33	Pototan, Iloilo	Riyadh, KSA
Rosal	31	Tacas, Jaro, Iloilo City	United Arab Emirates
Rose	34	Duenas, Iloilo	Dubai
Sampaguita	35	Pavia, Iloilo	Taiwan
Sunflower	30	Janiuay, Iloilo	Saudi Arabia
Tulip	32	Miag-ao, Iloilo	Hong Kong

### Data Gathering

The following methods were used: First, it made use of hermeneutics and descriptive methods in presenting Honneth's social-critical theory of the struggle for recognition and in presenting the present social conditions of the OFWs in the Philippines. Second, series of interviews with those OFWs who were victims of abuses by their employers were conducted. The respondents came from different towns of Iloilo Province and Iloilo City. In the conduct of the interview, ethical standards were strictly observed in accordance with the standard operating procedures or ethics board of the university. Third, data gathered were validated through small group discussions. Because of the unsettling situations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, this study conformed with the health and safety guidelines set by the national government, particularly by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) and the Department of Health (DOH); follow-up interviews and validation of data with the key informants were done online (using zoom, goggle meet, messenger, etc.) and phone conversations. Fourth, a critical-analytic method was employed in the application of Honneth's (1991) theory of the struggle for recognition in the OFWs' struggle for social justice.

In the conduct of this study, the respondents' consent was sought, rights were protected, and full confidentiality of gathered information was assured. Likewise, the subjects' participation was voluntary, and they were informed of their rights to withdraw anytime if they felt uncomfortable gathering information.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the lived experiences and social conditions of Ilongga OFWs abroad. Necessary information on Ilongga OFW's struggles was gathered through their written statements, actual personal interviews, and messenger chat paint a clear picture of the true social conditions of these modern heroines of the country.

### **Physical Abuse and Psychological Abuse**

In an interview with Gumamela and Sunflower, both courageously shared their stories of discrimination and physical and psychological abuses by their employers in Dubai, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

Gumamela, a single mother of three, worked in the Middle East as a domestic helper because of poverty. She had been in Qatar in 2010 and in Dubai in 2014. According to Gumamela, she was discriminated against as her employers in Qatar always regarded her as low class, poorly educated, and incapable. She recalled that, as always, she was made to eat her employers' leftover food and never allowed to eat in the same place where they eat. They would point out her incapability to learn the language and their way of life. They would look down on her as less human instead treated her like an animal. For Gumamela, it was a very long and agonizing year of her life. However, due to dire need and too much poverty, she challenged herself and believed that next time would be different. So in 2014, after few months of living a difficult life here in the Philippines due to an unstable source of income, she decided on another OFW adventure in Dubai. Maybe life in the Middle East was unkind to her because, like her first employer, the second one who lived with Preet, her sister-in-law, was a meticulous and sensitive type of person. She would often invite her boyfriend to their house and stayed for a couple of days and even a week. Preet was quite jealous of Gumamela every time her boy would ask Gumamela to prepare his food. In most times, because of jealousy, Preet maltreated Gumamela in such a way as throwing some laundry on her face, kicking her butt, slapping her face, and punching her arms. She just bore with all these until her contract ended. A few months later, she applied for another domestic job in Hong Kong, where she is still working for now and in a better working condition.

On the other hand, Sunflower, a domestic helper in Saudi Arabia, confessed that she was a victim of physical abuse by her female employer during the interview. Sunflower's female employer was so strict with her. Sunflower's female

employer was so strict with her. She would get mad with a little mistake that Sunflower commits. One time, while she was cooking in the kitchen, the sauce suddenly slipped on the floor and broke an expensive plate. Immediately, she was slapped on the face and pulled by her hair. Sunflower further explained that her female employer would always get angry with her. The employer would throw her the TV remote control, books, or even her phone even without a valid reason.

*“Naga kakibot langko may nagalinagapok na sa ulo ko, kis a dalagko nga estrellya makita ko e, but gina agwanta ko gd.”*

Sometimes, I am sadly surprised that things are thrown to my head that I see stars during broad daylight, but I just endure them. All these she bore for the sake of her family, and she just continued to trust that one day it would end.

### **Sexual Harassment**

Rose retold her life as a domestic helper and part-time beautician in a low-class beauty parlor in Dubai in 2013. She did a part-time job to earn more. She started as a waitress, but soon her employer asked her to be an entertainer. She thought that extra pay would be a big help for her family in the Philippines. One night at the bar, while entertaining customers, Rose felt dizzy and unconscious. She just woke up on the bed with a Pakistanis beside her. She was sexually abused. Out of dismay and fear, she just kept it. Rose promised herself that such an incident would never happen again. Thus, she decided to stop that part-time job, and when her contract was finished, she left Dubai with a sad memory and went back to the Philippines with the help of the Philippine Embassy officials.

