Government officials’ representation of nurses and migration in the Philippines

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During the past few decades, the nursing workforce has been in crisis in the United States and around the world. Many health care organizations in developed countries recruit nurses from other countries to maintain acceptable staffing levels. The Philippines is the centre of a large, mostly private nursing education sector and an important supplier of nurses worldwide, despite its weak domestic health system and uneven distribution of health workers. This situation suggests a dilemma faced by developing countries that train health professionals for overseas markets: how do government officials balance competing interests in overseas health professionals’ remittances and the need for well-qualified health professional workforces in domestic health systems? This study uses case studies of two recent controversies in nursing education and migration to examine how Philippine government officials represent nurses when nurse migration is the subject of debate. The study finds that Philippine government officials cast nurses as global rather than domestic providers of health care, implicating them in development more as sources of remittance income than for their potential contributions to the country’s health care system. This orientation is motivated not simply by the desire for remittance revenues, but also as a way to cope with overproduction and lack of domestic opportunities for nurses in the Philippines.

Keywords Health professionals, globalization, politics

KEY MESSAGES

- This study examines Philippine government officials’ efforts to manage priorities of economic development and migrant nurses’ rights using case studies of two recent controversies (a licensure exam leakage and the inclusion of nurses in trade agreement with Japan).

- Philippine government officials discuss nurses primarily as export products and cast them as global rather than domestic professionals.

- The massive overproduction of nurses puts political pressure on Philippine government officials, who describe a sense of ‘responsibility’ to seek and protect overseas markets for Filipino nurses who cannot find work in the Philippines.

Introduction

In the face of a worldwide shortage of nurses, many health care organizations in developed countries recruit nurses from developing countries to maintain acceptable staffing levels. Source countries manage the emigration of their health professionals to varying degrees. While health workers leave some countries with little state involvement, the governments of other countries—such as China (Xu 2006) and Indonesia
Brush (1993). Filipinos represented 80% of participants in the migration of Filipino nurses was to the US during the 1950s. In fact, the first large-scale migration of nurses are well-qualified to work in English-speaking receiving markets (Choy 2003; Brush 2010). In the Philippines, the nursing profession is virtually synonymous in the case of health workers, who have an important domestic development function as health care providers. Source country governments are sometimes hesitant to acknowledge their role in seeking overseas markets for health workers. The Chinese government, for example, has labelled its policy of training nurses for export as ‘international labour co-operation’ to minimize the intent of the policy and to maintain the appearance of commitment to domestic health care (Xu 2006; Yeates 2009).

The Chinese government’s attempt to manage the image of its export policy highlights the dilemmas faced by government officials in countries whose health professions education sectors focus on overseas markets. When the overseas orientation of health professions education is the subject of controversy, how do government officials react, and how do they seek to influence the discussion? Do they seek to use situations of controversy to call for changes to existing practices, or do they seek to justify and perpetuate the status quo? What political and economic circumstances motivate their reactions?

The purpose of this study is to examine how Philippine government officials frame public discourse about nurses and nurse migration in response to two recent controversies in nursing education and migration: a leakage of answers on the Philippine nursing licensure examination and the inclusion of nurses in the Japan–Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA). The cases illustrate the political pressures faced by government officials in countries that export health professionals, and show how Philippine government officials’ framing of public discourse about nurses and nurse migration in response to these pressures shapes the material and ideological conditions for migration.

Background

In the Philippines, the nursing profession is virtually synonymous with migration; as of 2004, over 85% of Philippines-trained nurses (about 150,000 nurses) were employed overseas (Aitken et al. 2004). The overseas orientation of the Philippine nursing sector is fuelled by several factors. First, standardized English-language bachelor’s level education established under US colonial rule in the early 20th century ensures that Filipino nurses are well-qualified to work in English-speaking receiving markets (Choy 2003; Brush 2010). In fact, the first large-scale migration of Filipino nurses was to the US during the 1950s and 1960s under the US’s Exchange Visitor Program (EVP) (Brush 1993). Filipinos represented 80% of participants in this programme by the late 1960s, including an ‘overwhelming majority’ of exchange nurses (Choy 2003).

Secondly, overseas markets for Filipino nurses expanded in the 1970s as nurses were deployed to the Middle East under President Ferdinand Marcos’ labour export programme (Choy 2003; Brush 2010). The programme, established as a temporary solution to foreign debt and domestic unemployment, has become an institutionalized part of the country’s economy (Ball 1997; Lorenzo et al. 2007). As of 2008, an estimated 8.2 million Filipinos (nearly 25% of the country’s workforce) lived overseas (Ruiz 2008). Reaching over US$19 billion in 2009 (World Bank 2010), revenue from overseas workers’ remittances exceeds direct foreign investment and other foreign private resource flows into the Philippines (Burgess and Haksar 2005).

