



The Lived Experiences of Construction Workers during COVID-19 Pandemic: In Suburban Case

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The lived experiences of construction workers are explored in this study. The twelve construction workers were interviewed face-to-face to solicit their struggles and sufferings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data gathered from the respondents were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In the analysis, the major themes identified were Knowledge of COVID-19, Initial Reaction, Financial Assistance Received, Life during Work Suspension and Challenges experienced as Construction Workers. Fear of infection and worry for their family were the initial reactions of all the respondents upon hearing of this CoVID-19 virus. For them to cope with the crisis during the work suspension period they resorted to an alternative way of livelihoods like went to farming, copra selling, rice harvesting, and 'habal habal' driver. Homesick is also one of the challenges being experienced by a construction worker for he cannot go home because of travel restrictions.

Keywords: *Construction workers; COVID-19 pandemic; lived experiences.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic does not only strained the health sector but significantly affect the socio-economic sector worldwide. This health crisis has had a wider impact on the daily lives of people [1]. This pandemic brought a widespread economic fallout thus resulted in employment losses across different types of jobs and workers [2]. According to Riya Alsanah & Rafeef Ziadah [3], due to lockdown measures, the pandemic compounded the problems of those already suffering from economic deterioration by the high level of unemployment and the loss of wages for working families. This may lead to unpredictable socio-economic consequences affecting the construction industry across the globe [4] hence, the labor market is profoundly affected [2]. The economic fall can be attributed to the vast majority of the fall in economic activity during this pandemic can be attributed to perceived disease risks influencing behavior, rather than government restrictions [5].

The different sector of the labor force of society has its own story of experiences during this pandemic. The United Nations promoted the principle of "leaving no one behind" [6]. Hence, construction workers should not be left behind. Construction workers have their own untold stories. From ordinary labor to foreman has its struggles to survive during this period. They are experiencing collapses whether directly or indirectly affecting them. May the company may decide to resume their operation and rehiring labor market but will these people be willing to be hired considering the risk they will be facing? Will they accept the job they needed most for their family to survive? This study gave an avenue to the constructions' experiences to unhide. They may be not frontliners but still, they are facing struggles for survival. Their experiences may somehow give guidance for the company in the preparation and finding solutions to current conditions and also, to the policy-makers in striving to respond to the call of this pandemic.

Bsusu [4] cross-investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Jordanian civil engineers and revealed that 96% are affected by their works and 96.7% by their lifestyles. Also, the construction industry was found out that the majority were negatively affected financially. Consequently, this effect is expectedly more negative to the construction workers.

Among the sectors of Palestinian society, the most affected are the construction workers employed in the construction industry in Israel [3]. They stated that the Palestinian construction workers are suffering from discrimination in the construction industry where they are employed even amid this pandemic. The positive effect of this pandemic according to the latter is the exposure of the harsh realities of life of these workers under Israeli occupation. This study categorized the experiences of these workers according to key aspects such as occupation and exploitation, rich pickings, lockdown, scapegoating workers, coordination, structures of complicity, and reconstructing resistance.

A study in the United States was conducted by Bui et al. [7] on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on workers however not focusing not on the sector they belong to but rather on their age group. A constructions workers belong to any age group under investigation of this study. This study revealed that recession hit older people, especially older women, even harder than past recessions maybe because the pandemic creates additional risks for older workers being vulnerable to the virus as what the health sector declares.

As observed, when the outbreak has risen some construction firms declared closure for no operation in the site is allowed resulted in around millions become unemployed globally. The temporary closure of semi-essential industries during this pandemic is a workplace safety policy to prevent further disparities in COVID-19 morbidity and mortality [8].

Workers lost their job unexpectedly. It is not only the worker himself who is affected but the whole family for they are breadwinners of their family. And the sad reality is these construction workers are low-paying earners. Their daily sustenance is fully dependent on that income from foods they eat to the electric bill to light their homes. This pandemic does not only brought job destruction but consequently, the lives and the future of the family. Yes, it may be true that this sector of workers may not be considered essential during this pandemic but undeniably they belong to one of the pillars of the economy of a country, the construction industry. The sweat and blood make such industry alive and hence, it just that their voices through this study be given due. In this study, their experiences had been explored so that proper intervention be addressed. Also, this study will contribute to both the practice of the construction firms in coping with unexpected

situations like the COVID-19 pandemic and the research aspects particularly on the policy-making and implementation strategy.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design. The phenomenological study attempts to understand people's experiences in a certain phenomenon. The purpose of this approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation [9]. Furthermore, to seek reality from individuals' narratives of their experiences and feelings, and to produce in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon [10]. One of the main key concepts of the Phenomenological philosophy is the lived experiences of a person in a particular phenomenon [9]. In this study, the lived experiences of the construction workers during the COVID-19 pandemic were analyzed as to different circumstances.