Further, Rosal shared her heartbreaking difficulty at work particularly, the sexual harassment she experienced. Her struggles started when she stayed in the boarding house during her training in Manila, where they were made to stay in a crowded, noisy, poor, ventilated, dirty, and unsafe boarding house. Then her struggles continued with her difficulty in the different international airports. Anxious of uncertainties and fear of the unknown occupied her heart and mind. Her struggle worsened when she finally arrived in UAE. She described her work as inhuman because she served three (3) families living in a big house.

*“Hanggod nag balay e mataas, three stories nga damo kwarto, ayawan ka e daw mapatay ka makatapos paninlo dayon gina nyerbyos kaw pa pirmo kung tauwong kaw ka amo mo nga laki, Hay Dyos ko dulang gd.”*

Describing the house, she worked with a big, three-story structure with so many rooms that it is almost impossible for you to finish cleaning it. She added that she was always scared every time she was called to the room by her male employer. This had happened as her legal employer was living with her in-laws and a brother-in-law who was a soldier and a widower. Whenever the soldier was at home, she could not sleep because she was afraid. At first, she was called to clean his room and massage him. This would usually end up with a sexual advantage/harassment.

*“Pagsulod mo sa kwarto na, kis a naka tuwalya lang sya halin sa bathroom, baw naga kurog kurog nako karan. Tapos mapa masabe kag t dayon.... Man an mo na ran e kung ano matabo...”*

In teary eye, she recalled that when she is called, she became very nervous because the man was just wearing a towel and then would ask for a massage. Then the harassment would follow. She had to bear with it because she did not know what to do and how to escape from it. She was afraid as this place was in a far remote desert area of UAE. Besides, her passport was taken from her upon her arrival, and she could not use any cell phone. When asked if she would still go back and work abroad she said, she hoped she would not because life there was never easy. However, due to the difficulty of living here and because of the unstable source of income and the idea that she would want to send her children to school and be able to provide with their needs, she considered taking another risk, one more time but no longer in the Middle East.

### **Insecurity of Financial Instability**

Emotional stress due to insecurity of financial difficulties had been the challenge for Camia, Margarita, Sampaguita, Orchid, and Tulip. These three Ilongga OFWs (Camia, Margarita, and Tulip) became friends in 2015 when they started to apply as domestic helpers. During our small group discussion, these three Ilongga OFWs asserted that their situations abroad were miserable, especially when employed by those employers who did not regard their helpers as humans. For them, some employers did not have a heart for their domestic helpers because they maltreated them.

Camia and Margarita shared their experiences of delayed salaries. They argued that sometimes the employers were not sympathetic with the feelings of their helpers by not attending to the needs of their helpers, especially when it

concerns health and welfare. For one, as Camia shared, being maltreated by her employers when she got sick of flu with a high fever. Despite her situation, she had to finish her task. Camia asked her employers to seek medical consultation or for a check-up, yet she was not allowed. She waited for five more days or during her day off to have her medical check-up. Camia had to bear the pain that she experienced while attending to her household tasks.

Likewise, Margarita was asked by her employers to work despite her ill conditions. One time, she met an accident while cleaning the house. Instead of helping Margarita, she shouted at her and maligned her. The employer told her that she had to finish what she was doing, clean the floor and clean the mess in the kitchen. The employer did not provide any medicine or medical attention to help Margarita, not even first aid her bleeding wound. Margarita just cried, continued cooking, and cleaned her mess in the kitchen. She also had to bear the difficulty of having multiple jobs as she had to clean three houses. Her salary was always not enough as her husband would demand and ask for more as he claimed that prices of foods and other commodities kept rising. In addition, Margarita continued her story of injustice as her husband back here in the Philippines would not communicate with her anymore using a different alibi.

*“Dyos ko ina bala nga abe mo ikaw may sala kay pirme kulang ang palada mo... gali timo hay may aringkingking sya ya. Baw daw tinakluban ako ka kalibutan e kag abe ko katapusan na sang tanan.”*

Tears were falling down her face as she recalled and remembered the miserable condition she was in there, then she found out about her husband's infidelity. She thought it was the end of the world. All these had caused a psychological and emotional burden to her. She later found out that her husband had several affairs. At first, those were just flings but eventually, he left the children under the care of their grandparents.

As compared to Margarita and Camia, Tulip and Sampaguita had different but more frustrating situations. Camia was accused of stealing her employer's perfume. While she was arguing, her employer took the cooking pan with cooking oil and threw it to Tulip. Fortunately, Tulip was able to catch the hot pan, and her hands got the first-degree burn. She immediately called her friend and asked her to send her to the nearest medical center. Tulip was confined for two days for the first-degree burn.

