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Exploring Pathways to Empowerment:
A Narrative of the Bangsamoro Women Migrant Workers

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ABSTRACT

The socio-economic empowerment of Muslim families in the country relies to a great extent on how their women migrant workers (WMWs)—majority of which are migrant domestic workers (MDWs)—are nurtured and enabled to become nurturers and enablers of themselves and of others. This paper pursues the empowering feminized narrative, having considered the significance and relevance of the empowerment processes in the context of feminized global labor migration. It seeks to identify some pathways to processes of empowerment accorded to the Bangsamoro WMWs as they navigate through "power within," negotiate "power with others," and harness "power to change" as a consequence of their choices. Recommendations include (1) renegotiating the women's hopes and dreams, (2) strengthening their power within, (3) reinforcing the power to work with others, and (4) intensifying their power to protect.

KEYWORDS

Bangsamoro women migrant workers, domestic workers, women empowerment, migration process, migration experience, migration narratives

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> *"Migration can be both a cause and a consequence of female empowerment."*[2]

Introduction

Mara[3] was four years old when her mother left her and her siblings to the care of a neighbor in SK[4] in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Her mother left to work as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. Domestic workers are those "who work in other homes to clean the house, cook, wash and iron clothes, take care of children, or elderly or sick members of a family, do gardening, guard the house, drive for the family, and even take care of household pets."[5] One in every twenty-five (25) women workers worldwide is a domestic worker. Mara's mother is one of them, a migrant domestic worker (MDW) or one working in a country of which she/he is not a national though she/he may be "working on full-time or part-time basis; employed by a single household or by multiple employers; residing in the household of the employer (live-in worker) or living in his or her own residence (live-out)..."[6]

Domestic work remains a highly feminized sector, employing 80 percent of women.[7] The sector employs the biggest number of Filipino women migrant workers (WMWs), estimated to be at 97 percent based

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[2]   Graeme Hugo, "Migration and Women's Empowerment," in *Women's Empowerment and Demographic Processes: Moving Beyond Cairo*, ed. Harriet Presser and Gita Sen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), quoted in Anjali Fleury, "Understanding Women and Migration: A Literature Review" (working paper, Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development, Washington D.C., 2016), 1. https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2017-04/KNOMAD%20Working%20Paper%208%20final_Formatted.pdf.

[3]   The real names of women migrant workers (WMWs) mentioned were withheld to protect their identities. Instead, pseudonyms were used.

[4]   Real locations of the WMWs were also withheld to protect their identities.

[5]   "Who are domestic workers?," International Labour Organization, https://www.ilo.org/global/docs/WCMS_209773/lang--en/index.htm.

[6]   Ibid.

[7]   Ibid.

on a 2013 report.[8] A high 75 percent of them come from Mindanao and are employed in elementary occupations, as compared to those from Luzon and Visayas (*see* Table 1 *below*). This figure includes the 2.7 percent of WMWs from the BARMM (*see* Table 2 *on page 5*).

TABLE 1   Distribution of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) by major occupation group, sex, and area, 2017

Area & Major Occupation Group	Both Sexes	Male	Female
Philippines			
Number (in thousands)	**2,339**	**1,084**	**1,255**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Managers	1.1	1.4	0.9
Professionals	8.7	8.3	9.0
Technicians & associate professionals	5.8	9.5	2.5
Clerical support workers	3.4	2.6	4.0
Service & sales workers	18.0	15.7	20.0
Skilled agricultural forestry & fishery workers	0.4	0.7	0.1
Craft & related trades workers	11.4	22.1	2.1
Plant & machine operators & assemblers	13.7	26.9	2.3
Elementary occupations	37.6	12.8	59.0
National Capital Region (NCR)			
Number (in thousands)	**221**	**122**	**99**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Managers	2.3	2.6	1.9
Professionals	18.0	12.2	25.1
Technicians & associate professionals	7.2	9.8	4.1
Clerical support workers	3.0	2.7	3.3
Service & sales workers	20.2	16.8	24.4
Skilled agricultural forestry & fishery workers	—	—	—
Craft & related trades workers	9.5	15.7	1.8
Plant & machine operators & assemblers	21.0	33.4	5.7
Elementary occupations	18.8	6.8	33.8

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[8]   Jean Encinas-Franco, Alvin Ang, Jeremaiah Opiniano, and Joselito Sescon, *Gender, Migration and Development in the Philippines — A Policy Paper* (Quezon City: UN Women Philippines, 2015). http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2016/gender-migration-development-in-philippines-policypaper.pdf?la=en&vs=2043.

Area & Major Occupation Group	Both Sexes	Male	Female
Luzon (excluding NCR)			
Number (in thousands)	**1,343**	**621**	**723**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Managers	1.0	1.4	0.6
Professionals	8.1	8.5	7.7
Technicians & associate professionals	6.2	9.7	3.2
Clerical support workers	4.4	3.1	5.4
Service & sales workers	19.5	16.9	21.8
Skilled agricultural forestry & fishery workers	0.5	1.0	0.1
Craft & related trades workers	11.4	21.6	2.7
Plant & machine operators & assemblers	11.7	21.9	2.9
Elementary occupations	37.3	15.8	55.7
Visayas			
Number (in thousands)	**414**	**236**	**178**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Managers	1.5	1.3	1.6
Professionals	8.6	5.8	12.2
Technicians & associate professionals	5.5	9.4	0.4
Clerical support workers	1.6	0.9	2.6
Service & sales workers	14.8	14.1	15.6
Skilled agricultural forestry & fishery workers	0.3	0.4	0.0
Craft & related trades workers	16.8	27.7	2.4
Plant & machine operators & assemblers	18.7	32.0	1.0
Elementary occupations	32.3	8.3	64.2
Mindanao			
Number (in thousands)	**360**	**105**	**255**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Managers	0.6	0.1	0.8
Professionals	5.3	7.5	4.4
Technicians & associate professionals	3.5	8.2	1.6
Clerical support workers	1.8	3.2	1.2
Service & sales workers	14.9	10.6	16.6
Skilled agricultural forestry & fishery workers	0.0	0.1	0.0
Craft & related trades workers	6.0	20.1	0.1
Plant & machine operators & assemblers	11.3	37.4	0.5
Elementary occupations	56.6	12.6	74.7

Notes:
- Details may not add up to totals due to rounding.
- The estimates cover overseas Filipinos whose departure occurred within the last five years and

who are working or had worked abroad during the past six months (April to September) of the survey period.

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, *2017 Survey on Overseas Filipinos*

TABLE 2   Distribution of overseas Filipino workers by sex and region, 2017

Region	Both Sexes	Male	Female
Philippines			
Number (in thousands)	**2,339**	**1,084**	**1,255**
Percent	100.0	46.3	53.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
National Capital Region	9.5	11.3	7.9
Cordillera Administrative Region	2.3	1.6	3.0
I - Ilocos Region	9.0	7.4	10.4
II - Cagayan Valley	6.8	4.1	9.2
III - Central Luzon	12.9	14.9	11.1
IV-A - CALABARZON	20.7	24.2	17.8
IV-B - MIMAROPA	1.8	1.7	1.9
V - Bicol Region	3.8	3.4	4.2
VI - Western Visayas	9.5	10.0	9.1
VII - Central Visayas	6.1	9.1	3.5
VIII - Eastern Visayas	2.1	2.6	1.6
IX - Zamboanga Peninsula	2.1	1.5	2.6
X - Northern Mindanao	2.5	2.4	2.6
XI - Davao Region	3.0	1.7	4.2
XII - SOCCSKSARGEN	4.2	2.0	6.2
XIII - Caraga	1.7	1.2	2.1
Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao[9]	1.9	0.9	2.7

Notes:
• Details may not add up to totals due to rounding.
• The estimates cover overseas Filipinos whose departure occurred within the last five years and who are working or had worked abroad during the past six months (April to September) of the survey period.