Finally, because of the popularity of nursing as a way for Filipinos to access overseas job markets (Brush and Sochalski 2007), the nursing education sector has grown into a centre of economic activity in recent years. The number of schools has grown from 40 in the 1980s to 470 in 2006 (Lorenzo et al. 2007). The vast majority of nursing schools are private, and most nursing education is privately financed (Overland 2005; Masselink and Lee 2010). The rapid growth of nursing education has raised concerns about declining quality due to a shortage of instructors and clinical training venues (Hicap 2005), which the government’s Commission on Higher Education (CHEd) has addressed by imposing a moratorium on new nursing schools in 2004 (Sparaco 2005) and attempting to close down poorly performing schools. Its efforts have been stymied by political pressure (Overland 2005).

Ball (1996) has argued that the Philippine nursing sector’s focus on training nurses for overseas employment is a ‘mechanism for national dissolution’ because it undermines the country’s domestic health care system. While remittances from migrant nurses might help the Philippines’ domestic economy, the focus on overseas markets rather than the domestic health system makes it more difficult for the state to provide health care for its citizens, undermining its legitimacy and its mandate to pursue broader development goals. This situation places government officials in an awkward position: on one hand, the Philippine government seeks to promote Filipino labour in overseas markets and benefits from migrant remittances; on the other, it is responsible for regulating the nursing education sector and ensuring that the country has a qualified workforce to provide health care for its citizens.

Two recent controversies in nursing education and migration—a leakage of answers on the June 2006 nursing licensure examination, and a provision in the Japan–Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) allowing Filipino nurses to work in Japan—provide an opportunity to examine how Philippine government officials manage this ‘crisis of legitimacy’ through their representation of nurses and nurse migration in public discussion.

The first controversy erupted in June 2006, when a group of nursing licensure examinees filed a complaint alleging that a licensure exam review centre had leaked questions to examinees. The complaint caused concern that the leakage would damage the international reputation of the Philippines’ nursing education system (Conde 2006) and received intense media coverage for several months while policy makers debated how
to respond. The Professional Regulation Commission and President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo eventually decided to offer a retake of the affected tests after the United States threatened to refuse visa screening to affected nurses.

The second controversy began when the Japan–Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement was signed by President Arroyo and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in September 2006. The JPEPA includes provisions on agricultural products, electronics and other products as well as the entry of Filipino nurses and caregivers into Japan. It is Japan’s first economic partnership agreement to provide for the entry of foreign workers (Yu-Jose 2008). The agreement allows a limited number of Filipino nurses to stay in Japan indefinitely if they acquire a Japanese license. The inclusion of nurses in the JPEPA was the subject of widespread debate in the Philippines as it came up for Senate ratification in August 2007. Although government-sponsored newspaper advertisements hailed the agreement as an opportunity for the Philippine economy, it was strongly opposed by the ‘Junk JPEPA’ coalition, including the Philippine Nurses Association and labour unions, which lobbied the Senate not to ratify the agreement because of concerns about the potential for forced movement into sex work, and transparency and monitoring of recruitment (Vilog 2006).

Despite these protests and opposition from some Japanese stakeholders, the JPEPA was ratified by the Philippine Senate in October 2008. As of 2011, only two Filipino nurses have qualified as fully licensed nurses in Japan under the JPEPA. The small number is due in large part to the fact that Filipino nurses are required to take the licensure exam in Japanese, a requirement that has caused most of them fail the exam (Diaz 2011). An additional 240 nurses have entered Japan as nursing trainees, and 229 have entered as caregivers (Diaz 2011). Kaelin (2011) argues that health professional migration is politically ‘made’—it is not simply a result of economic imbalances between sending and receiving countries. In other words, the nurses affected in the two controversies do not migrate to countries such as the US and Japan simply because they can earn higher salaries there than in the Philippines. Their movement would not be possible without political ‘making’—that is, the creation of policies and media representations that define what is at stake with respect to health professional migration and what responses are possible—in sending and receiving countries. This study seeks to understand how government officials in the Philippines seek to ‘make’ nurse migration by examining how they manage tradeoffs between nurses’ right to migrate and the government’s mandate to build a sustainable health care system, and between the government’s competing desires to expand overseas markets for nurses and to protect the welfare of nurses working overseas.

