

Work Preference of Aspiring Nurses in Sulu Province

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Abstract

This study examined the work preferences of aspiring nurses in Sulu Province, Philippines, with particular emphasis on the influence of socio-economic profile, employment packages, social support, and personal aspirations. Anchored on the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) of Lent, Brown, and Hackett, the research sought to explain how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals shape employment preferences among final-year nursing students. A quantitative-descriptive, cross-sectional research design was employed, involving 446 fourth-year nursing students from five selected nursing schools in Sulu Province during School Year 2024–2025. Data were collected using a self-constructed, validated survey questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests, ANOVA, t-tests, and multinomial logistic regression. The findings revealed that local employment was the most preferred option across genders; however, female students showed a stronger inclination toward overseas employment, while male students demonstrated relatively higher preference for national-level work. Significant differences in work preferences were observed when respondents were grouped according to gender, monthly family income, parental occupation, and parental education. Employment packages—particularly salary and welfare programs—were significant predictors of overseas employment preference, while employer reputation moderately influenced national employment preference. Social support from family negatively predicted overseas work preference, indicating that strong family ties discourage migration. Personal aspirations such as skills enhancement, family responsibility, and recreational experience were highly valued across all work preferences but did not mediate the relationship between socio-economic profile and work preference. The study concludes that nursing students' work preferences are shaped more directly by socio-economic conditions, financial incentives, and family background than by personal aspirations. The findings support the need for policies that strengthen local employment conditions, enhance welfare benefits, and provide targeted career guidance, particularly for students from low-income families. This study contributes to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by informing strategies that support nurse retention, equitable workforce distribution, and sustainable healthcare delivery. By addressing workforce preferences in a geographically underserved region, the study highlights the importance of aligning education, labor policies, and institutional practices to promote long-term socio-economic and health system sustainability.

Keywords: Career decision-making, Employment packages, Nursing students, Social support, Socio-economic profile, Work preference

1. Introduction

The migration and employment preferences of aspiring nurses remain a critical concern for healthcare systems, particularly in developing countries experiencing workforce shortages. Work preference reflects how individuals organize their expectations and priorities regarding employment (Kozák, 2020), and is shaped by socio-economic conditions, institutional work environments, employment packages, social support systems, and future career outlook. Globally and nationally, Filipino nurses increasingly seek employment abroad due to low local compensation, limited benefits, and constrained professional growth, contributing to workforce gaps and weakening local service delivery (POEA, 2019; Migration Policy Institute, 2023; Center for Migrant Advocacy, 2023). Evidence further suggests that work decisions are influenced by organizational conditions such as employee welfare programs, workplace standards, institutional leadership practices, and job satisfaction factors that affect long-term commitment and retention (Santos & Cajucom, 2020). Salary-related expectations remain a strong driver of workforce mobility, particularly among younger professionals seeking stable financial outcomes (Yu & Santos, 2025), while workplace experiences such as burnout and negative organizational culture may also push health workers toward migration or alternative employment options (Armas et al., 2019). In addition, access to career guidance, institutional quality assurance practices, and governance mechanisms can shape students' employment confidence and career planning as they transition to professional practice (De Lara & Santos, 2024; Jacoba et al., 2024). Emerging perspectives in human capital development also emphasize that professional decisions are linked to perceived career success pathways and long-term sustainability of employment opportunities (Ortiz et al., 2025). Within this context, understanding the work preferences of aspiring nurses in Sulu Province is essential to inform evidence-based policies, educational strategies, and retention interventions that strengthen local employment readiness and sustain healthcare delivery in underserved regions (Santiago & Santos, 2021; Santos, 2024).

1.1 Work Preference of Aspiring Nurses in Sulu Province

Work preference refers to how workers arrange their expectations and priorities regarding employment, including compensation, job security, and working conditions (Kozák, 2020). Among aspiring nurses, decisions to work locally, nationally, or abroad are shaped by economic, professional, and social considerations. Globally, Filipino nurses comprise a significant portion of the international nursing workforce, with approximately 18,644 nurses leaving the Philippines in 2019 (POEA, 2019), about 123,165 practicing in the United States (National Nurses United, 2024), and around 40,000 working in the United Kingdom (Tinig UK, 2023). Nationally, low salaries and underemployment continue to push nurses to seek opportunities abroad. In 2023, approximately 124,000 licensed nurses in the Philippines were unemployed, underemployed, or working outside the profession (DOH, 2023), while entry-level nurses earned between ₱8,000 and ₱13,000 monthly (Indeed, 2025). In Mindanao, including Sulu Province, migration patterns reflect national trends, with 17.6% of Overseas Filipino Workers originating from the region (PSA, 2023).