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, *2017 Survey on Overseas Filipinos*

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[9]   The BARMM formally replaced the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) after majority of voters ratified Republic Act No. 11054 or the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in plebiscites held on January 21 and February 6, 2019.

There is also a considerable link between West Asian countries (such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait) being the top countries for WMW deployment in Asia (at 61.3%; *see* Table 3 *below*) and the number of Muslim WMWs from 2000 to 2013.[10]

TABLE 3   Distribution of overseas Filipino workers by sex and region, 2017

Region	Both Sexes	Male	Female
Philippines			
Number (in thousands)	**2,339**	**1,084**	**1,255**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Africa	1.1	2.4	0.1
Australia	1.6	2.3	0.9
Europe	6.4	10.1	3.1
North and South America	5.4	8.0	3.2
Asia	85.5	77.3	92.7
East Asia	18.9	15.7	21.7
Southeast and South Central Asia	9.5	9.3	9.6
Western Asia	57.1	52.3	61.3
Kuwait	6.7	2.6	10.3
Qatar	5.5	6.0	5.1
Saudi Arabia	25.4	28.7	22.5
United Arab Emirates	15.3	12.6	17.5
Other Countries in Western Asia (Bahrain, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan)	4.3	2.4	5.9

Notes:
• Only the data needed is expanded.
• Details may not add up to totals due to rounding.
• The estimates cover overseas Filipinos whose departure occurred within the last five years and who are working or had worked abroad during the past six months (April to September) of the survey period.

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, *2017 Survey on Overseas Filipinos*

When Mara's mother left, that decision influenced Mara years later when she joined the daughters of BARMM in search for "greener pastures," having limited access to viable employment opportunities

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[10]   Encinas-Franco, et al., "Gender, Migration and Development," 18.

at home. Compared to men, WMWs tend to be concentrated in a limited number of occupations and choices,[11] such as domestic work or jobs in the care or entertainment sector.[12]

Interestingly, more competitive employment opportunities for MDWs are on a steady rise. West Asian countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Kuwait, grew a huge demand for Filipino MDWs.[13] In 2017, one out of four OFWs is working in Saudi Arabia.[14] As further noted,

> In mid-2011, the Saudi government temporarily banned the hiring of new domestic workers from the Philippines. The later imposed stricter requirements for prospective employers, including a minimum USD400 monthly salary and detailing of employers' residence and background information. After the ban was lifted a year later, and an agreement was signed … deployment levels steeply increased from 2,098 in 2012 to 42,440 in 2013.[15]

Migration is truly multidimensional, particularly in terms of human development effects upon the home country and the host country. As noted,

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[11] Mary Kawar, "Gender and Migration: Why are Women More Vulnerable?," in *Femmes en Mouvement: Genre, Migrations et Nouvelle Division Internationale du Travail*, ed. Fenneke Reysoo and Christine Verschuur (Genève: Graduate Institute Publications, 2004), 74.

[12] Jayati Ghosh, "Migration and Gender Empowerment: Recent Trends and Emerging Issues," Human Development Research Paper 2009/4, United Nations Development Programme, New York, NY, April 2009, 8.

[13] Other destination countries in the Middle East for Filipino MDWs are Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. See Lisa Grace S. Bersales, "Total Number of OFWs Estimated at 2.2 Million (Results from the 2016 Survey on Overseas Filipinos)," Philippine Statistics Authority, Reference Number 2017-043, April 27, 2017, https://psa.gov.ph/content/total-number-ofws-estimated-22-million-results-2016-survey-overseas-filipinos.

[14] Bersales, "Total Number of OFWs Estimated at 2.2 Million."

[15] Encinas-Franco, et al., "Gender, Migration and Development," 18.

It can have many positive effects because it expands the opportunities for productive work and leads to a wider perspective on many social issues, among migrants and among the population of host countries. But it can also have negative aspects, dominantly in the nature of work and work conditions and possibilities for abuse of migrant workers by employers and others. Migration has a complex and multi-layered relationship with human development: while conditions of human development in the home country determine both the need for and the nature of economic migration, the process itself generates many and often differing human development effects upon the home country and the host country.[16]

Pathways to empowerment: Contexts and cases

Women are "increasingly migrating on their own, often to enhance economic opportunities by seeking jobs or education," a trend commonly referred to as the 'feminization of migration.'[17] The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that women are half of the global migrant population, even reaching 70 to 80 percent in some countries, including the Philippines.[18] The feminization of migration, particularly of labor migration, is basically changing traditional norms as women improve their autonomy, human capital, self-esteem, status, authority, and worth in their families and communities. This is manifested in the improvement of women's rights and access to resources; development of new norms, skills, and expertise; gaining of greater control and authority at home;

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[16] Ghosh, "Migration and Gender Empowerment," 1.

[17] Fleury, "Understanding Women and Migration," vi; United Nations, *2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women and International Migration* (New York, NY: United Nations Publishing Section, 2006), quoted in Tseun Kweun Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration: A Case Study of China's Manufacturing Industry," Development Studies Institute Working Paper Series No. 07-79, Development Studies Institute, London, January 2007, 6.

[18] Fleury, "Understanding Women and Migration," vi.

improvement of their families' overall welfare, health, and education; and greater financial dependability through sending remittances to their families.[19]

The context of feminized narrative

The feminization narrative, however, seems to be of generally pessimistic tone, espousing how and why women are at greater risk of exploitation and abuse. They are vulnerable to risks such as trafficking, de-skilling (for highly skilled women) and employment in less-regulated and less-visible sectors if not harsh working conditions (for unskilled women),[20] the perpetuation of traditional gender roles as dutiful and filial daughters,[21] downward class mobility,[22] and the growing trend of young and single women—some even adolescent girls—becoming migrant domestic workers.[23] As women become attracted to the increased job demands, employers are drawn to recruit them as cheaper and more docile workforce alternatives and consider them as natural providers of care and housework,[24] thus their prevalence in domestic work. Migrant women are also engaged in sex work, either voluntarily or forced into prostitution,[25] while

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[19] Ibid., vi, 1.

[20] Grete Brochmann, *Middle East Avenue: Female Migration from Sri Lanka to the Gulf* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 12.

[21] Susan Greenhalgh, "Sexual Stratification: The Other Side of 'Growth with Equity' in East Asia," *Population and Development Review* 11, no 2. (1985): 265–314, quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 13.

[22] Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 13.

[23] Fleury, "Understanding Women and Migration," vi; Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 7.

[24] Helma Lutz, "At Your Service Madam! The Globalization of Domestic Service," *Feminist Review* 70, no. 1 (2002): 89–104, quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 7.

