

# Low pay, high risk: The reality of nurses in the Philippines

Thursday 6 August 2020, by [MAGSAMBOL Bonz](#) (Date first published: 6 May 2020).

## How much do nurses in the Philippines earn?

The nature of health workers' jobs is such that they are put at risk of contracting any disease, including the deadly COVID-19.

Despite low pay, 27-year-old Mae\* chooses to stay in the profession to help save lives.

*"The pay is never enough, dahil may binubuhay ako na anak, single parent ako, at sinusupportahan na pamilya. Pero nag-stay ako ngayong pandemic kasi natagpuan ko 'yung purpose ko sa buhay,"* said Mae.

(The pay is never enough, because I'm raising a child, I'm a single parent, and I'm helping my parents with finances. But I stayed, during this pandemic, because I found my purpose in life.)

This was how Mae answered when asked if she's earning enough as a nurse in a coronavirus ward at a tertiary hospital in Tacloban, a first class city in the Eastern Visayas region.

At present, Mae is getting around P19,000 (\$376.54)-net per month.

Mae has been in the profession for 5 years already. Her family didn't want her to treat coronavirus patients because they were afraid for her, that she would contract the virus herself.

"I found it hard to convince my family, and I thought it would be unfair to my colleagues if I won't join them because most of them have families, too," said Mae in a mix of English and Filipino.

According to Mae, whenever she needs to leave their house, her 3-year-old daughter would always tell her, *"Si Mama puro na lang mga patients ang problem* (My mother always worries about her patients)."

*"That's the reality. Mas mahirap pa ngayon na kapag umalis ako ng bahay dahil nga naka-assign ako sa COVID-19 ward, 3 weeks ako naka-isolate sa pamilya ko,"* Mae said. (It's harder now since if I leave home for work, I can only go home 3 weeks after, since I need to be isolated first because I'm working in a COVID-19 ward.)

It doesn't help when her daughter falls ill. *"Yung anak ko kapag nagkakasakit, mahirap talaga,"* Mae said. (It's really difficult whenever my daughter gets sick.)

## How much is the salary of PH nurses?

According to the [Department of Labor and Employment \(DOLE\)](#), an entry-level registered nurse receives an average salary of P8,000 (\$158.54) to P13,500 (\$267.54) per month.

Registered nurses hired by hospitals commonly receive an average salary of P9,757 (\$193.36) a month. In government, the average salary per month is around P13,500 (\$267.54) while in the private sector, the rate average is around P10,000 (\$198.18) per month.

Earlier this year, President Rodrigo Duterte signed the [Salary Standardization Law](#) that would increase the take-home pay of government employees, including nurses, starting January 1, 2020. But the increase of around P1,500 (\$29.72) is relatively insignificant for someone raising and supporting a family.

Rappler spoke to Alfon Daga, governor of the Philippine Nurses Association in Region 8, who wants a salary increase for health workers in the Philippines.

Daga said that they've been receiving complaints about the low pay of nurses in their region. (READ: [After backlash, DOH studying increase in health workers pay](#))

"That's why the Philippine Nurses Association has been actively advocating for the government to be able to implement the salary grade 15. It is stipulated in our Philippine Nursing Law. So far the PNA has already conducted activities such as mobilizations for the government to be able to know that we are actually pushing for it," Daga said.

### **Quest for better life**

For many years, Filipino nurses had been leaving the country after failed attempts of fighting for higher wages and better working conditions.

In April, the Philippine government imposed a blanket ban on health workers to help the country deal with the pandemic and stem the exodus of these workers.

For 27-year-old Hero Esplanada, a Filipino nurse in London for more than 3 years now, leaving the country was the only option for him back then because he needed to provide for his family.

Esplanada, who hails from Leyte, said that he was earning P7,000 (\$138.72) to P8,000 (\$158.54) a month in a private hospital there.

*"Sobrang liit ng suweldo. Hindi talaga kasya sa panggastos. I came from an average earning family lang tapos anim pa kami magkakapatid. Nahirapan ang parents ko to send my siblings to school,"* Esplanada said.

(The salary was too small. It was really not enough for daily expenses. I came from an average earning family then I have 5 more siblings. My parents found it difficult to send my siblings to school.)

After 3 years of working abroad, Esplanada said that he can now provide his family a comfortable life. At present, he is helping his parents send his younger brother to college. He can also now provide financial support to his parents every month.

Asked if he has plans of returning to the Philippines, Esplanada said, *"I think my life is already here. I am earning way, way better here. At sa totoo lang hindi ko na naiisip sa ngayon na bumalik ng Pilipinas dahil sa situation diyan ng mga nurses* (To be honest, I am not thinking of returning to the Philippines because of the situation of nurses there). I feel really appreciated here compared to the Philippines."

Meanwhile, Mae was planning to go abroad to try her luck there before the pandemic broke. She

applied for a nursing position in New York in October 2019, but was put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

*“Naghihintay na lang ako ngayon ng permit to take the exam. Kasi lumalaki na rin ang anak ko eh kaya kailangan ko humanap ng malaki ang suweldo para sa kanya,”* Mae said. (I’m waiting now for my test permit. My daughter is already growing and I need to get better pay for her.)

Mae added: *“Sana maging lesson ‘to sa government na pahalagahan nila ang mga healthcare workers.”* (I hope this will serve as a lesson to the government to value healthcare workers.)

Rappler looked for the top-paying countries for nurses in the world. According to the 2017 data of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Western countries can pay nurses as much as P5 million per year. That’s a dozen times more than the starting annual wage of nurses in the Philippines.

### Highest paying countries for nurses in 2017

	Country	Ave. Annual Salary (in \$)	Ave. Annual Salary (in P)
1	Hungary	12,794	645,566
2	Slovak Republic	14,942	753,948
3	Mexico	15,235	768,765
4	Estonia	17,417	878,872
5	Turkey	17,445	880,279
6	Czech Republic	17,624	889,323
7	Slovenia	26,131	1,318,594
8	Chile	34,276	1,729,546
9	Italy	34,518	1,741,769
10	Spain	40,656	2,051,485
11	Finland	42,615	2,150,329
12	United Kingdom	45,186	2,280,090
13	Canada	54,971	2,773,841
14	New Zealand	56,318	2,841,792
15	Ireland	57,663	2,909,692
16	Netherlands	61,866	3,121,755
17	Israel	63,541	3,206,259
18	Norway	66,647	3,363,009
19	United States	75,770	3,823,354
20	Switzerland	76,162	3,843,111
21	Iceland	87,639	4,422,256
22	Luxembourg	105,749	5,336,082

\$1 = P50.46

Source: [OECD.Stat](#)

In February, House Deputy Speaker Mikee Romero called on the Department of Budget and Management to [immediately greenlight the basic salary increase of government nurses](#) as mandated by Congress and the Supreme Court.

Romero said nurses deserve a much-needed increase during the pandemic.

The law states that the minimum base pay for nurses working in government hospitals and health institutions should start at salary grade 15, equivalent to about P32,053 (\$635.21) per month.

During this pandemic, the country needs more healthcare workers to protect the people from the virus. But with better compensation abroad, many are choosing to leave in their quest for a better life. – with research from Michael Bueza/Rappler.com

*\*Name has been changed to protect her privacy*

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