

Female Workers in the IT-BPO Sector in the Philippines: Possibility and Impossibility for Upward Mobility

Makiko OTA

Abstract

This paper focuses on the possibility and impossibility of upward mobility for female workers in the export sector of the Philippines, specifically those in the call center industry in the IT-BPO sector. The study considers overseas employment and its relationship with and similarity to the IT-BPO sector with respect to the labor force and devaluation of skills and educational backgrounds.

Chapter 2 examines the process of development of the Filipino middle class, with a particular focus on highly educated women in professional, clerical, and related fields. Moreover, the chapter takes up a recent dissemination of the middle-class mindset and the aspiration for upward mobility through education.

Chapter 3 will discuss occupational classifications to examine the categorization of skill level and educational attainment requirements of call center employment. The study notes a gap between the average educational level of actual workers and the skill levels defined by the classifications. Furthermore, based on previous studies of call center workers and international migrants, the paper describes the following points. First, the devaluation of the educational attainment of Filipino workers has been observed among overseas Filipino workers as well. Second, the development of the call center industry in the Philippines indicates an emergence of space that devalues their skills and education within the country in exchange for relatively high income.

The study proposes investigating the process by which a population emerges that desires upward mobility through education. To understand the growth of the IT-BPO sector in the Philippines, the focus should be not only on their work but also on the production process of such a population that originates in urban low-income neighborhoods and households. In conclusion, the study examines people's efforts to achieve upward mobility in a context of neoliberalism and gender and the implications of the current pandemic by reviewing literature and articles.

1. Introduction

The Philippines has been known for its stagnant economy due to political instability, disaster, and cumulative deficits at a time when other Asian countries experienced foreign capital-led industrialization and growth in the late 20th century (Bello, et al., 2005). However, the Philippine economy has recorded roughly 6%–7% in annual growth rate of its gross domestic

product (GDP) from 2010 to 2019 (World Bank, n.d.), which was driven by service economy, individual consumption based on overseas remittances, and the information technology-business process outsourcing (IT-BPO) industry.

The number and share of the middle-class population have increased although the pace remains slow compared with other Asian nations (World Bank, 2020). Moreover, several studies have alluded to the emergence of the middle class from the new service sector (Hechanova-Alampay, 2010; Ota, 2016; Hori, 2016, 2020). The Philippines has been expected to transform into an upper-middle-income country following the categories defined by the World Bank. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and stringent lock-down measures worldwide have led to the downfall of the economy in 2020 (de Vera, 2020).

Interestingly, the IT-BPO sector, including the call center industry, is largely occupied by women (Ota, 2016; Hori, 2020; Errighi et al., 2016). In Metro Manila, the capital of the Philippines and a major center of IT-BPO sector in the country (Ota, 2016; Sallaz, 2019), the majority of managers, clerks, professionals, associate professionals, and other service categories are composed of women. Such employment opportunities, which are dominated by college- or university-level female workers, are highly feminized and under the influence of foreign capital (Ota, 2016). The increase in workers under the said categories could be attributed to the growth not only in overseas remittances but also in the IT-BPO sector, which began thriving from the mid-2000s. In particular, the call center subsector constitutes nearly 70% of employment in the IT-BPO sector (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2020).

The firms and offices of the IT-BPO sector are concentrated within several business districts in Metro Manila, supported by a pool of highly educated young people with a neutral English accent (Sallaz, 2019). The industry is second to overseas remittances, which has been a pillar of the Philippine economy for long time. According to the IT and Business Process Association of the Philippines (IBPAP), the number of full-time employees in the IT-BPO industry exceed 1.2 million as of 2018 (Macaraeg, 2020b).

In the 1970s, many developing countries promoted export-oriented industrialization, whereas the production process of manufacturing shifted from developed countries to developing countries. The New International Division of Labor (NIDL) has mobilized women in the newly industrialized countries, especially those from rural areas, as a cheap workforce for labor-intensive manufacturing. According to Sassen, this aspect of the feminization of the labor force is preparatory for the conditions of the next aspect, that is, feminized international migration from newly industrialized countries (Sassen, 1990; 1998). During the course of industrialization, the employment status of workers in the

manufacturing sector was unstable, such that the urban unemployment population of the export sector became a reservoir for international migrants (Sassen, 1990:115-119).

The current emergence of service occupations in the IT-BPO sector of the Philippines could be interpreted as a new version of the NIDL (Ota, 2016; Hori, 2016). The reason for this notion is that the sector was formulated through the transfer of gendered and labor-intensive service production process from the core to the semi-periphery, which is similar to that of the export-manufacturing industry. The IT-BPO sector has been likely to mobilize female workers from urban low-income households of migrants from provinces¹⁾ (cf. Ota, 2016). Moreover, the domestic labor market in the Philippines tends to interact with the overseas labor market (di Gropello et al., 2010). Thus, the labor force of the IT-BPO sector could be considered relevant to the international migrant population (Ota, 2016; Hori, 2016, 2020). A large number of workers in the sector is assumed to be a pool of potential migrants or returning migrants.²⁾

Against this background, the current study focuses on the possibility and impossibility of upward mobility for female workers in the export sector of the Philippines, specifically, those in the call center industry. The study considers overseas employment and its relationship with and similarity to the IT-BPO sector with respect to the labor force and the devaluation of skills and educational backgrounds. The study examines previous literature and materials on the middle class in the Philippines and the call center industry and its workers; overseas migration; and government occupational classifications for statistics.