[25] United Nations, *2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development,* quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 7.

their children are highly affected by the absence of their mothers.[26] In short, "instead of a liberation of the patriarchal oppression at home, the status quo of gender positioning is often preserved or even strengthened, and women move 'from one household-based patriarchal to another in which their status is no better or even worse than at the origin…' subordinated in the masculine capitalist system."[27]

Despite a growing attention to the multidimensional empowering and disempowering effects of the feminized labor migration, most studies are still concerned on the latter. Is it because of how women in the Global South are often "rendered as weak, voiceless and faceless subjects, homogeneous and indistinguishable?"[28] As Yu espoused, women's individual agency and ability "as social agents to negotiate and transform the structure are (oftentimes) denied outright… the fluidity of empowerment is (normally) discounted… (and their) active struggle against subordination goes unrecognized…" in the context of complicated and contingent interactions between individual, household, and institutions in migration.[29]

A more appropriate approach is to take the feminized narrative as a two-edged sword that acknowledges both the empowering and disempowering affects of the feminized labor migration. But more so in the perspectives of the WMWs, particularly those "blissful moments,"[30] which may render insignificant in the perspective of outsiders. The narrative should begin from the standpoint of the women themselves: how do they perceive migration and how does the experience shape their personal and collective hopes and dreams and, in turn, empower them? As Chant and Craske observed, "female

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[26] Fleury, "Understanding Women and Migration," vi.

[27] Hugo 1997, quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 13.

[28] Ai-hwa Ong, "Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-Presentations of Women in Non-Western Societies," *Inscriptions* 3, no. 4 (1988): 79–93, quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 13.

[29] Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 13.

[30] Ibid., 14.

employment and empowerment are interlocked and although their relationship remains a 'vexed' one, 'many women feel there is a connection.'"[31] Thus, we should be willing to "accept the women's own and [though] frequently contradictory accounts about what migration means in their lives."[32]

These "blissful moments" or processes of empowerment do not either mean being complacent with the achievements of migrant women or ignoring the disempowering effects of the feminized narrative. Rather, it "implies a broadened perspective on individual agency and a demonstration of the positive elements which are often shelved," as well as a recognition of the "global and natural forces on women's empowerment" such as the globalization and expansion of multinational corporations' production network or the global care chain, among others.[33] Empowerment narratives in the context of migration have a "contingent perspective, i.e., those who are empowered in destination areas may be disempowered when they return home or vice versa."[34] Thus, this fluidity of power and the possibility of backlash should also be properly considered.

It is significant and relevant to speak of empowering women migrant workers, which calls for a "critical consciousness" that enables them to actively struggle for change.[35] Yet, their empowerment "cannot be bestowed by a third party," but must rather be claimed as others can simply "facilitate women empowering themselves… [by]

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[31] Sylvia Chant and Nikki Craske, *Gender in Latin America* (London: Latin America Bureau, 2002), 197, quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 14.

[32] Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 14.

[33] Jane L. Parpart, Shirin M. Rai, and Kathleen A. Staudt, eds., *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/Local World* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002) and Lutz, "At Your Service Madam!," quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 17.

[34] Hugo, "Migration and Women's Empowerment," quoted in Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 17.

[35] Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 11.

creating conditions favorable to empowerment."[36] Empowerment then includes a "sense of people making decisions on matters which are important in their lives and being able to carry them out" in a process which involves reflection, analysis, and action both at the individual and the collective levels.[37] Mosedale further argued that "while women's own struggles for empowerment have tended to be collective efforts, empowerment-orientated development interventions often focus more on the level of the individual."[38] Finally, empowerment is an "ongoing process rather than a product… where there is no final goal" nor an absolute sense of becoming empowered; rather, "people are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or, importantly, relative to themselves at a previous time."[39] The core of both the empowerment and disempowerment processes is the "transformation of individual, which include self-agency, critical awareness of self-positioning, respect, negotiating ability with power structures," among others in the "exercise of power that brings about personal, collective and institutional changes."[40]

The context of the Bangsamoro feminized narrative

This paper pursues the empowering feminized narrative, having considered the significance and relevance of empowerment processes in the context of feminized global labor migration. It seeks to identify some pathways in empowering WMWs from the Bangsamoro as they navigate through their power within, negotiate their power with others, and harness their power to change as a consequence of their choices.

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[36] Sarah Mosedale, "Towards a Framework for Assessing Empowerment," Working Paper Series 3, Impact Assessment Research Center, Manchester, 2003, 3.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 16.

How did the women who "have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability?"[41] This empowerment concerns the 'self' in an awareness-awakening process and ability, as well as the conditions of making choices.[42] It is a process of change from being denied power in terms of ability to make choices to acquiring such power, which is rooted in how people see themselves or their sense of self-worth, which, in turn, is critically bound with how they are seen by those around them and by their communities.[43]

The three dimensions of the empowerment processes and pathways are agency, resources, and achievement (*see* Figure 1 on next page). *Agency* is the "power within," which encompasses the meanings, motivations, and purposes that individuals take into account in their decision-making and in their actions.[44] *Resources* are the medium through which agency is exercised—i.e., various material, human, and social resources—or the "power with others," which enhances the "power within."[45] *Achievements* are the outcomes of people's efforts that were exercised through agency and their consequences or the "power to change."[46] It is in exploring these pathways of empowerment that we can understand how Bangsamoro women migrant workers are strengthening the "power within" themselves as they define their hopes and dreams and act upon them and how various forms of interactions and relationships in their collective migration experience enable them to realize these hopes and dreams.

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41 Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 435, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125.

42 Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 3–4; Naila Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal," *Gender and Development* 13, no. 1 (March 2005): 14, https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273.
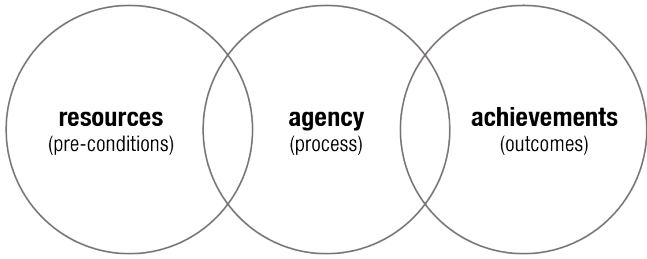
43 Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment," 13–15.

44 Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements," 438.

45 Ibid., 437.

46 Ibid., 438.

FIGURE 1   Three interrelated dimensions of the ability to exercise choice

Source: Kabeer 1999

The case studies

Eight direct replication cases involving transformative narratives or migration stories that reflect the "power to change" of MDWs were gathered through *pagtatanong-tanong at pakikipagkwentuhan* (casual social interactions) and in-depth interviews. As the cycle of temporary labor migration progresses, the number of re-hires among the women range from two to eleven times in a span of three to seventeen years of domestic work in Western Asia.

The women's collective narrative presented their perceptions of migration through their hopes and dreams that define their desired futures and aspirations *before leaving home*, given the various possibilities that the MDWs had been given based on their own experiences or of their loved ones and/or friends. The narratives also provided glimpses of their experiences, particularly of how their hopes and dreams were shaped, which brought out forms of transformation from within and reflections on their sense of self *while at work and away from home*. These narratives also portrayed how the women's choices enabled them to make strategic life choices of transformatory significance on their *return home*.

Navigating the power within

Who are the Bangsamoro women migrant workers? How did they navigate the "power within?" Their stories of empowerment include gaining access to education as Muslim women, braving through the

decision to leave home against the odds, and defining their desired future and aspirations and acting upon them.

The Bangsamoro women

Because of the influence of her mother, Mara from MG in the BARMM grew up dreaming to be an MDW herself. When she turned sixteen (16), she got a passport and gave it to the most popular MDW recruiter in their neighborhood. Despite not being able to finish school—not even primary school—she pushed herself to go to Manila to process her application to become an MDW.