2.2 Data Gathering

The lived experiences of the construction workers were gathered through a face-to-face interview with the researcher guided by the formulated unstructured interview guide questions which were then analyzed using thematic analysis for inference and conclusion.

The profile of the respondents as well as the work experiences were asked to obtain the background of the former. To solicit the

respondents' lived experiences significant questions were asked such as whether or not their employer continued to operate or not and how they managed their way of living in the case where there was suspension from work and were they able to receive financial assistance either from the government or from their employer, or both. The open-ended question "How this COVID-19 pandemic affect you as a construction worker, and consequently to your family?" gave the respondents the freedom to narrate their experiences.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and became the date of this study. All the names of the respondents were replaced depending on their work classification like mason, foreman, carpenter, etc. The researcher undertook the initial analysis of the transcribed text by reading each interview text to understand the overall meaning of the text. After all the interview text had been analyzed, common themes emerged and are discussed in this article.

2.3 Respondents

The respondents are twelve (12) male construction workers. Some are connected with a construction firm and others are freelance. As shown in Table 1, their ages range from 28 to 53 years old. All of them are married with a family. They are the breadwinners of their families. They are all skilled construction workers. One is a foreman, three are carpenters, six are a mason, one is an electrician and one is a partition and ceiling carpenter.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Name	Age	Type of Construction Worker	Length of Experience as Construction Worker	Approximate Monthly Income (Php)	Number of Household Members
Mason 1	50	Mason	Almost 26 years	9,000.00	3
Mason 2	36	Mason	More than 2 years	9,000.00	5
Mason 3	53	Mason	More than 1 year	9,000.00	3
Operator 1	40	Heavy Equipment Operator/Mason	Almost 17 years	10,000.00	4
Carpenter 1	54	carpenter	More than 6 years	10,000.00	3
Foreman 1	44	Foreman	More than 6 years	15,000.00	3
Electrician 1	36	Electrician	More than 3 years	By Contract	5
Mason 4	42	Mason	more than 1 year	10,000.00	7
Carpenter 2	51	Partition/Ceiling carpenter	On call with any company	By Contract	5 (has 17 children)
Mason 5	34	Mason	more than 1 year	10,000.00	4
Carpenter 3	28	Carpenter	Almost 3 years	10,000.00	3
Foreman 2	50	Foreman	Almost 15 years	12,000.00	7

The number of household is defined as the number of family members dependent on the respondents. The approximate income is computed on their daily wages excluding the overtime fee. Two of them are by contract so the monthly income is not fixed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the analysis of the data gathered based on the answers of the respondents the following are the themes extracted.

3.1 Knowledge of Covid-19

This refers to how the respondents know about the COVID-19 pandemic. Mason 1, Mason 3, Mason 4, Mason 5, Operator 1, and Carpenter 2 said that they knew about this pandemic through television and radio while Mason 2, Carpenter 1, and Carpenter 3 were informed by their friends. On the other hand, Foreman 1 and Electrician 1 were informed through government information dissemination.

3.2 Initial Reaction

Upon knowing the COVID-19 virus, all the respondents' initial reactions were fear of infection and worry for the family. Their common reason is that the opponent (they are referring to the virus) cannot be seen.

Mason 1 said that "if ever I will be infected with the virus better to commit suicide than my family is infected also."

"When my child got sick we did not bring her to the hospital because of the fear of being infected there so we resorted to a traditional healing method," said Mason 5. He worries about the health of his children.

3.3 Financial Assistance Received

While Foreman 1 and Operator 1 were given an allowance from their company as financial assistance others received only goods as relief from their employers. Foreman 1 was given a 13th-month pay. However, Mason 1, Mason 2, Mason 4, Mason 5, and Carpenter 3 are beneficiaries of the Social Amelioration Program of the government while Mason 3, Carpenter 2, and Foreman 2 are Pantawid ng Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) members.