Chapter 2 examines the process of development of the Filipino middle class, with a particular focus on highly educated women in professional, clerical, and related fields. Furthermore, the paper takes up the recent dissemination of a mindset of the middle class, that stimulates the aspiration to climb the social ladder through education across the class border. The Philippines has the highest educational mobility in the world despite the marginal growth of the middle-class population (World Bank, 2020).

The skill levels and educational attainments required for occupation in the statistical classifications are graded as lower than those of actual workers in the call center industry, the largest subsector. Chapter 3 will discuss such occupational classifications to examine the categorization of skill level and educational attainment requirements of call center employment. The study notes a gap between the average educational level of actual workers and the skill levels defined by the classifications. Moreover, based on previous studies of call center workers and international migrants, the current study describes the following points. First, the devaluation of the educational attainment of Filipino workers has been observed among overseas workers as well. Second, the development of the call center industry in the

Philippines indicates an emergence of space that devaluates their skills and education within the country in exchange for relatively high income.⁹ In other words, their aspiration and endeavor toward upward social mobility do not necessarily come to fruition.

Based on the abovementioned points, the study proposes that the process of emergence of a population that desires upward mobility through education should be investigated. To understand the growth of the IT-BPO sector in the Philippines, the focus should lie not only on their work but also on the production process of such a population that originates in urban low-income neighborhoods and households. In conclusion, the study examines people's efforts to achieve upward mobility in a context of neoliberalism and gender by reviewing literature in the area. Lastly, the paper discusses the implications of the current pandemic on workers in the IT-BPO sector and for returned migrants in the Philippines.

2. Mindset of the middle class across the class border

According to Pinches (1996), the middle class in the Philippines is relatively poorer than those of other Southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore and Malaysia. They are socio-economically diverse and consist of a wide range of strata from low-end workers, which is close to the labor class to high-end workers. Therefore, a steep disparity is observed in terms of income level and lifestyle.

Although Pinches (1996) does not clearly refer to the operational definition of class, Kimura (2003) defined class on the basis of a categorization following occupational groups and their prestige. However, Kimura (2003) offered and verified an observation similar to that of Pinches (1996). The Filipino middle class has reproduced itself across generations without drastic changes as a minor and distinct group of the society (Kimura, 2003), although Kimura (2003) indicates its diversity and the occurrence of mobility among occupational subcategories within the class. Alternatively, Seki (2012) depicted the identity of the middle class by focusing on Filipino professionals belonging to the upper-middle class.

Many discussions occurred in the social sciences regarding the benchmarks for defining the middle class, such as occupation, income, lifestyle, housing, and so on. The chapter aims to make an inquiry into the position of call center workers in the class structure of the Philippines by examining the recent trends of the middle class in terms of income, the historical development of the middle class, a recent increase in the middle class by occupation, and a possibility of the dissemination of the mindset of the middle class into the lower strata of the society.

The study focuses on Metro Manila because the majority of the middle class in the Philippines are geographically concentrated in urban areas (Kimura 2002; Virola et al., 2016;

Albert et al., 2018; World Bank, 2020).⁴⁾

(1) Recent trends of the middle class in the Philippines

First, a recent trend is observed by income level, which remains sluggish. Virola et al. (2016) stated that the proportion of families classified as middle income minimally increased from 28% in 2006 to 30% in 2012.⁵⁾ Simultaneously, low-income households slightly decreased from 2006 to 2012 (Virola et al., 2016). Albert et al. (2018) argued that 40.2% of the total population belonged to the middle-income class as of 2015, though the ratio only slightly changed since 2006.⁶⁾ The two studies are consistent in citing the slight increase in middle-income families since the mid-2000s. Moreover, the income range of families classified as middle income is wide. The income of those at the high end of middle-income families is approximately 10 times as that of those at the low end of middle-income families (Albert et al., 2018), such that the lifestyle of middle-income families is assumed to be diverse, as illustrated by Pinches (1996).⁷⁾

A recent report of the World Bank (2020) verified the same tendency, although its definition of middle class is more rigid than those of the two studies. Despite a relatively high annual GDP growth rate, the size of the middle class remains small (i.e., 9.2% of the total population; global middle class; approximately 15\$ per day according to the 2011 purchasing power parity). Accordingly, the growth rate is slow (annually 3.7% between 2006 and 2015). Interestingly, the World Bank (2020) pointed out a strong intergenerational mobility in terms of education in the Philippines despite its stagnant economic mobility (World Bank, 2020: 28).

Another report from the World Bank (di Gropello, 2010) mentioned an oversupply of college and university graduates due to the high expectation for overseas employment opportunities, especially as professionals. The scenario renders an excess of academic degree holders in the labor market. Furthermore, the report stated that the desire and pressure to work overseas result in an inflation of education and a drastic downgrading of occupation (di Gropello, 2010). This tendency indicates an orientation for higher education across the class border in the Philippines.

On average, the educational achievement of women is higher than those of men in the Philippines. For example, the number of high school graduate or above reached more than 41.6 million in 2015, in which women accounted for 52.3%. Moreover, the proportions of women in the population of “Academic degree holder” and in the one of “Post Baccalaureate” reached 56%, 59.9 %, respectively (PSA, 2018a).

In Metro Manila, over half of workers in occupational groups, such as managers,

professionals, and clerical workers, which could be categorized as middle class or marginal middle class (Kimura, 2003) as in 2(3), are women except for technicians and associate professionals (Ota, 2016: 25; PSA, 2018b)⁸. Furthermore, 53.7% of overseas Filipino workers from Metro Manila who are working or had worked abroad during the past six months comprised women as of 2017 (PSA, 2018c).