On the other hand, Sampaguita narrated that her struggle was also more emotional and psychological as she had difficulty adjusting to the Dos and Don'ts

and rigid rules of her Chinese employers. Due to cultural differences and being a first-timer to work abroad and having a Chinese-Singaporean employer with two children and an in-law in a two-bed-room house-apartment was difficult. She was not allowed to communicate with anyone using her cellphone during work hours. However, most of the 24 hours of the day, she worked, and that she had to sleep very late (1:00 AM) and still had to wake up at 4:00 AM to do the laundry. She also had to prepare different breakfast meals and do the cleaning and washing of the two cars. She had difficulty preparing different food demands, especially that there were only two burners of the stove. Nevertheless, she would always receive insults after insults.

Orchid considered her experience working in Riyadh in 2016 as a disappointing moment in her life. Prior to her work in Riyadh, she worked as a house helper in a village in Iloilo City, receiving PHP 4,000.00/month. However, being a single mother for her two children, she decided to work as a domestic helper in Riyadh with the help of her friend and a fellow helper in Iloilo City.

For Orchid, being an OFW in a secluded area of Saudi Arabia was very difficult due to language and cultural differences. Her work included cooking food which ingredients she never heard of before, being a nanny, and doing household chores. She first had two other companions, but after five months, their contract ended. She was left alone doing all the work and chores they had left while her employers were looking for replacements. Her employers assured her that it was only temporary. However, months had passed, they had not found any replacements. Because of the bulk of household chores, Orchid skipped her meals and could not have enough sleep most of the time. Despite the workloads that were given to Orchid, her salary remained, amounting to 15,000.00 pesos. She asked for additional pay but to no avail. Orchid, feeling helpless, did not know what to do, just cried inside her quarter. She continued living that difficult life for the sake of her family back home. She had to be strong to survive. Orchid finished her two-year contract in Riyadh and did not return to being an OFW.

Like Orchid, Dahlia also experienced being cheated when it came to her salary. As a domestic helper in Hong Kong, her main task was to take care of the three children, send them to school in the morning, and fetch them in the afternoon. After a month of working with that employer, her “Boss” told her to transfer and work to her ailing mother with the sister-in-law. She worked as a caregiver to the 92-year-old woman, which is far different from the contract she signed. There, Dahlia had to do all the household chores, including gardening, grooming of pets, and even washing the car of her “new employers.” Without hesitation and complaints, Dahlia worked all the chores given to her, although

some of her day-offs were already used to clean the glass windows and do much laundry. There, she experienced maltreatment because she was not given food on time, was not allowed to communicate with her family, and sometimes was not paid on time. She felt so disappointed about her miserable situation. Because of these, Dahlia left her “new employer” and sought her friends and fellow domestic helpers in Hong Kong for relief. The authorities in the Philippine Embassy in Hong Kong acted promptly and sent Dahlia home.

The preceding stories of these Ilongga OWFs showed that their demands were not just for improving their socio-economic interests, but more so, it was a moral claim hinge on respect and self-determination. The discriminations, exploitations, physical abuses, compensation injustice, as well as the emotional and psychological stresses due to financial instability they experienced, have deeply marginalized and disenfranchised them. This showed that the feelings of frustration resulted from these experiences of being marginalized and disenfranchised drove these Ilongga OFWs to struggle for recognition. Thus, giving the Ilongga OFWs due to recognition of their rights and demands shall pave the way for their emancipation from all forms of domination and social control.

## CONCLUSIONS

Axel Honneth’s theory of the struggle for recognition has provided theory-based analysis of the struggle of the Ilongga OFWs who have been treated unjustly by their employers abroad, which was aggravated by the deficits of implementing the Republic Act No. 10022 of the Act amending RA 8042, otherwise known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995. Indeed, their struggles for recognizing their rights resulted from their deeply-seated claims and expectations of the proper implementation of the laws both in the Philippines and in their countries. Such would give the Ilongga OFWs hope of gaining back their freedom, identity, and self-respect that were lost due to their experiences of injustice. The injustices and difficulties they experienced serve as the motivating factor for them to struggle to recognize their rights in order for them to gain freedom and be extended a sense of social status and pride as people who have the same rights and privileges as any other Filipinos. In this way, the Ilongga OFWs would become recognized and respected as full-fledged members and modern heroines of the country.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Using Honnethian lens in analyzing the present condition of the Ilongga OFWs, the researcher recommended the following: (1) strengthen the support given by the Philippine government to protect the welfare of these marginalized and disenfranchised modern heroines of the country, (2) the Philippine government should revisit all the laws related to labor migration, foreign policies and economic relations between the Philippines and other countries. Moreover, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), and Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) should regularly monitor the status of OFWs abroad to ensure the safety, security, and welfare of OFWs in the hands of their employers and recruiters, (3) the OFWs should be afforded proper trainings, and seminars about financial literacy for more comprehensive management of their hard-earned income, and (4) alternative source of livelihood should be provided for the OFWs whenever they decide to stay in the country for good.

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