The particular tradeoffs faced by government officials in the Philippines are specific to the country’s socio-political, economic and historical context, but they are likely representative of the dilemmas faced by governments of countries that train health professionals for overseas employment. By highlighting how Philippine government officials frame the nurse migration issue in response to the particular political and economic pressures they face, our analysis lays the groundwork for future research comparing the political ‘making’ of health professional migration in multiple source countries. The findings of the study can also be instructive for reflexive government policy-makers in health professional source countries, as well as global policy-makers who seek to develop policies to manage health professional migration that consider the full range of forces (including source country politics) that influence it.

Methods

This study used retrospective analyses of the nursing licensure exam leakage and the JPEPA nursing provision cases to examine how nurses and nurse migration are represented by Philippine government officials. Each case study involved two types of data: newspaper articles and key informant interviews. The use of two comparative cases and different data sources may reveal the consistencies, as well as inconsistencies, in policy discussions and enable us to identify the underlying logics of policy decisions (Yin 2009).

The first phase of each case study was a frame analysis of government officials’ discussion of the controversy in three major English-language Philippine newspapers. Frame analysis was introduced by Goffman (1974) as the study of ‘schemata of interpretation’ by which people organize and package information. Frame analysis has been used to examine public debates of a variety of policy issues, including nuclear power (Gamson and Modigliani 1989), climate change (Hoffman and Ventresca 1999), breast cancer (Andsager and Powers 1999) and abortion (Terkildsen et al. 1998; Andsager 2000).

Newspapers have been used to examine policy-making discussions because they have significant ‘agenda-setting power’, whether or not they are widely read by the masses (Florentino-Hofileña 2004). The three newspapers examined—the Manila Times, the Philippine Daily Inquirer and the Philippine Star—were chosen because they are among the most widely read English-language newspapers in the Philippines (Ables 2003), represent a variety of political perspectives and have easily accessible online archives. The Manila Times (which is owned by family members of an Arroyo administration official) tends to be pro-administration, while the Philippine Daily Inquirer has a reputation of being more critical of government policies (personal interview with Philippine Daily Inquirer editor, 2007). The Philippine Star is perceived as more neutral with a ‘sober’ reporting style (Coronel 2000).

Searches of each newspaper’s online archives (the Manila Times at www.manilatimes.net, the Philippine Daily Inquirer at www.inquirer.net, and the Philippine Star at www.philstar.com) between June 2006 and December 2008 were conducted using the following search terms: for the licensure exam leakage controversy, ‘nursing licensure leak’, ‘nursing licensure retake’, ‘nursing licensure scandal’, ‘nursing board leak’, ‘nursing board retake’ and ‘nursing board scandal’; and for the JPEPA controversy, ‘JPEPA nurses’ and ‘Japan nurses’. Automated searches were supplemented by hand searches of each newspaper’s archives. After duplicate, irrelevant and Filipino-language articles were deleted, the final study sample for the nursing licensure exam leakage case included 365 articles (133 from the Manila Times, 161 from the Philippine Daily Inquirer and 71 from the Philippine Star) and the sample for the JPEPA case included 176 articles (68 from the Manila Times, 51 from the
The articles were imported into ATLAS.ti for analysis. Frames were identified using an inductive approach informed by Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) ‘signature matrix’ method. The initial analysis focused on six idea elements: metaphors (analogies used to describe the situation), depictions (characterizations or representations of subjects), catchphrases (slogans or key words), roots (attribution of a problem to a particular cause), consequences (effects of the issue or problem) and appeals to principle (links to a set of values or moral claims: Gamson and Lasch 1983; Creed et al. 2002). Similar idea elements were then grouped together into broader frames that displayed consistent collective action functions: problem diagnosis, attribution of responsibility and recommended responses (Benford and Snow 2000; Creed et al. 2002). Once all of the frames were identified, each article was coded to indicate the frame(s) that were present in the article and the sources or ‘sponsors’ with which the frames were associated.

The frame analysis of newspaper articles was supplemented with in-person interviews with five key informants, including officials from the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO, a government agency tasked with upholding the interests of Filipino emigrants abroad), the Board of Nursing (BON, responsible for nursing licensure and regulation), the Department of Health (two informants) and the Philippine Senate. The interviews were conducted in the Philippines in October 2008. The informants were chosen for their knowledge of both controversies and to represent a range of government agency perspectives with respect to nurse migration. Interviews were conducted in English. For the licensure exam leakage case, interview topics included explanations for the volume of news coverage, priorities associated with policy responses to the leakage, and key individuals or organizations that influenced the response. For the JPEPA case, interview topics included history of Filipino nurse migration to Japan, key individuals or organizations in the pursuit of the nursing provision and policy priorities with respect to the provision. Interviews were tape recorded with participants’ permission, transcribed and imported into ATLAS.ti software for coding and analysis.