In terms of orientation toward upward mobility through higher educational attainment, women are more likely to hold the tendency regardless of the stagnant increase of the middle-class population.

The next section examines the historical formulation of the middle class and female professionals and related workers to enhance the understanding of women's orientation for higher educational attainment from a historical perspective.

(2) Historical development of the middle class

Historically, the Filipino middle class emerged during the first half of the 20th century under the American rule that led to export growth under free trade, Filipino bureaucratization with the displacement of Spanish public servants, and dissemination of elementary education (Doeppers, 1984: 53–56). A percentage of occupations, such as professionals, public service, education, and clerk, increased from 7.7% in 1903 to 18% in 1939 (Doeppers, 1984: 52). The era gave birth to the new middle class in the Philippines.⁹

The majority of bureaucratic needs accompanying the expansion of social and economic structures and colonial offices were fulfilled by men as typists, secretaries, stenographers, and telephone operators (Eviota, 1990: 69). According to Eviota, proportions of women in the professions relative to men and to other women's occupations increased, although this increase concentrated on teaching. The United States, which prioritized education, trained teachers to spread American values throughout the country (Eviota, 1990: 69). Moreover, women in the nursing and pharmaceutical professions emerged under the American rule (Doeppers, 1984; Eviota, 1990). During this period, the US colonial government established an Americanized nursing training system that made preconditions for the post-war mass exodus of Filipina nurses to the United States (Choy, 2002). As a whole, the occupations of men as professionals were more diverse and wide-ranged compared with those of women (Eviota, 1990: 69). It was the post-war years that women began to increasingly occupy clerical duties (Eviota, 1990: 69).

After World War II, the Philippine government signed the Bell Treaty with the US government that yielded unequal trade relationships under free-trade policies, unemployment, and social uncertainties under the Cold War conditions. In the late 1940s, the Philippine

government initiated the exchange and export control policy, which propelled a remarkable growth in the import substitute manufacturing sector, although such a protective policy was not in favor of the US government (Abinales and Amoroso, 2017:173-178). From this boom emerged a domestic bourgeoisie rooted in the private business sector under the state-backed growth of industrialization (Pinches, 1996). Eventually, the industrialization faced stagnation due to its narrow domestic market (Bello, et al., 2005: 9) and the decontrol policy introduced in the early 1960s (Tamaki, 1993).

President Marcos (1965–1986) promoted export-oriented industrialization under the influence of the World Bank and other international agencies (Bello et al., 2005: 10; Snow, 1983: 84), which also created another bourgeoisie engaged in subcontract manufacturing for the US market, which was likely to be constituted of less politically influential entrepreneurs, including many ethnic Chinese people (Snow, 1983: 96-97). However, the export orientation of the government was more rhetorical than real (Bello, et al., 2005:10).

The President preferred groups of friends and relatives as cronies, most of whom were not connected to conventional landed elites. They obtained monopolistic control of various industries (i.e., from coconut to construction), which were mainly domestic-oriented (Morisawa, 1993). The export manufacturing, such as garments, mobilized many Filipina workers (Eviota, 1990: 111-126), although the sector lacked development compared with those of other Asian countries. The scenario is partly attributed to business conditions in favor of the cronies instead of the prioritization of export manufacturing during the Marcos administration, with respect to finance (Morisawa, 1993).

Conversely, the proportion of women in professions and administrative and clerical positions increased for several reasons related to the national economic development strategies of the post-war years. According to Eviota, women occupied 60% of professional and technical occupations in 1980, who were mainly teachers. Actually, teachers shared 74% of all professions in the same year (Eviota, 1990: 88).

Another category that women dominated was nursing. Despite their expertise, they worked under poor labor conditions and low wage level in the country (Choy, 2002). It was relevant with overseas migration instigated by the US Exchange Visiting Programme, the US 1965 Immigration Act, and the government's policy for labor export with the objective of earning foreign currency. By 1967, the Philippines became the world's top sending country of nurses to the United States (Choy, 2002: 98). The US market directly led the education of nurses. As a result, the number of nurses exceeded the international and domestic demands (Choy, 2002).

Third, women in clerical positions have increased primarily due to the rationalization of

work processes, the creation of complex business operations, dissemination of education, and expansion of roles of state and state bureaucracy (Eviota, 1990: 88). Marcos's regime highly valued technocrats and military forces, both of whom were in close relationships with the US. At the same time, the Marcos government prioritized non-efficient and uncompetitive domestic-oriented industries held by cronies (Tamaki, 1993). The government protected and favored such establishments and invested large amounts bolstered by foreign debt. The technocrats, IMF-World Bank, and even the US became dissatisfied with the scheme which led to the generation of cumulative external debt that drove the national economy into a predicament under the Structural Adjustment Program (Tamaki, 1993).

After the collapse of the Marcos regime in 1986, the Aquino administration prioritized the repayment of foreign debt. This policy depressed the economy and prevented foreign companies from investing in the Philippines (Bello et al., 2005: 13-20). In terms of foreign direct investments, the Philippines was bypassed by the massive flow of Japanese investment embarked after the Plaza Accord of 1985 (Bello et al., 2005: 19-20).