Haan, who is also from MG, dreamed of going to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker. She also did not finish primary school, but she is the only one in her household who is eligible to work because she is already 16 years old. That is what she knows at least from the stories of their neighbors who either recruit young women to become domestic workers in West Asia or became domestic workers themselves. Her parents, who worked in the corn fields through the past years, are already complaining of tiredness and of the weakening of their bodies so she likewise submitted herself to a community recruiter in order to help her parents provide for the growing needs of their family. She is excited at the prospect of finally going to Saudi Arabia—or at least of how the glory of working in West Asia is presented to her.

Sai just finished high school in NC in the BARMM and is excited to go to college. However, her father cannot provide for her college education. He gently reminded her that they he and her mother have meager income as farmers and that they just sent off her older sister to Manila to apply for work in Saudi Arabia. In frustration, she packed her bags and joined another recruiter. After a few interviews, she left for Saudi Arabia few months later, even ahead of her sister.

Fara has a different story. She finished college a few years ago and had been in and out of jobs, but she experiences various forms of discrimination at work for being a Muslim. She cannot the wear skimpy uniform of her workplace and prefers to wear a *hijab*, which, however, is against her employer's policy. Her compensation is also

insufficient even for her personal needs. Her aging parents expect her to help in providing her family's needs, thus she has to find ways to do so. Fortunately, her neighbor is a recruiter with a good track record, so she thought about working abroad. She is not scared or worried, because just like Mara, Haan, and Sai, she too is a Muslim. And even though she has Grade 2 Arabic language proficiency—a bit lower than that of Mara and the others—she knows that she can manage. She eventually left for Saudi Arabia too.

Spaces of disempowerment

What is common in their collective narrative is the staggering reality of disempowerment, as the women in the above cases have been denied viable employment opportunities, which is directly linked to the lack of good education and competitive skill sets. Being born and raised in the BARMM poses a huge challenge as well. Of at least 31 percent of Filipino children living below the poverty line, 63 percent of them come from the BARMM as reported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).[47]

In the Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) for the year 2017, about 9 percent of the estimated 39.2 million Filipinos aged 6 to 24 were out-of-school children and youth (OSCY) or those who are not attending formal school, not gainfully employed, and have not finished college or post-secondary courses. The most common reasons for not attending school among OSCY were marriage or family matters (37.0%), lack of personal interest (24.7%), and the high cost of education or financial concerns (17.9%). Among female OSCY, marriage or family matters (57.0%) was the main reason for not attending school, while it is lack of personal interest among males (43.8%).[48]

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[47] Rio N. Araja, "31% Philippine kids, mostly from ARMM, below poverty line," *Manila Standard*, October 9, 2018, http://manilastandard.net/news/national/277571/31-philippine-kids-mostly-from-armm-below-poverty-line.html.

[48] Lisa Grace S. Bersales, "Nine Percent of Filipinos Aged 6 to 24 years are Out of School (Results from the 2017 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey)," Philippine

Furthermore, women have been denied decent jobs and quality sources of livelihood as key areas in the BARMM are affected by conflicts. In most cases, farms and fisheries in which many families depend on are devastated and communities are displaced. With lack of resources to rebuild, families may fall deeper into poverty whether they are directly affected by the conflicts or not. Based on the 2015 Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES) released by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the poverty incidence in the BARMM remains the highest in the country at 59 percent, making its almost four million population live below the poverty threshold.[49]

The various social ills affecting the BARMM go beyond resolving the armed conflicts among various armed groups and factions. They have taken much of the financial resources from the economic sectors that used to flourish in the region, including agriculture, fishing, small home industries, retail, and barter trade. These resources have now become less and less sufficient, thus

> exposing the young and the restless to the lures of lucrative source of quick incomes and riches, albeit risky and illegal, such as smuggling of all sorts of highly-in-demand goods including drugs and guns, kidnapping for ransom, piracies, and more lately participation in radical movements with substantial funding from the outside world.[50]

Spaces of empowerment

The Bangsamoro WMWs have all the reasons to remain disempowered given the many misfortunes and disadvantages brought about by the

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Statistics Authority, Reference Number 2018-092, June 6, 2018, https://psa.gov.ph/content/nine-percent-filipinos-aged-6-24-years-are-out-school-results-2017-annual-poverty-indicators.

[49] Jodesz Gavilan, "Fast Facts: Poverty in Mindanao," *Rappler*, May 28, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/171135-fast-facts-poverty-mindanao.

[50] Samuel K. Tan, "Human Development and Education in Mindanao," in *The Muslim South and Beyond* (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2010): 111.

socio-economic and political structures around them. But they have navigated through these in several aspects. First, the Bangsamoro women have gained a higher simple literacy rate of 88.7 percent than the male population based on the 2015 Census of Population. This was a huge leap from the recorded 80.2 percent simple literacy rate in 2010.[51] This is apparent among the WMWs interviewed as four of them have completed secondary education and one has a college degree, while two have primary-level education and only one didn't have any formal education. Interestingly, they all have Madrasah education, so they have learned Islamic beliefs and values and the Arabic language. Gaining education has been a crucial decision for most of these women as they aim to empower themselves in a better way. It is a decision hugely influenced by more experienced WMWs, as the women imagine themselves to be better than their loved ones and others. These forms of education have placed the WMWs at an advantage as MDWs in West Asia, as it is the seat of Islam. They are not simply Muslim women, but Muslim women who pushed their way against the odds to be literate and to have the basic capacity to foster deeper enablement.

Secondly, the women have responded to the crippling burden of poverty in their households by braving through the decision to leave home, defying the norms of traditional family structures and gender roles. The women's motivation to leave home is primarily a family-centric personal decision to subordinate personal interests to the family's collective welfare and solidarity.[52] It is also indirectly influenced by fellow WMWs in some cases. But ultimately, it is a decision owned by the women, having recognized themselves as the key decision maker, regardless of whether the head of the family

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[51] Philippine Statistics Authority—Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (PSA–ARMM), "Fact Sheet: ARMM Simple Literacy Rate Based on POPSEN 2015)," Philippine Statistics Authority, Reference Number FS-ARMM-17-010, July 31, 2017, http://rssoarmm.psa.gov.ph/release/54743/factsheet/armm-simple-literacy-rate-%28based-on-popcen-2015%29.

[52] Sylvia H. Guerrero, "Overseas Migration of Women: Realities and Consequences," in *Filipinas in Dialogue: Muslim–Christian Women's Response to Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Erlinda H. Bragado (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1995).

supports the decision or not. However, there are certain limits to the women's motivation and purpose to leave home as influenced by others. As they have the potential to be abused, leaving home to work abroad can be disempowering to both the women and their families.

While the purpose of the decision to leave home could be basically due to the prospects of economic gains, they have also determined to enable themselves and their family along the way, despite the uncertainties at the destination places and the certainty of displacement. There is a sense of social empowerment in this process as the women developed a sense of autonomy, self-confidence,[53] and new identity either as the sole or another breadwinner in the family. This disrupts the traditional family structure and gender roles where wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters are expected stay at home to submit to and support men in the family and nurture the women and the young. On the other hand, those who have left home as single women have either delayed their marriage or remained single and decided not to marry upon their return home. This is quite interesting in a culture where arranged marriage is customarily practiced and where the marrying age of 15 years old—for both male and female Muslims—is predetermined by the law.[54]

Finally, the women have moved from the powerlessness of poverty to putting meaning into their motivations and purposes to leave home by defining their desired future and aspirations. In doing so, they are moving from defining their hopes and dreams to acting upon them in the migration process. That as their economic gains increase, their hopes and dreams are also moving beyond the immediate daily survival of the family to exercising greater control

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[53] GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services, "Social and Economic Empowerment," *Voice, Empowerment and Accountability Topic Guide*, August 2014, https://gsdrc. org/topic-guides/voice-empowerment-and-accountability/supplements/social-and-economic-empowerment/#soc.