The interviews were coded first through line-by-line reading using a codebook developed from the frame analysis, with emergent codes added as they were found in the interview data. We collapsed coded elements in the interview data into major categories (analogous to the frame labels used in the newspaper article analysis), and used sorting memos to generate descriptions of how informants defined problems, attributed responsibility, discussed the implications of the problem and prescribed solutions for each controversy (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We examined differences between key informants’ discussions of the controversies and how government officials were quoted defining and elaborating the problems in news coverage.

Findings
The licensure exam leakage and JPEPA case studies revealed similar tensions in Philippine government officials’ representation of nurses and migration in public discussion: in both cases, officials attempted to balance concerns about economic development (the role of nurses as an export product) with concerns about protecting migrant nurses’ rights. Findings from the key informant interviews suggested that while government officials expressed sympathy for nurses’ concerns, their primary priority—and the goal of the eventual policy responses to the licensure exam leakage and JPEPA controversies—was to protect overseas markets for Filipino nurses. These choices were motivated not simply by the desire for remittance revenue, but also out of a desire to provide employment options for Filipino nurses in the face of overproduction and lack of domestic opportunities.

Licensure exam leakage
Government officials were quoted in 188 of the 365 articles about the licensure exam leakage: 74 of 133 total Manila Times articles (56%), 72 of 161 Philippine Daily Inquirer articles (45%) and 42 of 71 Philippine Star articles (59%). Differences between the frequency with which the three newspapers quoted government officials in articles about the licensure exam leakage approached statistical significance ($P = 0.06$), with the ‘critical’ Philippine Daily Inquirer quoting government officials least frequently and the ‘neutral’ Philippine Star quoting government officials most frequently. Among the articles that quoted government officials, the frames that government officials used most frequently were an ‘economic-image’ frame (144 articles), a ‘nurses’ rights’ frame (83 articles), a ‘leadership’ frame (58 articles) and a ‘professionalism—health and safety’ frame (37 articles). Government officials were quoted using the ‘economic-image’ and ‘professionalism—health and safety’ frames most frequently in the Manila Times (81% and 26% of articles respectively), the ‘nurses’ rights’ frame most frequently in the Philippine Daily Inquirer (42% of articles) and the ‘leadership’ frame most frequently in the Philippine Star (43% of articles). None of the differences in frame distribution across the three newspapers was statistically significant.

Government officials employing the economic-image frame described the leakage as a threat to the Philippines’ economic interests by raising suspicion about the ‘integrity’ and qualifications of Filipino nurses overseas:

‘[Senator Richard] Gordon…expressed fears that if the examinees who took the tests are passed, the image of Filipino nurses would suffer… By nullifying the results of the exams, Gordon said, the government would show the world “how serious we are in establishing the integrity and credibility of our nurses. This is the best way for our country.”’ (Gordon urges new exams for nurses, Manila Times 2006a)

Officials employing this frame called for a retake of the licensure exam as a matter of ‘national interest’, the only way to ‘redeem’ the reputation of Filipino nurses abroad.

On the other hand, some government officials used the language of nurses’ rights to reject the proposed retake, arguing that it imposed an unfair and excessive burden on ‘innocent’ examinees. For example, during the immediate aftermath of the leakage a presidential spokesman suggested that a ‘retake is unnecessary and unfair, particularly for those who come from..."
poor families that had worked hard for their young ones to enter this noble profession’ (Mediavilla 2006). Other officials invoked nurses’ rights to defend the retake, suggesting that it was the only way to give them the opportunity that they deserved.

Government officials also discussed the leakage as a failure of leadership by regulatory bodies such as the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) and the Board of Nursing (BON): ‘The PRC should have seen this coming. There will always be rotten individuals who will exploit the vulnerability of the examination, and profit by the desperation of a number of examinees to make the grade so they can quickly search for greener pastures abroad’ (Porcalla 2006). One official faulted the BON for corruption that preceded the leakage: ‘It is downright anomalous for members of the Nursing Board or other professional boards to be under the employ of supposedly independent review centers’ (Porcalla and Mendez 2006). Some officials suggested that the failures of these organizations caused the entire licensure system to be called into question.

They called for the resignation of involved officials and reorganization of regulatory bodies to restore the credibility of the licensure exam process.