The plight enhanced the Philippines' dependency on overseas employment, remittances, and feminization of migration. Labor export, despite its introduction as a temporary alternative policy for the less-gearred export-manufacturing, had become a national economic strategy since the Marcos administration (Ogaya, 2016: 181-182). The major destination during this period was Middle Eastern countries, whereas the majority of overseas workers were male. In the late 1980s, the rate of female overseas workers increased because the progressive economic growth in Asia created the demand for a cheap labor force in the service sector, such entertainers in Japan and domestic workers for Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. Filipina migration as a national strategy initiated by sending nurses overseas (Choy, 2002: 115) became increasingly diverse with the inclusion of other fields of service (Ogaya, 2016).

However, during this period, Filipino migrants confronted an increase in human rights violation, which led to legislation of Republic Act No. 8042 or the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 that resulted in the professionalization and skillization of overseas workers (Ogaya, 2016:188-197). This direction could be considered to be enhancing the orientation toward higher education among the young population.

The growth of the service-oriented economy was driven by the consumption of families receiving remittance from Filipinos overseas (Rivera, 2017). Currently, businesses also considered returning migrants as an important target. The mass migration overseas added a new group to the Filipino middle class (Pinches, 1996).

As discussed earlier, women tend to complete higher levels of education than men and

constitute a large proportion of the population of administrative, professional, and clerical workers and overseas migrants. However, this orientation toward higher education under job scarcity creates an excess of highly educated population, which paved the way for the development of IT-BPO industries.

(3) Dissemination of the mindset of the middle class to the *masa*

Attitudes that value education have been widely spread across the class border. Roberto (2004) addressed the distinction between a self-rated and an objectively rated middle class in relation to the concept of the middle class in terms of mindset and values, such as work ethics, entrepreneurial values, priority on economic security, and respect for education and profession (Roberto, 2004: 66-68). The middle-class population is relatively small, whereas the number of individuals with a sense of the value of the middle class as above may exceed the number of the actual population.

As Pinches (1996) noted, the middle class is composed of families with various income levels and lifestyles. Seki (2012) highlighted the identity of upper-middle-class professionals who attempt to attain nursing licenses as a “second passport” despite being academic-degree holders and working as professionals. This strategy is an insurance in the case that the political-economic situation of the Philippines worsens. Seki depicted the narratives of interviewees in terms of the neoliberal governmentality. Furthermore, he reported that the middle-class professionals gave weight to their marketability and employability and differentiated themselves from the lower class people or *masa* (translated as “mass” in Tagalog). The boundary between the middle and lower classes became increasingly blurred due to overseas employment, such that members of the middle class constructed a symbolic boundary between themselves and other classes (Seki, 2012).

In fact, the values and mindset of prioritizing employability and education and differentiating oneself from those belonging to the lower strata seem to spread broadly and infiltrate the lower classes in current years. Specifically, this notion is likely to hold for families of the former working class that become wealthier through domestic or overseas employment.

Kimura (2003) proposed that the middle class in the Philippines consists of three types according to occupational group, namely, the new, marginal, and old middle classes. Kimura’s study classifies clerical workers under the marginal middle class, whereas professionals, associate professionals and technicians, and managers fall under the new middle class. Furthermore, it indicates that the middle classes in the Philippines continue to remain stagnant across generations, although it observes mobility among the subcategories.

Interestingly, however, the study notes a slightly higher mobility between the marginal middle and lower classes, such as the working class and peasants (Kimura, 2003).¹⁰⁾

Examining the current trend on labor and employment, an increase in the number and share of the occupational middle classes is clear. For example, the ratio of the new and marginal middle classes to the total employment population in the Philippines increased from 22.5% to 30% in the period from 2002 to 2017, while those in Metro Manila increased from 37% to 43% within the same period (Ota, 2016; PSA, 2018b). Thus, the study infers that mobility occurred between the occupational groups classified as the middle and lower classes, although the ratio of the middle class by income level marginally increased (cf. Ota, 2016).¹¹⁾ Evidently and as previously discussed, women composed more than half of the workers from the new and marginal middle classes, such that the observed mobility might have largely emerged among women.

Furthermore, individuals belonging to middle classes in terms of occupation may be influenced by the mindset of the “middle class,” which Roberto (2004) argued, though not a few of them may remain unstable in terms of income level due to their peasant or working-class origin. For example, Kusaka (2017) explained the recent division between “probational citizens worth saving” and the “worthless and helpless poor” among the poor, which have been promoted by morality-based anti-poverty programs (e.g., the conditional cash transfer program or Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program [4Ps]).

The mindset of prioritizing education, employability, and skill development led to the increase of a highly educated population in the labor market, which is being partially absorbed by IT-BPO industries. The abovementioned values function as an ideology, which leads to the subjectivities of new workers obedient to neoliberalism under the new version of the NIDL. However, whether the effort and expenses spent for education could be rewardable remains uncertain.

The next chapter discusses workers in the IT-BPO sector, especially those in the call center subsector because the growth of the industry promoted mobility among occupational classes through changes in the employment structure of the Philippines.

3. Devaluation of skills and education and hope for mobility

The beginning of the call center industry in the Philippines can be traced back to the 1990s. Following the establishment of a small service center at Manila’s financial district spearheaded by Andersen Consulting in 1994¹²⁾, foreign firms as well set up offices in Manila (Sallaz, 2019: 66). For example, an article published in 1999 (Business World, 1999) reported that English proficiency, low labor costs, and its highly educated population are transforming

the Philippines into an attractive spot for back-office functions. According to Pinaroc (2000), concerned vendors expected that the Philippines could become the best site for customer relationship management (CRM) in Asia due to high levels of English proficiency and its manpower (Pinaroc, 2000). The Philippines established a modest presence as a hub for call centers as of 2000 (Sallaz, 2019: 66).