According to Mason 2, the financial aid he received went to the delivery expenses of his newborn child. "The assistance is so timely," he said.

3.4 Life during Work Suspension

When the pandemic broke out most of the construction firms stopped their operations hence resulted in the stoppage of work like the case of all the respondents. Their work was unexpectedly suspended for approximately almost a month. Hence, they resorted to alternative ways to earn money to provide the necessities.

Mason 1 went to farming while Mason 2 and Mason 3 are by copra selling. Carpenter 3 was contented to get some coconut and some vegetables on the farm for them to have some food on their table. Mason 5 labored under the sun by rice harvesting. "It so timely that when my work was suspended, it is harvest time with my father's rice field so I went to harvesting," Mason 5 said. Carpenter 2 and Foreman 2 with their savings and relief goods from the made them survive those days.

3.5 Challenges Experienced as Construction Workers

After lifting the Enhanced Community Quarantine, some construction operations resume. But undeniably, there are challenges that construction workers are confronting when they go back to work and even until now. The daily struggle to catch a vehicle for them to ride so that they can report to their workplace is one of the major challenges. The fear to be infected in their way from work to their home.

Also, although social distancing in the construction workplace can hardly be implemented, still it should be practiced for an effective social distancing, according to the hospitalization risk is expected to be two to three times higher for construction workers than non-construction workers [11].

Mason 5 is against the prohibition of 'angkas'. "Honestly," he said, "when we are approaching the checkpoint, I dropped from the motorcycle then I walked for a distance to get rid of the interrogation in the checkpoint then my friend with his motorcycle is waiting for me a distance after the checkpoint station."

But on the other hand, there are construction workers who do not worry about the construction site they are working is just near walking distance from their home. They worry not much because they live far away from town proper which they believe a lesser chance of being infected. However, still they are worrying about the possibility that their co-workers might be positive and so they will be infected also.

Foreman 1's greatest challenge is that he is away from his family. From the time ECQ was declared until now, he was not able to visit his family.

4. LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to 12 respondents for the reason that with this number the researcher met a saturation point of the interview. A wider study involving psychological impacts like anxiety and mental stress may need to be carried out in future researches. The study was qualitative only utilizing interviews. A study involving mixed methods on these issues may need to be carried out in the future to enable the exploration of all the issues from different approaches.

5. CONCLUSION

Construction workers may not be essential like frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic but they belong to one of the pillars of one's country economy, the construction industry. Construction workers have their fare in this COVID-19 pandemic. They experienced fear and worry not only for themselves for also for their family. They faced many challenges like the unexpected suspension of work which made them more resourceful for they were able find an alternative way to feed their family and the psychological and emotional suffering from homesick for they cannot even visit their family because of travel restrictions.

Even when the ECQ was lifted still these construction workers suffer struggles in commuting from their home to their workplace. During their work hours when they are in the project site premises, their safety still may be endangered taking note that social distancing is somehow quite difficult to practice in the construction site. To safeguard the workers against the virus the employer should cautiously implement precautionary measures such as mandatory temperature check, wearing of face

mask, provides a disinfection tent and hand washing facilities and other health and safety practices.

Not all of these workers are beneficiaries of government financial assistance programs like the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) however, some availed financial assistance from their employer. The government should revisit and strengthen with a wide coverage of the implementation of financial assistance programs. The livelihood assistance program should be extended to this sector of society because the physical strength of these workers will fade when they aged. It is fair and just that the government should have a proper intervention for this group of people belongs to one of the economic boosters of the country.

This study should be followed up soliciting the experiences of the construction workers in the highly urbanized cities. It is for the reason that study investigated construction workers in suburban areas although probably there is no significant difference between the construction activities in this area and that of the highly urbanized cities however, the workers might have different lifestyles and consequently, has different coping up mechanisms. The voices of the manager or proprietors of the construction firms should also be heard on the impact of this pandemic on their operations as well as their finances.

CONSENT

The researcher declares that the participants were fully informed of the purpose of their participation in the interview and gave consent thereto as evidenced by their affixing their signatures in the consent form and that they further signify that no coercion had been done against them. The interview process brought no harm to the participants. Moreover, all the participants agreed to record the conversation via the cellular phone of the researcher to make no unnecessary delay and for accurate data analysis. A consent form was secured first from each respondent before an interview was commenced.

The researcher assures the participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of the information divulged by them. The scope of the interview was limited to the information necessary for the research.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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