Finally, some government officials described the leakage in terms of concerns that nurses involved in the leakage could endanger patients’ health and safety: ‘...Since nurses are charged with the health, medical needs and life of their patients, here and abroad, it is essential that the PRC ensures that licensed nurses are competent and fully equipped to perform the responsibilities of the nursing profession’ (‘Nurses trapped in limbo’, Manila Times 2006b). While some government officials raised these concerns immediately after the leakage, the professionalism frame re-emerged when the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools threatened to block examinees from working in the United States because of the uncertainty of their qualifications.

In the key informant interviews, government informants echoed many of the same concerns invoked by government officials in the newspaper coverage of the licensure exam leakage. They described the leakage primarily as an economic problem because it raised concerns about Filipino nurses’ credentials, made the Philippines look like a ‘country of cheats’ and jeopardized overseas work opportunities for Filipino nurses. One informant called the situation and the actions of PRC leaders ‘disgusting’ and noted that they had provoked a sense of ‘outrage’ in the nursing sector. Another informant noted that the leakage exposed corruption among nursing sector leaders, particularly the actions of a nursing school and review centre owner who was criminally charged in the leakage. Since this person was also president of the Philippine Nurses Association at the time, his actions also reflected negatively on the PNA and caused divisions in the nursing sector.

Government informants called for reforms in the PRC licensure system and insisted that a retake of the affected exam was the only way to protect the employability of the affected students and demonstrate that the government had ‘cleaned up’ the process. One Department of Health official criticized the decision to require a retake of the licensure exam only for US-bound nurses as a double standard, stating that all nurses should be held to high testing standards no matter where they intended to work.

One government informant invoked nurses’ rights to pursue overseas employment to defend the decision to offer a retake of the licensure exam:

“So it’s not a question of emotions or not having taken pity on the students, it’s a question of protecting their future, protecting their integrity...And that being so, I have an obligation to see to it that the reputation of the professionals we’re sending to the US retains[s] their credentials. I help protect their integrity. That being so, if I’m able to help protect the integrity of the nurses, especially those going to the US, naturally it would be good in the short and long run, not only for the nurses but also for the Filipinos as a whole.”

Rather than using his authority to ‘protect’ nurses from having to retake the licensure exam, this official described the retake decision as a way of protecting their ability to pursue overseas employment, a right important not only to individual nurses but also to the country.

Despite concerns about the effects of the leakage controversy on the affected students’ job prospects abroad, government informants expressed confidence that it would not affect the long-term marketability of Filipino nurses, whose ‘superior bedside manner’ and excellent English language skills were the key to maintaining their ‘competitive advantage’. One informant stated that while the nursing profession initially lost credibility after the leakage, she hoped that leaders would take advantage of the ‘crisis point’ to ‘uplift the profession’ through improved training and professional development for Filipino nurses.

**JPEPA nursing provision**

Philippine government officials were quoted in 65 of the 176 articles about the JPEPA nursing provision. The ‘pro-administration’ Manila Times quoted government officials least frequently [21 of 68 articles (31%)], while the ‘neutral’ Philippine Star quoted government officials most frequently [26 of 57 articles (45%)].

Among the articles that quoted government officials, the frames they used most frequently were an ‘economic-opportunity’ frame (51 articles) and a ‘nurses’ rights’ frame (34 articles). Government officials were quoted using both the ‘economic-opportunity’ and ‘nurses’ rights’ frames most frequently in the Philippine Star (84% and 54% of articles, respectively). None of the differences in frame distribution across the three newspapers was statistically significant.

Government officials who invoked the economic-opportunity frame suggested that the JPEPA nursing provision was not a problem, but a ‘historic’ opportunity for the Philippines. They touted the two countries’ longstanding ‘close relationship’ and called for the JPEPA to be ratified as a matter of ‘duty’ and ‘national interest’ so that the Philippines could secure its position as a supplier of nurses to Japan. When advocacy groups sought to derail the JPEPA over concerns about migrant nurses’ rights, some government officials echoed their concerns, particularly regarding the JPEPA’s training and Japanese
language requirements. A senator suggested that Japan ‘might have opened up their market for our caregivers and nurses, but they have put up barriers to our entry. It’s like opening their window but putting thick bars in between’ (Domingo and Cabacungan 2007). Another senator faulted government negotiators for not obtaining more benefits for Filipino nurses under the agreement: ‘I don’t know why the government did not negotiate aggressively for our nurses when they are looked up to in the entire world’ (Danao 2007). Other government officials defended the JPEPA’s provisions for Filipino nurses as a ‘good package’ and assured the public that they would be protected under the agreement.