The second term of the Arroyo administration (2004–2010) prioritized the IT-BPO sector and incorporated the policy into Medium-term Philippine Development Plan 2004–2010 (Morisawa, 2008). The IT-BPO sector in the Philippines, which began with contact centers in the 1990s, developed various and high value-added subsectors, such as medical transcription services through the 2000s (Errighi et al., 2016). Presently, the sector constitutes 13% of the worldwide IT-BPO market (Business Mirror, 2018).

However, the number of employees in the CRM subsector remains the largest with an employment of 435,448 workers, which accounts for 67.6% of the total employees in the IT-BPO sector for 2017, followed by sales and marketing (i.e., telemarketing) activities with 84,581 workers (13.1%) (PSA, 2020). The CRM subsector displays a labor-intensive character and is located toward the lower end of value chains (Bird and Ernst, 2009), though the IT-BPO sector is heavily dependent on call centers in terms of sales revenue (Errighi et al., 2016).

Errighi et al. (2016) reported that women comprise more than half of BPO workers and are concentrated in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, such as call center agents (Errighi et al., 2016). Therefore, the majority of employees in the IT-BPO sector in the Philippines, especially women, tend to work in labor-intensive subsectors.

Call center workers are considered less as high-skilled workers and are frequently stigmatized (de Leon, 2014). For example, Fabros (2015) conducted a sociological study on call center agents and found that the agents described their job as a “proxy profession,” a “disposable career,” or a “fallback”. However, at the same time, they valued “professionalism” ethos and sense of responsibility as university graduates, and attained high compensation and purchasing power (Fabros, 2015).

In reality, how high is their skill graded objectively in the Philippines? The article reviews their position in the government’s statistical classification of occupations, especially, the Philippine Standard Occupational Classification (PSOC)¹³ of 2012, which is the most recent version. The study collects information from the 1992 PSOC as well, which is the previous version. The following texts will focus on occupational categories that include those which PSOC refers to as call center or contact center occupation.

(1) PSOC and Skill levels of call center workers

The 1992 PSOC classifies the occupational category related to call centers as Major Group (MG) 4 (i.e., clerks; sub-group: customer service clerks). The skill level of the group is assumed as “2nd skill level,” which is more or less equivalent to a secondary education of four years, although on-the-job training and experience may be necessary and may supplement the formal training or replace it partly (National Statistical Coordination Board [NSCB], 1993: viii).

In the 2012 PSOC, occupations clearly related to call centers or contact centers were included under several major groups, such as managers (MG1), technician and associate professionals (MG3), clerical support workers (MG4), and service and sales workers (MG5). Each major group in the 2012 PSOC is associated with the skill level designation of the International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008 [ISCO-08] (PSA, n.d.).¹⁴⁾

In fact, in the 2012 PSOC, only MG2 reaches level 4, which is the highest level of ISCO-08, which required complex problem-solving, decision-making, and creativity skills based on theoretical and factual knowledge in a specialized field (ILO, 2012:13). According to ISCO-08, the skill level generally requires extended levels of literacy and numeracy, which are frequently at very high levels, and excellent interpersonal communication skills, which is usually obtained through higher education of three to six years, thus leading to a first degree and beyond (ILO, 2012:13). As previously mentioned, the 2012 PSOC does not classify call center or contact center occupations under MG2. At this point, the study aims to examine each skill level of major groups under which call center occupations are designated.

First, MG1 in the 2012 PSOC pertains to an occupational group of managerial positions and is not related to any skill levels under ISCO-08. It describes the tasks performed by MG1 workers, which is similar to the fourth level of ISCO-08, without reference to educational attainment (PSA, n.d.). In ISCO-08, MG1 is positioned at Level 4, except for sub-MG 14 “Managers in Hospitality, Retail, and Other Services,” which is positioned at Level 3 and is lower than other sub-MGs in the category (ILO, 2012: 87). The third ISCO skill level is typically obtained through one to three years of study in higher educational institutions after “completion of secondary education.” In general, it requires “high levels of literacy, numeracy, and interpersonal communication ability” (ILO, 2012: 13). Sub-MG 14 has unit group 1439 or “service managers not elsewhere classified,” which includes “contact center managers” (PSA, n.d.: 25; ILO, 2012: 108). Therefore, workers in the managerial position of call centers are positioned at the third ISCO skill level based on the international standard, whereas the 2012 PSOC does not refer to the educational background of the occupations.¹⁵⁾

MG3 (technician and associate professionals in PSOC) is positioned at the third ISCO skill level. The major group includes unit group 3512 “information and communications technology user support technicians” that provide technical assistance to users directly or through other electronic means. Furthermore, it aims to resolve and diagnose issues and problems on software, hardware, Internet, and so forth (PSA, n.d.:135).

MG4 “clerical support workers” and MG5 “service and sales workers” belong to the Level 2 of ISCO-08, of which many occupations require “relatively advanced literacy and numeracy skills, and good interpersonal communication skills” (PSA, n.d.; ILO, 2012: 12). Such skills are acquired through the completion of the first stage of secondary education, the second stage of secondary education, or vocation-specific education after completion of secondary education (ILO, 2012: 12). The educational backgrounds of the second-skill level seem diverse.