[54] "Presidential Decree No. 1083, s. 1977 (Code of Muslim Personal Laws of the Philippines)," *Official Gazette* 73, no. 20: 4038, https://www.officialgazette.gov. ph/1977/02/04/presidential-decree-no-1083-s-1977-2/.

over both their resources and life choices.[55] For example, while some of the women have identified their hopes and dreams from the reality of family needs, others have appropriated new meaning in each re-hire as a means to creatively establish their resources, cultivate new aspirations, and take greater control over their life choices.

Negotiating the power with others

How did the collective experience of the WMWs shape their hopes and dreams and deepen their sense of self through the "power with others?" The women's stories testified to access to certain jobs, responses to certain social resources at workplaces, and control over economic resources as pathways to the process of self-empowerment which is empowering to others as well.

Access to employment resources

While Mara, Haan, and Sai would not be as competitive as Fara or other Filipino WMWs, they can actually compete as MDWs. Now, more than ever, they have an access to a viable employment opportunity for two reasons. First, West Asian countries opened their doors and welcomed Filipino MDWs (among other available employment packages) in their households with terms and conditions that are compliant to international labor standards and employment packages that are competitive in the labor market. Second, this open door has created a robust partnership between the destination countries (i.e., West Asian countries) and the sending countries (i.e., the Philippines), which provides more friendly, accessible, and beneficial migration processes and procedures.

For example, the first thing that prospective MDWs do is to secure their passports, either through their own efforts or of the recruiters. The recruiter will then secure a job order and translate it to an employment contract. Part of the process is getting basic

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[55] GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services, "Social and Economic Empowerment."

skills training for MDWs through the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), which runs for as long as a few weeks up to a month. Pertinent medical tests, depending on the requirements of the destination countries, have to be passed. There are also briefing and orientation seminars that they have to go through. The preliminary orientation is called the Pre-Employment Orientation Seminar (PEOS), which is being done by the Philippine Overseas Employment Authority (POEA), while the final orientation is called the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS), which is administered by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and their authorized partners. As further noted,

> The Philippines have the most developed legislation and regulations with regard to leaving migrants. This is basically organized by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration. A mandatory one-day pre-departure orientation seminar is organized. Information is provided on various issues from travelling procedures to workers rights and pitfalls of living abroad.[56]

In short, from application to hiring, and skills training to briefing and orientation processes, the migration process and procedure— including policies and initiatives with partners and networks—is well established. As keenly studied, the "historical legacy of internal migration, social norms, global economic structuring, sending and receiving policies induce the demand and supply of Filipinos WMWs."[57] That "the most commonly observed factor has been largely the lack of work opportunities in the country particularly in the rural areas… and that social norms supporting women's mobility encourage women to emigrate abroad[, and c]ompared to other countries, Filipinos have greater acceptance for women's search for greener pasture in foreign lands."[58]

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[56] Kawar, "Gender and Migration," 80.

[57] Encinas-Franco, et al., "Gender, Migration and Development," 10.

[58] Ibid.

As several studies attest, the financial resources from overseas which have tremendously helped Filipino Muslim families in Mindanao mostly come from West Asia, as is the largest overseas employer for Filipino Muslims.[59] Despite an established structure, accessing employment opportunities entails being aware of the processes and procedures for working abroad. This awareness is obtained either through the help of more experienced fellow MDWs or from their own experience of going through the migration process. For most of them, the experience of going through the process enables them to deepen their sense of self not only as a "warrior" or "survivor," but also as a potential helper and enabler for fellow MDWs. This is a testament to how MDWs were previously helped and enabled by fellow MDW friends and relatives, and as the cycle of enabling goes on, how they help others in the process. Their growing awareness of the process is also a competitive edge in the re-hiring cycle after the end of their regular two-year contracts.

Responses to social resources

Western Asian countries as destination workplaces for MDWs are plagued with narratives of misfortunes and vulnerabilities intrinsic to temporary labor migration scenarios and female jobs. As Kawar noted, compared to men, most WMWs end up performing the 3D—dirty, dangerous, and demeaning (or difficult)—jobs and are in isolated situations with limited opportunities to build networks and limited access to information and social support.[60] The women's narratives testify to employers who do not allow them to own a cellphone, to having limited access to call home regularly, or to not being allowed to have a regular rest day or day-off as required by international labor standards.

Furthermore, the migration of women is mostly unrelated to career advancement and skill acquisition. There is enough evidence to

[59] Tan, "Human Development and Education in Mindanao," 111.

[60] Kawar, "Gender and Migration," 74.

suggest that a significant number of migrant women possess skills and qualifications often not recognized or unneeded in the types of work that they perform,[61] i.e., the deskilling for some groups of women, such as what Fara experienced.

How the women navigated through these unfavorable social structures in the workplace points to creative ways of resisting, refusing, withdrawing, accommodating, or influencing others[62] as they access available social resources. Mara and Sai resisted to be disconnected to their families by finding ways to call home regularly through the help of fellow MDWs, while Nur and Fara decided to accommodate their employers' wishes. In the end, such accommodation enabled the employers to trust them and the ban was eventually lifted. Nur and Sai tell of certain social interactions that strongly influence their employers so much so that four of their siblings and cousins joined them to work in the same household. Among the MDWs themselves, there are also certain levels of social interactions that allow the MDWS to influence one another to be better workers and better women.

Yan, on the other hand, refused to be subjugated by the sexual innuendos of her employer by accessing on-site welfare support, while Fara is planning to go through some programs that can help her develop skills as a WMW with a college degree. They are learning to access the resources and welfare services that the OWWA provide the women while at work. As Kawar noted,

> At work sites, particularly where there are large concentrations of female migrant workers, the Philippines government has posted female Filipino Overseas Labour Officers, who are labour attaches, welfare officers and centre coordinators… in places such as Hong Kong, the Republic of South Korea, Singapore, Saipan, Taiwan, Spain,

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[61] Ibid.

[62] Yu, "An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration," 25.

Italy, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. In the United Arab Emirates as well as Lebanon the Embassy of the Philippines offers programmes for educating female domestic workers and helping them to move out of the unskilled labour category. The programme carried out at the Dubai Consulate on weekends is exemplary as self-sustained community work...[63]

Control of resources

Empowerment is defined as women's control over key aspects of their lives. How did the women exercise control over resources while at work? Kabeer asserted that control indicators vary between control defined in relation to resources. For example, if it pertains to earnings and expenditures, the empowerment measure includes looking at the factors of who keeps the household earnings and who has a say in household expenditures. These indicators cover both ownership and decision-making. The other indicators include control in terms of self-reliance (i.e., can women support themselves without their husband's support?), control as decision-making (i.e., who has the final say in making decisions about a variety of issues?); and control as choice (i.e., choosing own spouse or being consulted in the choice of marriage partner).[64]

As the women exercised control over their choices, they have established that they have left home for "greener pastures." Operationalizing such control over their choice for economic empowerment, how did the decision-making process look like? In most cases, the women would send remittances back home to the most trusted family member, i.e., the mother, father, sister, brother, niece, or nephew. There is no pattern in this manner. However, most of the women have major control on how the remittance will be spent and where it will go. It is not full control as the women

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[63] Kawar, "Gender and Migration," 80.