In key informant interviews, government informants invoked the language of the economic-opportunity frame when they argued that the JPEPA was an opportunity for the Philippines to do business with the historically closed Japanese economy:

‘Japan until today is a relatively closed country. They say that they welcome imports, but look—it’s difficult to penetrate the Japanese market. The nuances in Japan are very hard to understand, and you have to be very, very patient. But once you crack it, you will be able to do business with Japan.’"

They represented the JPEPA as inevitable and economically necessary, as one stated:

‘You cannot be an island. Countries trade among countries, between countries. You can’t afford not to trade with Japan—one, it’s a very rich country, and two, there’s a lot of opportunities in Japan…Workers, trade, business…there’s a lot of potential in Japan.’"

One government informant suggested that the JPEPA would lead to cultural exchanges that would have broader economic benefits; she anticipated that the presence of Filipino nurses in Japan would bring Japanese tourists and retirees to the Philippines since “they will have firsthand experience of how it is to relate to Filipinos”.

Another informant responded critically to suggestions that the JPEPA exacerbated ‘brain drain’ of professional nurses in the Philippines:

“Well, always the old refrain. The brain drain, you know, is one constant refrain you hear. But in a country where there is a surplus of supply, what do you do? You have to send them somewhere. If the Philippine market cannot accommodate them and the schools continue churning out professionals, what do you do?…Our growth can’t simply keep up with the demand, so what do you do? So as a government we have to look for other sources where they can be employed…So I’m not at all worried about the so-called ‘brain drain’. We have so much ‘brain’ in this country; we can certainly afford to lose some of them—not to lose them, to share some of them.”

This official maintained that the nursing surplus in the Philippines made finding new markets for nurses a government responsibility rather than a consequence of the migration policy and a problem created by the lax oversight over the nursing education system.

Some government informants rejected concerns raised by anti-JPEPA advocates that the requirement that Filipino nurses learn Japanese to work in Japan was unfair. They described the provision as a natural aspect of working in another country and a way to protect nurses from language-related legal problems:

“The problem is it’s very difficult to ask people to learn if they simply refuse to study. First they should study, they should try and learn. Because…when you go to the US you are required to speak English, so what’s the difference?”

They described language learning as a basic expectation and responsibility of migrant nurses—an aspect of their professional role—rather than an unfair burden. Another government informant encouraged nurses participating in the JPEPA to be “proactive” and “assertive” about what they could offer as professional nurses rather than fearful of being exploited, seeking to benefit professionally from participating in the agreement.

Other government informants suggested that the JPEPA could be altered to require Japanese language training to be offered in the Philippines so that Filipino nurses were prepared to work before they entered Japan, a way of improving the status of Filipino nurses in Japan. One mentioned two particular concerns about how Filipino nurses would be received in Japan: first, the fact that the JPEPA did not treat Filipino nurses working in Japan under the agreement with equal professional status with Japanese nurses. As he put it,.

“I don’t know how Japan calls it, but the Philippines perceives it as much, much lower than a legitimate Japanese nurse. But of course the ego of a Filipino nurse is ‘I am a licensed nurse, I have my competencies, and I can equal with a Japanese nurse.’”

Also, he suggested that Filipino nurses might be received poorly by the Japanese public, noting that Indonesian nurses already working in Japan had experienced “culture shock” because Japanese people were not used to having foreigners taking care of them.

Discussion

The case studies of the licensure exam leakage and JPEPA controversies reveal similar tensions in how Philippine government officials represented nurses and migration. In both cases government officials sought to manage trade-offs between ‘economic’ images of nurses as export products for overseas markets and ‘nurses’ rights’ images of nurses as potential victims in need of protection. They paid relatively little attention to the role of nurses in the domestic health system, instead focusing on concerns about nurses’ role as professionals in overseas markets (ensuring their continued marketability and contribution of remittance income).

In public, government officials often represented themselves simultaneously as marketers of Filipino nurses abroad and protectors of migrant nurses’ rights. In response to the licensure
exam leakage, President Arroyo attempted to balance priorities of protecting the Philippine ‘brand’ abroad and defending the interests of migrant nurses, stating on one hand that a retake of the licensure exam would be ‘unnecessary and unfair’ (Mediavilla 2006) to honest exam takers, and on the other hand that it was necessary to ‘preserve the good reputation of our Filipino professionals’ (Dalangin-Fernandez 2006). Similarly, government officials attempted to balance concerns about the Philippines’ economic opportunity and the protection of migrant nurses under the JPEPA, framing the agreement as a matter of national economic interest but taking pains to explain how it would protect Filipino nurses. However, in both cases the eventual policy decisions demonstrated that economic concerns were the state’s ultimate priority, and after the decision was made, government officials rarely engaged critics who suggested that the licensure exam retake and the JPEPA provisions were unfair to Filipino nurses.