MG4 includes unit-group 4222 “contact center information clerks” under sub-MG 42 “customer service clerks,” who are tasked with the provision of advice and information to clients, responses to queries, and processes of financial transactions via telephone, email, etc. (PSA, n.d.:144). MG5 includes sub-MG 52 “sales workers” selling and demonstrating goods via telephone or customer contact centers to potential customers. Unit group 5244 “contact center salespersons” provides several examples of various occupations, such as call center agent (sales and marketing), call center salesperson, and telemarketers (PSA, n.d.:167-168).

Occupations related to call centers have developed to such an extent that PSOC have created the new subclasses across different skill levels and educational backgrounds. However, in the 2012 PSOC, the occupational groups related to call centers are not considered requiring an academic degree.

Esguerra (2019) regarded managers, professionals, and technician and associate professionals as groups of high-skilled jobs; clerical support workers and three other categories (e.g., MG8; Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers) are groups of middle-skilled jobs; whereas service and sales workers and a group of elementary occupations are considered “low-skilled” (Esguerra, 2019: 17). Based on the classification by Esguerra (2019), the skill levels of call center workers are ranged from the lowest to highest levels. In 2017, however, clerical support workers and service and sales workers occupied approximately 60% of the workforce in the four occupational groups related to call centers in Metro Manila (PSA, 2018b). Although the share of call center workers in each major group is unknown, a majority of call center workers are likely to belong under the two categories with middle- to low-skilled levels.

Considering the wage level, purchasing power, interaction with foreign customers in the

English language, and workplace environment (i.e., air-conditioned offices), jobs in call centers seem more modernized compared with conventional and prevailing occupations dominated by women, such as factory workers, domestic helpers, and sales workers in shops and stalls. Fabros (2015) argued that such conditions resonate with their middle-class identities, even though their jobs are designed like a production line (Fabros, 2015:229-231).

As previously discussed, the skill levels of call center workers are less likely positioned as that of an academic degree holder according to the occupational classifications. However, the reality of these workers is that the majority of them are college graduates regardless of the categorical position of their occupation in PSOC and ISCO. Bird and Ernst (2009) conducted telephone interviews with 11 BPO companies (5 call centers and 6 IT companies) and found that many call centers demanded at least a two-year college education apart from possessing excellent speaking and writing skills in English. According to their study, the share of college graduates among employee is between 80% to 90% in the majority of the BPO companies (Bird and Ernst 2009:13-14).

In other words, the educational attainments of the workers in call center industry have been devaluated.

(2) Overseas migration and the IT-BPO industry

IT-BPO workers in the Philippines seem to have characteristics similar to overseas employed Filipino workers. Truly, the working population in the IT-BPO sector is overlapping with that of international migrants, as mentioned in the Introduction.

Ortiga (2019) reported that many nurse graduates work in call centers and other IT-BPO sectors due to the lack of job opportunities abroad and at home (Ortiga, 2019:112-113). The ethnographic work of Sallaz (2019) on call center agent in Metro Manila suggests that young educated individuals in the Philippines consider two paths, namely, going abroad in search of the “Philippine dream,”¹⁶ thus leaving family and friend behind, or staying as underpaid and unsecured white-collar workers in the Philippines. Call centers represent a third path or a middle route to the labor market (Sallaz, 2019). It incurs costs in the form of “suboptimal earnings and a questionable professional identity” (Sallaz, 2019:86), although it offers good salary. The young workers have to suspend aspirations to pursue a career in the profession for which they trained (Sallaz, 2019: 85). Moreover, overseas employment continues to attract them because even unskilled jobs provide a much expensive income than their wage (Sallaz, 2019: 85).

Therefore, the emergence and development of the sector are based not only on the highly educated population but also on the devaluation of their education and impossibility of their

careers in the future.

Parreñas (2001) referred to the migrant experience of Filipina domestic workers to Rome and Los Angeles and conceptualized “contradictory class mobility.” In other words, such women migrate, work as domestic workers, earn higher income, and attain material fulfillment in the home country, on the basis of the unequal exchange rate. However, they move downward with respect to their social status because many of them had worked as “female professionals,” such as teachers with high level educational attainment, in their home country. They describe domestic work as “a process of slowly making them stupid” (Parreñas, 2001: 245). Thus, the study observes the devaluation of the educational attainment and professions of Filipino workers, and the de-skillization as a result. Pratt et al. (2017) explored that the overseas Filipino workers and their families in a migrant-sending community in Metro Manila have been in precarity across generations, despite their dedication to investment for children’s education through remittances (Pratt et al., 2017).

Overseas work leads to the devaluation of one’s educational background. This tendency thus eliminates the possibilities of one’s development as workers and even leads to the de-skillization of the people despite efforts to obtain better educational attainment and aspiration for better lives and professions.

A similar phenomenon is occurring in the IT-BPO sector. The World Bank (2020) reported an oversupply of college and university graduates despite the stagnant increase of the middle class in the country. In other words, it means that many people in the lower class prioritize higher education in an endeavor to climb the social ladder but fail.

This study assumes that a structure exists that fuels the aspiration for higher education and upward social mobility among the lower-class population in the Philippines. As mentioned in chapter 2(3), the mindset of the middle class, which prioritizes education, could be disseminate among the lower class through certain strategies. Thus, focusing on the process of reproduction of such labor force in lower-class communities is necessary step to understand the development of the IT-BPO industry in the Philippines.