[64] Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements," 444–45.

normally initiate either a consensus-based or consultative manner of decision-making as part of their family dynamics. As the family needs are largely shouldered by the family breadwinner, the MDWs engage in a process of negotiation and renegotiation so that remittances are redesignated properly. For example, from day-to-day household needs, the remittances (or savings) may be redesignated to family emergencies, i.e., sudden death or hospitalization of a family member or the wedding of a brother, among others. As one of the women noted, *"Hindi ko matiis, hindi ko matanggihan"* (How can I refuse when they need my help?). There is willingness to negotiate, renegotiate, and sacrifice for the sake of others, particularly those who are perceived as (more) deprived and disadvantaged.

Part of the decision-making is to set a part of their earning for their own personal needs, to save some, or to invest in small projects, e.g., house repairs, buy real estate, etc. This is an indicator that the gender narratives are shifting from ownership and decision-making to willingness to sacrifice and to self-reliance so that they are able to help, and moreso, enable others. Clearly, there is a recognition of gender empowerment as a crucial aspect in the process of empowering others.

Harnessing the power to change as a consequence of their choices

What were the consequences of the kinds of choices that the women made? Did they lead to strategic life choices carrying out transformatory significance?

As the women navigated through the migration narrative, their choices have implied the possibility of alternatives or the ability to choose otherwise. This section will consider if they have made strategic life choices critical to achieving their hopes and dreams in ways that do not violate other people's capacity to make strategic choices on their own. Some examples of strategic choices (or first-order choices) are choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, who has

custody over children, freedom of movement and association, etc.[65] Empowerment only happens when the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices is available in context where this ability was previously denied.[66]

Strategic life choices

As the women return home, there were changes that they have to navigate through, including changes within themselves and changes in the dynamics of their families. There were also new expectations to manage and many forms of adjustments to contend with. As noted in several studies, the return and reintegration process of migrant workers can be more problematic for women than men (e.g., socio-psychological effects, family relationships, financial difficulties, and employment-related problems).[67] However, it is worth noting how the women continued to make strategic choices given the context that certain powers were previously denied to them.

The choice to be an MDW, as an independent decision, is a choice to be self-reliant. The women moved from a state of unemployment to employment, from being unskilled to gaining new skill sets, and from dependence to independence. For some, this extends to being capable and competent from being incapable and incompetent. When asked *"Saan mas mahirap ang buhay, doon o dito?"* (Which situation is harder to handle, here or overseas?), everyone asserted that despite the demands of hard labor (and misfortunes) in their workplace abroad, life back home is still more difficult. Lila said, *"Dito po. Hindi nga ako nahihirapan sa trabaho dito pero mas naghihirap naman sa kawalan ng kita at pangangailangan sa buhay."* (I may not suffer physically here, yet I suffer much more for the lack of income and basic

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[65]   Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements," 437.

[66]   Ibid.

[67]   Kawar, "Gender and Migration," 75.

resources to survive.) Yan thought more specifically: *"Kahit naman mahirap 'yung trabaho doon, meron pong sahod na hinihintay. Hindi katulad dito. Kasi dito, nakikita mo yung anak mo, nanghihingi ng pagkain pero wala kang maibigay. Ang sakit ng gan'un sa magulang."* (Even if life is hard there, as long as I am earning, it is okay with me. It's harder when my children come to ask for food and I do not have anything to give them. That's hard to bear as a parent.) Fara, on the other hand, is cynical in saying *"Mas madali ang buhay doon dahil may kita ka, samantalang dito, mahirap mag-*apply *ng trabaho ang Muslim na naka-*hijab. *Gusto kong magtrabaho para sa sarili ko at huwag umasa sa iba."* (Life there is better, while here, it's hard to have the same employment opportunity as a Muslim woman wearing a *hijab.* I want to work so I can help myself and not to depend on others.) Nur quipped, *"Mas maayos ang kalagayan ko doon kumpara sa kahirapan sa probinsya."* (My situation there is better compared to the poverty back home.) In a deeper sense, it becomes a choice against the cycle of poverty and the forms of disempowerment that comes along with it that the women were called to respond.

The choice to leave home for the sake of others, i.e., the family's collective welfare and solidarity, implies a kind of enabling which is opposite to how traditional family roles perceive women. While at home, they are dependent on the head of the family who typically holds the purse and has the control over resources. As returning WMWs though, the women are now looked upon as dependable members of the family while sharing the responsibility in addressing the family's strategic needs. As a consequence, they are accorded an increased social status, recognizing how their own economic empowerment has influenced their family's economic empowerment and the honor that comes with it. Sai stated, *"Ginawa ko talaga ito para sa pagmamahal sa pamilya ko. Minsan doon, hindi ako makakain kasi iniisip ko kung anong kinakain nila. Kaya tiniis ko na magsakripisyo para sa kanila."* (I have been motivated by love for my family. I can't eat well even if the food is good because I have been thinking about them, wondering if they are also eating. I am willing to sacrifice for them.)

The choice to cultivate new aspirations for oneself and others is another strategic choice that springs out of the migration narrative.

As the women are enabled socially and economically, they are able to establish long-term hopes and dreams against the backdrop of temporary labor migration. This includes choosing to go back as MDWs or as skilled workers so they are able to act upon their new aspirations and achieve them. As Mara hopes, "*Sana dito sa bago kong kontrata ay matapos na ang aming bahay dahil ʻdi naman sapat ang kinikita ng asawa ko. Pagkatapos ay sa business naman para ʻdi na ʻko babalik pa. Siguro isang kontrata pa, tapos tama na.*" (May it be that in this new contract (of two years), we would finish building our small house as the income of my husband is insufficient. I also plan to save so we can establish a new business, so that I won't need to go back anymore. Maybe another contract after this would be enough.) While Fara stated, "*Sana pagkabalik ko ay* skilled jobs *naman para mas mataas ang kita. Dahil gusto kong bumili ng maliit na lupa para maging niyogan at mag-alaga ng mga isda. Plano ko din magpundar ng maliit na* business *para dito na lang ako.*" (I hope that my experience as an MDW would give me new opportunities to be employed in skilled jobs so I would have a bigger earning. I hope to invest in a small property, maybe a piece of land where we can have a fishpond and coconut produce. I also plan to establish a small business so I can work here already.)

The choice to take greater control over their life choices also reflects a sense of growing spirituality among the women as they hope to become better Muslim women. For some of them, going to Saudi Arabia (or to other countries in the West Asian region) provides huge opportunities for spiritual growth as they live among the Muslim *ummah* (community) and fulfill their spiritual obligations freely, i.e., doing *salah* (prayer), *zakat* (almsgiving), *sawm* (fasting during Ramadan), and *hajj* (pilgrimage), which are part of the five pillars of Islam. For Fara, this is part of her ultimate dream after being an MDW for six years. She said, "This has been my dream, to go to Mecca and do pilgrimage. Then to Madina for communal prayer. This is my dream for my parents first, then for myself. Now, I have fulfilled these dreams." Being in the Middle East is synonymous to having Muslim employers and to be one with the Muslim community and culture.