Philippine government officials’ public discussion of the role of Filipino nurses as professionals also drew an explicit connection between nurses’ professional qualifications and their perceived economic importance. In both cases they invoked concerns about Filipino nurses’ impact on the health and safety of patients in other countries—primarily the United States and Japan—not in the Philippines, demonstrating the strength of the assumption that nurses would migrate and the perception of their role as international rather than domestic professionals. This was particularly striking in the response to the licensure leakage case, which concerned the domestic licensure exam—yet officials did not seriously engage concerns about their ability to provide care in the Philippines, only taking up the mantle of ‘health and safety’ when it threatened nurses’ ability to work in the United States. Since the JPEPA nursing provision explicitly concerned migration, Philippine government officials’ discussion of the Japanese language requirement for Filipino nurses under the JPEPA as a matter of professional responsibility is less surprising. In any case, the consistency with which government officials discussed nurses’ professionalism in terms of commerce and overseas marketability contributes to the political making of Filipino nurses as professional ‘export products’.

While the Philippines’ production of nurses for overseas markets is remarkable for a country of its size, nurses’ actual contribution to the country’s economy as ‘export products’ or sources of remittance income was likely not as substantial as the politically charged discussion of the licensure exam leakage and the JPEPA nursing provision would suggest. The JPEPA affected only 1000 nurses in theory, and thus far a tiny number in practice. The licensure exam leakage only presented a concrete threat to the employment of examinees who sought to work in the United States, a large receiving market, but hardly the only destination for Filipino nurses. The controversies might not have been as economically consequential as implied by the volume of public discussion and high-level political actors implicated, but they highlighted the symbolic importance of nurse migration for the Philippines—and a more complicated set of political and economic pressures faced by government officials as they crafted policy responses to the controversies.

In particular, the Philippine government has long faced a broader challenge of finding ways to provide employment for the country’s fast-growing population. The number of jobs needed exceeds the number of positions available in nearly every field, and the problem is particularly acute in the case of nursing: because its health sector cannot absorb most of the graduates being produced, the Philippines has a huge oversupply of nurses (Lorenzo et al. 2007). The imbalance between production and domestic employment opportunities has become so extreme that some Philippine hospitals have begun volunteer nursing programmes as an alternative way for new graduates to gain the necessary work experience to qualify for overseas jobs (Salaverria 2009). Other new nursing graduates have sought jobs in call centres and other industries because they could not find nursing jobs (PIA 2009). In this context, government officials’ responses to the licensure exam leakage and the JPEPA sought to maintain overseas markets as a way to absorb some of the Philippines’ thousands of nursing graduates. The licensure exam leakage threatened to exacerbate the crisis for government officials, and the retake eased the threat by protecting the US market for Filipino nurses. Similarly, the decision to ratify the JPEPA and begin sending Filipino nurses to Japan was another way to address domestic unemployment of nurses and an opportunity to diversify future markets for Filipino nurses. These measures were seen as particularly important in light of the fact that many new schools were just beginning to graduate their first classes, adding thousands of new graduates to the existing oversupply of nurses in the Philippines (Masselink and Lee 2010).

In response to the extreme pressure on the domestic nursing market, Philippine government officials described their efforts to provide opportunities overseas as a matter of ‘responsibility’ (as one informant described it). Rather than finding new ways to facilitate nurses’ participation in the domestic health system (removing administrative barriers to hiring, protecting nurses from exploitation by hospitals under ‘volunteer’ schemes and developing incentives to motivate nurses to work in underserved areas: Perrin et al. 2007; Salamat 2011), they focused their attention on positioning Filipino nurses for success in the US and Japanese markets. This posture demonstrates the durability of the idea—even in high-level policy-making circles—that Filipino nurses are international rather than domestic professionals, and it highlights Philippine government officials’ reliance on overseas markets to solve domestic employment problems. Even when the nurses for whom they seek overseas opportunities could have a vital role in the Philippines’ domestic health system, they instead devoted their policy-making attention to maintaining and extending overseas markets for Filipino nurses.