Many studies on urban informal settlers discuss the government-led conditional cash transfer program (4Ps), which aims to integrate marginalized people into the mainstream society (e.g. Seki, 2015; Kusaka, 2017). The program focuses on breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty reproduction through investment on “human capital,” that is, providing cash in exchange for certain conditions (Official Gazette, n.d.). However, according to Seki, the cash grant is too small to bring about substantial enhancement in their lives, which is an “inducement” for beneficiaries to engage in various practices of investing human capital (Seki, 2015: 1261). The program has sought to advance the social inclusion of the poor, by

nurturing their desire, habits, and dispositions that are conducive to the investment in human capital (Seki, 2015:1272).

4Ps and other poverty alleviation programs conducted by the government and civil society organizations are assumed to contribute to the production of a labor force that aspires to climb the “ladder of society.”¹⁷ Such programs are involved in the processes of the production of an eligible labor force that will be distributed to globally competitive sectors in the Philippines (cf. Ota, 2018).

(3) Aspiration for upward mobility and the labor force reproduction

Sassen (1990) explained the transformation of the unemployed female population into a reserve army of international migrants under the influence of westernization (Sassen, 1990: 116). The current feminization of the domestic labor force is induced by the capital flight of service production from the core to the Philippines (i.e., the new version of the NIDL), which is partially enhanced by grass-roots activities that aim to discipline the marginalized people as workers, consumers, debtors. In other words, additional collective and sophisticated measures are being undertaken to transform the people into a potential reserve army of labor for the global labor market (domestic and overseas).

Such activities have been promoted not only by the government but also by community-based organizations, non-profitable organizations, and international assistance institutions. Furthermore, women, specifically mothers, have been mobilized into organizational activities that are associated with their reproductive role, such as education, nutrition, health, and family planning. Kusaka asserted that the programs such as the 4Ps attempt to transform the poor women into moral agents who will morally uplift the children and husbands in their households (Kusaka, 2017:52). The programs attempt to proliferate the values of eligible workers, consumers, and “good citizens” (Kusaka, 2017:72) to people in the marginalized class. These women and their families seemingly attempt to exodus from unstable and impoverished conditions and to achieve upward mobility.

Therefore, it is necessary to focus on their households and communities as the supply side of the labor force through a field research from the gender perspective. Specifically, a high educational attainment has been regarded as the only means of move upwardly in the social ladder of the Philippine society. As previously mentioned, women tend to obtain higher levels of education than men, conceivably because they invest more due to economic expectations from their families and difficulties in landing decent jobs without such educational backgrounds (Ota, 2016:15, 21-27). It is worth to dissect the mechanism of the labor- force reproduction that has been underpinning the gendered export sectors such as the

IT-BPO industry in the Philippines.

4. Conclusion

Workers in the IT-BPO sector in the Philippines can earn relatively high salaries although their occupations are less considered sufficiently skilled in terms of investment in their education. Historically, a similar phenomenon was observed for international migration, where highly educated workers engage in occupations that require low-level skills in exchange for wage. Chapter 2(3) referred to the dissemination of the mindset of the middle class among the lower class, which led to the increase of workers of the “occupational middle classes” and the highly educated population at a pace faster than the increase of the middle-class population stratified by income. The preference of people toward professionalization through higher education and training in relation to overseas migration resulted in the labor flow into the IT-BPO industry.

According to Foucault (2008), the neoliberal individual is an entrepreneurial subject that adapts to unpredictable situations with resilience. The subject is required to enhance its set of physical and psychological characteristics, which enables a person to earn “human capital.” Individuals feel the necessity to be lifelong learners to adapt unstable circumstances under flexible accumulation (Mitchell, 2003, 2016). The entrepreneurial-self is established with oneself through various forms of personal investment, such as education (Peters, 2016: 300-301).

An interesting point in the neoliberal context is that women are seemingly induced to internalize the neoliberal values (cf. Scharff, 2016). The world has witnessed the massive mobilization of Filipina women as economic resources for national development and global competition in various occupations, such as global care workers, IT-BPO workers, small business holders, and community workers. At the same time, they hold not only their desire for upward mobility, better lives, and career-pursuing, but also burden as household providers and caretakers in their families (Medina, 2015). They possibly have driven themselves to be neoliberal individuals.

The study argued that dissecting how such attitudes have been formulated at the community and household levels is necessary to understand the growth of the IT-BPO sector.

However, many obstacles suddenly have destroyed their efforts and hopes for the future in this uncertain world. Unpredictable and sudden catastrophes have undermined people’s lives and their efforts toward upward mobility in the Philippines. Metro Manila has experienced numerous calamities, such as typhoons, floods, evictions, economic recession, and lawless

violence. The current pandemic worsened the situation.

The Philippines underwent the most stringent and longest lock-down worldwide from March to June, 2020, which accompanied restriction of mobility in entire Luzon area and suspension of mass transit (Manila Standard, 2020; Aurelio, 2020). The country confronted the worst economic depression since the culminate debt crisis of the 1980s (Cigara, 2020).

Despite the suspension of economic activities, the IT-BPO industry was permitted to operate under certain conditions, such as maintaining social distancing in the workplace and providing temporary accommodation or shuttle bus services for workers (Castillo, 2020). Many media news reported a miserable situation and environment, such as congested office space, sharing of headsets with other workers, and futons directly laid on the floor for sleeping (Macaraeg, 2020a).

The president of IBPAP cited that the damage incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic on the IT-BPO industry was less serious than those of other industries (Department of Labor and Employment, 2020), whereas IBPAP revised the growth rate of the total sales of the industry by 2022 in a downward direction (Canivel, 2020).