1.2 Employment Packages, Social Support, and Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Nursing Work Preferences

Literature consistently defines work preference as employment choices shaped by individual values, expectations, and perceived rewards, including salary, job security, and job satisfaction (Kozák, 2020; Anderson, C., 2024). Studies across contexts reveal that nursing students often prefer international employment due to higher salaries, improved living conditions, and better career prospects (Zabeli, N., Berisha, A., and Sahatqija, J., 2022; Haynes, 2021; RecognizeApp, 2022; PMC, 2023). In the Philippines, temporary contracts, low wages, and limited benefits exacerbate dissatisfaction and turnover (INSCOL, 2022; UP Manila, 2023). Socio-economic factors significantly influence work preferences. Gender differences affect motivations related to flexibility, specialization, income, and career advancement (WHO, 2020; Maurud, S., Børøsd, E., & Moen, A., 2022; Valet, Schmelzer, and Giesecke, 2023), although some studies report minimal gender-based differences (Md. Golam Rabbani Sarker, 2022). Income and family financial obligations strongly motivate migration, as overseas employment improves household economic stability (Koczan et al., 2021; Manago, 2023). Parental education and occupation further shape aspirations by providing guidance, resources, and exposure to global opportunities (The Open Nursing Journal, 2019; Yazici and Yazici, 2021; Ortiga, 2019). Employment packages—including salary, welfare programs, job security, employer reputation, and professional development—are central predictors of work preference (Wiyono, 2022; Ari Min, Wonhee Baek, and Sungkyoung Chokey, 2023). Competitive benefits, secure contracts, ethical organizational practices, and supportive work environments attract and retain nurses (European Journal of Research on Employee Welfare, 2022; Rajendran and Shamsudin, 2017; Vilá et al., 2023). Social support from family and peers influences decisions by providing encouragement, expectations, or pressure (Li, Z. S. and Hasson, F., 2020; Allen et al., 2020). Personal aspirations—such as skill enhancement, family responsibilities, and recreational experiences—mediate how these factors translate into work preferences (Purohit, Jayswal, and Muduli, 2021; Kozák, 2020; Carter et al., 2019).

1.3 Local, National, and Global Employment Context of Filipino Nurses

Globally, nurse migration reflects disparities in compensation, working conditions, and professional development between sending and receiving countries (OECD; UP Manila, 2023). Nationally, persistent low wages, contractual insecurity, and limited advancement opportunities have intensified nurse outmigration from the Philippines (INSCOL, 2022; DOH, 2023). Regionally, Sulu Province faces compounded challenges due to geographic isolation and limited healthcare resources, making nurse retention particularly critical. While overseas employment offers economic and professional benefits (Migration Policy Institute, 2023), its cumulative effect exacerbates domestic nurse shortages, undermining equitable healthcare access (Center for Migrant Advocacy, 2023).

1.4 Social Cognitive Career Theory as the Framework for Nursing Work Preference Formation

This study is anchored on the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), which explains career decision-making through self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. In this framework, employment packages and social support represent outcome expectations influencing beliefs about financial stability, job security, and professional growth. Personal aspirations—skill enhancement, family responsibilities, and recreational experiences—reflect personal goals that mediate decision-making. Socio-economic variables such as gender, family income, parental education, and occupation influence work preferences indirectly through self-efficacy and outcome expectations.

1.5 Research Gaps on Work Preference Determinants among Aspiring Nurses in Sulu Province

Although extensive literature examines nurse migration and employment preferences, limited empirical studies integrate socio-economic profiles, employment packages, social support, and personal aspirations within a single explanatory model, particularly among aspiring nurses in geographically marginalized areas such as Sulu Province. Existing studies often focus on practicing nurses or national trends, leaving a gap in understanding how final-year nursing students form work preferences before workforce entry. Addressing this gap provides evidence to inform targeted retention strategies, educational reforms, and policy interventions responsive to local realities.

1.6 Alignment of Nursing Workforce Preferences with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) by addressing factors influencing nurse availability, which is essential for sustaining healthcare systems. It supports SDG 4 (Quality Education) by informing nursing education and career guidance aligned with workforce needs. The research contributes to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by examining employment conditions, fair compensation, and job security, and to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by highlighting regional disparities affecting workforce distribution.

1.7 Contribution of the Study to Socio-Economic, Health, and Institutional Sustainability

The study contributes to socio-economic sustainability by informing policies that balance workforce mobility with local healthcare needs. It supports institutional and policy sustainability by guiding government agencies, educational institutions, and healthcare organizations in developing evidence-based retention and deployment strategies. By strengthening nurse retention in underserved regions, the research enhances community and public health sustainability, ensuring continuous access to quality healthcare while supporting ethical and sustainable workforce development.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a quantitative-descriptive approach using a cross-sectional research design to determine the factors influencing the work preference of aspiring nurses in Sulu Province. This design enabled the examination of relationships among variables at a single point in time through numerical data. Quantitative research methods allow variables to be measured using structured instruments and analyzed statistically to identify patterns, relationships, and predictive effects (Creswell, 2022).