The degree to which Philippine government officials rely on overseas employment to meet their ‘responsibility’ to provide employment for Filipinos was demonstrated powerfully in a 2002 incident in which the Japanese government imposed new restrictions on the number and provisions of performing artist visas (the vast majority held by Filipinos). The Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs travelled to Tokyo to protest the restrictions, and Filipino entertainers and their supporters demonstrated against the policy change at the Japanese Embassy in Manila (Yu-Jose 2008). Despite documented
evidence that Filipino entertainers frequently end up working illegally as ‘hostesses’ or prostitutes in Japan (Piper and Ball 2001; Uy 2005; Panao 2007). Philippine government officials—and the migrant workers themselves—fought to maintain this route to work in Japan. Even when the threats to migrants’ welfare were explicit, the desire to maintain migration pathways trumped concerns about what would happen to migrant workers once they arrived overseas.

Likewise, government officials invoked a broad definition of migrants’ ‘rights’ in describing their handling of the nursing licensure exam leakage and JPEPA controversies: they argued that concerns that the licensure exam retake and the JPEPA provisions were unfair to Filipino nurses were shortsighted. Instead, the most important ‘right’ they could protect was Filipino nurses’ opportunity to practice their profession, even if most of them would need to do so overseas. Officials described the licensure exam retake and the JPEPA nursing provision (including the Japanese language requirement) as incremental steps toward full employment for Filipino nurses, even if they were unpleasant for nurses in the short term. Government officials’ representation of these measures as ways of protecting Filipino nurses’ ‘rights’ again demonstrates both the extreme economic and political pressure they face because of the country’s domestic employment situation, and the pervasiveness of the perception that they can only address this challenge by seeking overseas employment opportunities for Filipino nurses.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the types of data we used—newspaper articles and key informant interviews—might not reflect government officials’ honest opinions so much as their official positions on the controversies. While government officials’ public representation of nurses and migration in the Philippines’ political environment was a focus of our study, we included key informant interviews to enable comparisons between how officials discussed the controversies in public discussion and in private conversation. Beyond that, we had no way to guarantee that government informants shared their perspectives honestly and completely—as is the case in any type of interview-based research (Weiss 1994).

Also, the data collection procedures could have generated article samples and interviews that inaccurately reflected government officials’ views. To minimize this threat to validity, we used strict protocols for newspaper data collection and interviews, including pre-specified search terms and structured interview guides. Also, the inductive nature of the analyses raises the possibility of investigator bias, which we worked to minimize through consultation and the use of multiple data sources. Another limitation is the fact that the frame analysis included only English-language newspaper articles, which could give a skewed impression of how the controversies were discussed. Filipino-language publications might have access to different stakeholders than English-language publications, and they might be less likely than English-language publications (the language of business and government) to privilege economic concerns. While these publications could not be analysed in this study, the newspapers included represented a broad readership and a variety of political perspectives.

We found no significant differences in the frequency with which newspapers representing different political perspectives quoted government informants, or the frequency with which government informants were quoted employing each frame as they discussed the controversies. Given that government business is conducted in English, this consistency suggests that it is unlikely that the newspapers missed significant events or perspectives of government officials.

Conclusion

This study uses case studies of two controversies in nursing education and migration to examine the political ‘making’ of nurses and nurse migration by Philippine government officials. The study finds that while government officials attempted to balance concerns about nurses’ economic role with concerns about their rights as migrants as the controversies unfolded, their policy decisions favoured economic concerns. These decisions did not reflect the economic importance of nurses’ remittance income so much as Philippine government officials’ sense of ‘responsibility’ to maintain overseas markets for professionals, rather than finding ways to bring them into the domestic health system. These findings highlight the dilemmas faced by government officials in countries with imbalances between production and employment of health care workers and other professionals, and they can form the basis for further research about how government officials make and justify policy decisions related to professional labour migration.

More studies are needed to understand how countries reach the point of overproduction such that government officials find themselves seeking overseas markets to absorb ‘surplus’ professionals rather than regulating production and developing domestic opportunities. Will the Philippines ever deal with the overproduction of health professionals, or will the education sectors continue producing workers that the country’s health system cannot absorb? What would need to change for government officials to shift their attention from seeking overseas markets for ‘surplus’ professionals to finding ways to moderate production and involve professionals already in the workforce in domestic development? As future studies seek to answer these questions for the Philippines, the findings could be compared with other countries with similarly overseas-focused health professional education sectors such as India and Cuba. Examining the political ‘making’ of health professional education and migration in the context of nation-building and economic development in multiple source countries would shed light on the complex roles of health professions education and migrant health professionals in developing countries. It could also inform future policy decisions both in the Philippines and in other countries seeking to position themselves as producers of health professionals for the global market, as well as for global policy-makers seeking new strategies to manage health professional migration worldwide.

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Conflict of interest
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