An important component of the IT-BPO sector is the returning migrants, who have been forced to return home due to the massive lay-off in the host countries, which could increase the unemployed population in the Philippines. The global pandemic forced overseas workers to return home and is about to hurt the pillar of the national economy. Alternatively, the IT-BPO sector is currently expected to be a reservoir of these workers and may lead to the possibility of enhancing competition among workers in the labor market.

Although the responses of the workers in the IT-BPO sector, migrant workers, and their communities and households toward this unpredictable situation should be studied, this topic can be discussed in detail in future studies.

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Note

This paper is partly based on the presentation made at the study group meeting “Gender and Space/Place” in the General Meeting of the Association of Japanese Geographers at Wakayama University on September 23, 2018.

- 1) In my field researches in Metro Manila, I interviewed with IT-BPO workers with provincial origins.
- 2) A well-known fact is that many nurse graduates are working in the IT-BPO sector due to job

scarcity in the global and local nursing labor market (Ortiga, 2019:112-113). Furthermore, the sector functions as a receiver of returning migrants. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 178,000 overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) returned as of October 2020, whereas the government predicted that more than 300,000 OFWs would return by the end of 2020 due to the drastic layoffs in host countries (Laforga, 2020; Caraballo, 2020). Thus, the IT-BPO sector could be a receiver of migrant workers laid off by foreign countries. In fact, IBPAP and the Department of Labor and Employment agreed to promote hiring of returning migrants due to the pandemic to the sector (Depasupil, 2020).

- 3) The annual income of workers in call centers is approximately 30,000 pesos as of 2017, which is nearly equivalent to the average annual income of all industries (Hori, 2020).
- 4) For example, Albert et al. (2018) stated that more than half of middle-income households reside in Metro Manila and its surrounding area in 2015, whereas 19.7% lived in Metro Manila and 31.9% are in Regions IVA and III (Albeit et al., 2018: 13).
- 5) The study defined families with annual income ranging from P308,880 to P 1,935,829 as middle-income class in 2015, which is equivalent to P25,740 to P161,319 per month (Virola et al., 2016).
- 6) Only 1.8 % had increased since 2006 until 2015 (Albeit et al., 2018). In this study, the monthly income level of middle-income class households ranged from P18,200 to P182,000 in 2015, which is a wider range than Virola et al. (2016). Therefore, the size of the class is considered larger (Albeit et al., 2018).
- 7) Albert et al. (2018) also noted socioeconomic characteristics of the middle class in the Philippines in terms of lifestyle (e.g., ownership of dwelling, residence with strong roof and walls, ownership of various durable goods) (Albert, et al. 2018: 30).
- 8) However, the percentage of men as clerical workers has increased from 32% in 2002 to 41% in 2015 (PSA, 2018b). The increase is probably strongly affected by the growth of the IT-BPO sector.
- 9) The Filipino elite class, comprising mainly of mestizos and based on agriculture and land in province, was formed during the 19th century (Doeppers, 1984).
- 10) Kimura (2003) quoted a paper presented by Bautista et al. in 1998 and demonstrated the result of their survey conducted in Metro Manila. The study found that although 25% of the marginal middle class and 22.3% of the old middle class had either a working class or agricultural class origin, only 16.7 % of the administrators and 6.5% of the professionals had such class origins (Kimura, 2003: 274).
- 11) In Ota(2016), in the same manner, I indicated that the pace of the increase of the middle class by income in Metro Manila is slower than that by occupational groups (Ota, 2016: 30). In the same article, I alluded an emergence of stratification among the low-income people in Metro Manila (Ota, 2016).
- 12) In another article, it was argued that the beginning of the IT-BPO sector in the Philippines was with the establishment of the first Global Resource Center by Andersen Consulting in Manila (Manila Bulletin, 2015). In 1992, an article in a business newspaper based in US said that

Andersen Consulting maintained an office in Manila that writes software for their customers (Child, 1992).

- 13) PSOC is based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO), defined by International Labour Organization (ILO), although it was modified to suit the local context and requirements in the Philippines. The 1992 PSOC was patterned after the 1988 ISCO (ISCO-88), whereas the 2012 PSOC is based on the 2008 ISCO (ISCO-08) (NSCB, 1993; PSA, n.d.; ILO, 2012).
- 14) The ISCOs for 1988 and 2008 indicate four skill levels. In comparison with ISCO-88, the definitions of ISCO-08 address cases where formal educational requirements may be less useful for measuring the skill levels required of a particular occupation. Therefore, each definition offers concrete examples of tasks performed, skills required, and occupations classified at that skill level, whereas they depict the probable requirements of educational attainment to obtain skills and knowledge to perform tasks (ILO, 2012).
- 15) In PSOC 1992, MG1 was not associated with any education level as ISCO-88 did not tie the group with any educational attainment for the reason that their various skills for executing tasks and duties cannot be linked with any of the skill levels of ISCO-88. Although ISCO-08 defined the skill level of the group tied to university degrees, the 2012 PSOC does not follow this definition (PSA, n.d.; ILO, 2012).
- 16) Sallaz's "Philippine dream" refers to the intergenerational strategy for mobility by letting one child at least obtain post-secondary degree and a good job, ideally abroad, to share earnings with family and relatives (Sallaz, 2019: 77).
- 17) However, Seki stressed its exclusive aspects and counterclaims by beneficiaries against the program (Seki, 2015).

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