As Kabeer noted, "these strategic choices help frame the other, second-order, less consequential choices, which may be important for the quality of life but do not constitute its defining parameters."[68]

Transformatory significance

The strategic choices made for the sake of others, to be employed, to cultivate new aspirations, and to take greater control over life choices were choices made along the spaces of disempowerment in the context of feminized narrative. As the women gained an increased social status and increased decision-making, to what extent did these choices provide the women with pathways and potentials to transform prevailing inequalities (or other forms of disempowerment) back home and in the workplace?

Functioning achievements are those achievements embodying meaningful choices.[69] These meaningful choices facilitated these movements: from poverty to some clear forms of economic empowerment, from subordinate members of household to self-reliant and dependable members, from being incapable to being capable, from having limited skills to gaining new skill sets, from inexperience to becoming wiser through their encounters and experiences, from dependence to independence, from fear to courage, from a nominal believer to becoming better Muslim women, and from being voiceless to becoming influencers and enablers. In short, the women's access to economic and social resources in the migration process helped enhance their ability to exercise agency—not just as effective agency, but moreso as transformative agency.

For example, there were glimpses of resistance and refusal as well as withdrawals and accommodations that the women exercised against disempowering socio-economic and socio-political structures. The women have resisted poverty by choosing to work and earn. They

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68 Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements," 437.

69 Ibid.

have refused to be non-literate and inexperienced by finding ways to learn and adapt. As a community, they have accommodated the meaningful transformations brought by the migration experience. They have also grown through their willingness to sacrifice and abilities to embrace change as they communicate and negotiate with the power structures around them.

Ami had only a few years of Madrasah education, so aside from Arabic, she does not know how to read or write in English. She is happy though that by working as an MDW, she has learned how to read and write in English. In fact, she has had five employers as an MDW. Meanwhile, Nur thinks that after 17 years of being an MDW, *"Kuntento na 'ko. Natupad ko man ang mga pangarap ko o hindi, kuntento na ako dahil sa aking malawak na karanasan bilang DH."* (I am content. Whether my dreams were fulfilled or not, I am content simply for having a rich experience as an MDW.) In the words of Yan, *"Wala kang ibang makakapitan sa oras ng kahirapan o takot kundi si Allah. Nu'ng nandu'n ako, wala akong mga kaibigan na puwedeng lapitan. Kaya nagdadasal na lang ako."* (You have no one to depend on in times of fear and suffering except Allah. While I was there—at workplace—I have no family or friends to run to. My only option is to pray.) These migration narratives seem to reveal how the women have transformed some of the prevailing inequalities by quietly standing against the power structures—finding strength from within and from each other, bearing each other's burden, peacefully accepting one's fate, and trusting God.

Pathways to empowerment: Enabling the enablers

As the women's agency reflected their strategic life choices and the extent to which it had transformatory potential, their access to resources as potential (rather than actual choices) are validated, and their achievement to transform prevailing inequalities in resources and agency reflected more possibilities (*see* Figure 2 *on next page*), this section explores some pathways to empowerment. These are avenues where the women's ability to exercise transformative agency can be nurtured and further strengthened.

FIGURE 2 Navigating through the possibilities and potentials

Navigate the Power Within
- Bangsamoro women
- Spaces of disempowerment
- Spaces of empowerment

Negotiate the Power with Others
- Access to employment resources
- Response to social resources
- Control over economic resources

Harness the Power to Change
- Strategic life choices
- Transformatory significance

Enabling the powerless and voiceless

The first pathway is to appropriate the "power within," enabling the women so they can enable themselves and enable others. This is specifically a recommendation to fill some gaps in institutional support which the women's natural support groups can further complement. In these spaces, the migration narrative would take on the forms of transformative narratives, family care narratives, and healing narratives to affirm the processes of transformation, empowerment, and healing that comes from inner strength and power.

There are existing models of resource centers that are carrying out some of the best practices in accessing the "power within." They come from partnerships among civil society, religious organizations, and government institutions.

(1) *Women centers.* This is an avenue where the personal development of WMWs would be addressed, including access to services, resources to basic rights, skills and values training, and documenting cases of abuse and discrimination, among others. This has the potential to serve as the women's socio-psychological support system, complementing what the existing support structures have already provided.

(2) *Family centers.* This is where the families of WMWs would be supported and cared for given their unique needs and

dynamics. There are now existing family centers in a few key cities in the Philippines. But with the 2.3 million Filipino migrant workers,[70] it's a critical need to enable more enablers such as these family centers. If every critical location could have one, that would be a huge support to the families of WMWs.

(3) *Counseling centers.* This is a specialized center that can address more specific and deeper needs of WMWs which are related to their migration experience. For example, basic return and reintegration debriefing sessions are crucial in processing the socio-psychological needs of each WMW, particularly those coming from MDW experiences.

Accessing institutional support

There are institutions that are actively assisting women in the migration process and experience. These are the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO), the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO), the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), the Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration (OWWA), and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), among other key players.

This is to appropriate the "power with others" or the role of accountability to one another to ensure the women's access to existing institutional services and support out of policies and partnerships. In fact, our migrant worker support infrastructure is considered one of the best in Asia, if not globally.[71] Some specific avenues to further enable the women are:

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[70] Bersales, "Total Number of OFWs Estimated at 2.2 Million."

[71] Commission on Filipinos Overseas, "Is there a Need for a Single Department to Cater to the Needs of Overseas Filipinos?," *Migration Standpoint*, Policy Briefs of the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, No. 02-2017 (September 2017), 2. https://www.cfo.gov.ph/images/publications/DOFW_7Sept2017.pdf.

(1) *Key players' strategic presence.* A recommendation for the key players in the migration process of WMWs is to establish strategic presence via one-stop spots or locations where their basic services can be easily accessed in each regional unit of the country. They need to establish strong communication campaigns (e.g., online presence, posters, advertisements, etc.) where their critical roles are explained clearly and are properly disseminated.

(2) *OSRCs and FWRCs.* In relation to the protection and reintegration processes of migrant workers, there is a critical need to increase the presence of One-Stop Migration Resource Centers (OSRCs) in the country and the Filipino Workers Reintegration Centers (FWRCs) in some embassies abroad.[72] These are places providing support such as skills retooling, legal assistance, refuge in times of needs, and for accessing other critical forms of support and assistance.

(3) *Financial literacy training.* To ensure that WMWs have access to financial institutions and better channels for sending and receiving remittances,[73] as well as a better understanding of this access to and control over their financial resources, the pre-employment orientation seminar (PEOS) provided by POEA and the pre-departure orientation seminar (PDOS) provided by OWWA should include efficient training on financial literacy and other financial support systems in partnership with key financial institutions, if possible.

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[72] In 2010, four One-Stop Resource Centers (OSRCs) were placed in four provinces in the country through the Joint Program for Youth, Employment, and Migration (JPYEM). Their mandate is to "augment the DOLE's reintegration program for migrants and local employment matching of the local governments through its Public Employment Service Office (PESO) to serve as a repository and an action center for migrant families and the youth," among others (Encinas-Franco 2015, 62).

[73] Fleury, "Understanding Women and Migration," 32.

(4)   *Inventory of skills acquired by WMWs.* There is a critical need to look into the pool of skills and values that many WMWs have acquired throughout their many years of temporary labor migration. This skills inventory could be used for purposes of local job placement and building a database of human resources in various communities. This could be part of the rich processes of capacity building and reintegration of returnees or returning migrant workers that government institutions should deeply consider.

(5)   *Deepening inter-institution accountability.* To strengthen their accountability with one another and with the migrant workers and their families, key stakeholders such as local government units (LGUs), civil society, private recruitment offices, primary government agencies, and migrant workers' families should be provided avenues to strengthen consultative and empowering partnerships to ensure that WMWs are protected, their needs are heard, and their active participation in decision-making are facilitated. Families should strongly take part in the migration process in this manner. The PEOS, PDOS, and consultative processes should ensure that there is transparency, open communication, and immediate action. As currently practiced, the airing and addressing of grievances, for example, takes a long time as inter-institution relationships and accountability are weak.[74]

Strengthening existing policies and partnerships

As more Filipino Muslim WMWs are becoming part of the feminized narrative, how can we appropriate the "power to protect" both to the Philippine government and the BARMM? Here are some critical recommendations for further study:

(1)   A recommendation is to comprehensively identify the key players in the feminized narrative of the Filipino Muslim

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[74] Commission on Filipinos Overseas, "Is there a Need for a Single Department," 7.

WMWs and to properly distinguish their key roles and overlapping responsibilities in the migration process. Connected to this is the need to look into updates on the boundaries of the migration process and procedures for WMWs as new international policies and partnerships are enforced. It is crucial to identify how these relationships are interconnected to foster strategic and transformatory functions.

(2) Another recommendation is to make available the extent of protection and reintegration policies the Philippine government has established and reinforced. These must be implemented in such a manner that key stakeholders, including the women and their families, are informed and enabled so that they can enable others as well.

(3) A final recommendation is to look into how the establishment of the BARMM could provide contextual terms and conditions to the processes of recruitment, release, tracking, protecting, and reintegrating Filipino Muslims WMWs. As the BARMM POEA and other key players prepare their long-term plans for new partnerships in the destination places of the WMWs, we must look into how are they enabling themselves so that they can protect and empower the women and their families in return.

Renegotiating hopes and dreams

A final key recommendation concerns paying attention to Filipino Muslim WMWs' potential strategic choice to stay home after the migration experience. How does it look like to renegotiate their hopes and dreams to include establishing of resources, cultivating new aspirations, and taking greater control over life choices when they are back home?

One of the women's aspirations is for the Philippine government—through the BARMM Transitory Authority (BTA) and other government agencies—to take heed of their plea for decent quality jobs for women coming from disadvantaged places like the BARMM,

while providing capacity building measures in order to gain skills and values that are important to paid employment conditions. This is to ensure that they will be fully integrated, protected, and empowered in the community alongside men in their households. Another aspiration of the women is to have a strong financial support system that will enable them to establish their financial base (i.e., building small businesses, or buying a tricycle or boat, etc.) and reintegrate at home. In this manner, the alternatives for the women have expanded. This represents a battlecry for strong socio-economic and political support to these expanded aspirations from within the women's social structure. Much wider support would be a necessity for an in-depth analysis on how these socio-economic and political conditions continue to encourage Bangsamoro women to pursue temporary labor migration and on how these conditions can be properly addressed.

At the heart of these pathways are the women's hopes and dreams (i.e., decent jobs, social protection, integration, etc.), which fire the their ability to exercise transformative agency from within and towards the socio-economic and political power structures around them (*see* Figure 3 *below*) so that they become enabled nurturers and enablers. As the cycle of poverty goes on, the migration narrative continues as well. It is hoped that the process of enabling enablers be likewise strengthened, reinforced, and intensified.

FIGURE 3 Pathways to empowering the BARMM WMWs
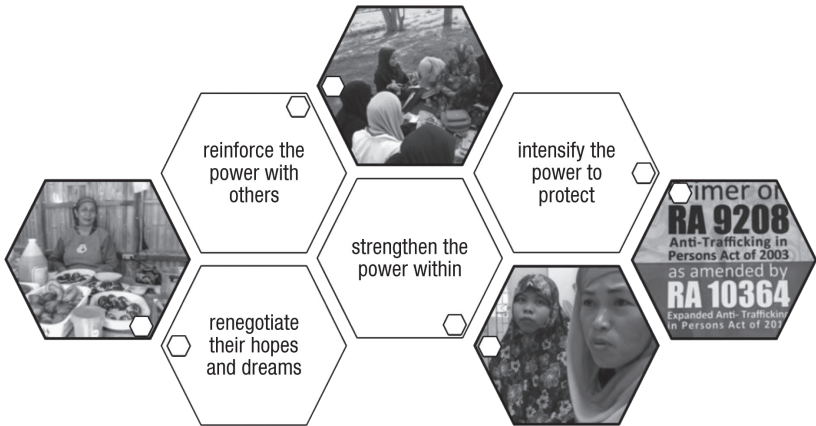
Concluding remarks

This paper presents the transformative migration narrative of the Bangsamoro women migrant workers. This is also an invitation to share their aspirations and to be available in joining them along the intersections of temporary labor migration. What has been a transitory phenomenon in response to temporary shortages and surpluses of labor or a temporary measure to help alleviate the poverty of Filipino families now seem to be a growing struggle for a new self-determinism for Bangsamoro families—that of nurturing, protecting, and enabling their WMWs.[75]

These women have gained new values in life (i.e., work ethics, value of relationships, etc.) and life skills that would help them be productive and live more meaningful personal lives (e.g., hard work, rest, and recreation). They have persisted, sacrificed, and became resilient for themselves and for others. These women have likewise become stronger than they ought to be, better than they hoped to be, and empowered than anyone have thought they would be.

For many Muslims around the world, the *sa'y*—running from Safa to Marwa four times and from Marwa to Safa three times during pilgrimage—is one of the obligatory acts of the *Umrah al-Tamattu* and the *Hajj*. As Islamic traditions tell, Hajar ran between these two hills in Mecca for seven times in order to find water for her son Ishma'il, whom she was still breastfeeding.[76] The Qur'an and Islamic traditions also stress that when the pilgrims do the *sa'y*, they endeavor or make effort for something that they desire, which, in turn, will surely be granted. The reason being, "And that man can have nothing but what he does (good or bad)."[77]

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[75] Cheery D. Orozco, "Diaspora and Identities: Transformative Stories of Filipino Muslim Women," (master's thesis, Institute of Islamic Studies, University of the Philippines Diliman, 2009), 164.

[76] Abul-Fazl Ezzati, "Hajj (Pilgrimage)," in *An Introduction to the History of the Spread of Islam* (London: News and Media Ltd., 1978): 199–200.

[77] An-Najm [53]:39, quoted in Ezzati "Hajj (Pilgrimage)," 199–200.

Islam is the harmonious combination of submission and endeavor. Hajar did not wait for a miracle, but tried to find water in a desolate desert without losing hope. The water came miraculously from an unexpected place: under Ishma'il's feet. That water, known as Zamzam, continues to meet the needs of millions of pilgrims every year, even after so many centuries. As Ezzati asserted, this miracle was the result of a combination of sincere belief, confidence in, and submission to God, of endeavor (humanity's duty), and of never being desperate. People act and God creates the result. This is why it has unanimously been said: "God is not found by looking for Him, but those who have found Him are those who have looked for Him."[78]

It is hoped that as many Filipino Muslim women choose not to wait for a miracle in the desolateness of their life back home and go instead to the Middle East—perhaps as an obligation so that they can sustain the life of their children back home—they find "water" and what it symbolizes to them through their deepest needs. As they move from one desolate desert to another, may they hold on and not lose hope for it is in these most desolate of places that life also springs out miraculously. May the women not give up in seeking for "water" and for the God who gave them "water."

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[78] Ezzati, "Hajj (Pilgrimage)," 199–200.

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