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Sulu Province, Philippines. The locale included five selected nursing schools where fourth-year nursing students were officially enrolled during the School Year 2024–2025. Sulu Province served as the setting due to its relevance in examining work preferences within a geographically distinct and underserved region.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were fourth-year nursing students enrolled in five selected nursing schools in Sulu Province during the School Year 2024–2025. These respondents represented aspiring nurses nearing entry into the workforce. Data gathered from the respondents included their socio-economic profile, specifically gender, monthly family income, parents' or guardians' occupation, and parental education level.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

A total population sampling technique was employed, resulting in a sample size of 446 respondents. This approach involved selecting the entire population that met the predetermined criteria, ensuring comprehensive representation of the target group. Total population sampling is a purposive sampling method appropriate when the population is relatively small and possesses distinct characteristics, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Etikan, I., Musa, S.A., & Alkassim, R.S., 2016).

2.5 Research Instrument

The study utilized a self-constructed survey questionnaire as the primary data-gathering instrument. The questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of related literature and a focus group discussion to ensure content relevance. It consisted of four parts: the socio-economic profile of the respondents; their work preference categorized as local, national, or abroad employment; statements related to factors influencing work preference such as employment packages and social support; and statements addressing personal aspirations influencing work preference. Responses were measured using a Likert scale to assess the level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. The scale ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with corresponding numerical values used for statistical analysis. This scaling method was employed to quantify attitudes and perceptions related to work preference.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

To ensure the validity of the self-constructed questionnaire, the researcher conducted a comprehensive review of related literature and a focus group discussion prior to data collection. The instrument was submitted to the research adviser for face validity and evaluated by three subject-matter experts to establish content validity. Pilot testing was then conducted among ten aspiring nurses who were not included in the actual study respondents. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha. After validation, formal permission was requested from the presidents or heads of the selected nursing schools. Upon approval, the questionnaires were administered to the respondents. Data collection was followed by data encoding, analysis, and interpretation.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive and inferential statistical tools were used to analyze the data. Frequency counts and percentages were employed to describe the socio-economic profile of the respondents and their work preferences. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze personal aspirations across different work preferences. The Chi-Square test was applied to determine differences in work preferences when respondents were grouped according to socio-economic variables. Multinomial Logistic Regression was conducted to examine the predictive influence of employment packages and social support on work preference. Additionally, ANOVA, t-test, and Multinomial Logistic Regression were used to determine the extent to which personal aspirations mediated the relationship between socio-economic profile and work preferences.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Work Preference of Nursing Students in Sulu Province

3.1.1 Work Preference by Gender

The findings show that local employment is the most preferred work option among nursing students in Sulu Province regardless of gender. Among male students, more than half preferred to work locally, followed by those who preferred working abroad and at the national level. A similar pattern was observed among female students, although a considerably higher proportion of females preferred working abroad compared to males. While local employment remained dominant for both groups, female students demonstrated a stronger inclination toward international employment, whereas male students showed relatively higher preference for national-level employment. These findings suggest that gender plays a role in shaping work preferences, particularly in the inclination toward overseas employment. This pattern aligns with the study by Zabeli et al. (2022), which reported that nursing students consider working abroad due to higher wages, better living standards, and improved stability. The higher preference for overseas employment among female students supports findings by Abdallah (2023), who noted that women are more likely to migrate for work in contexts that provide safety and financial security. Similarly, Maurud, S., Børøsd, E., & Moen, A. (2022) observed that female nursing students tend to be more motivated by professional interests and specialization opportunities, while male students often anticipate managerial or alternative career paths. These results indicate that both socio-economic and personal motivations contribute to nursing students' work preferences in Sulu Province.

3.2 Personal Aspirations in Relation to Work Preferences

3.2.1 Skills Enhancement, Family Responsibility, and Recreational Experience

The results indicate that skills enhancement is the most strongly emphasized personal aspiration across all work preferences. Students who preferred local, national, or abroad employment consistently reported high levels of importance placed on improving professional skills. Family responsibility also emerged as a highly rated aspiration across all groups, showing minimal variation regardless of preferred work location. Recreational experience was rated highly as well, with the highest emphasis observed among students aspiring to work abroad, reflecting interest in exposure to new environments and cultures. These findings demonstrate that career growth and skill development are central considerations in nursing students' work preferences. This aligns with Hsu and Ling (2019), who found that nursing students prefer practice areas perceived to offer advanced skills and professional development. The results are also consistent with Fontanilla et al. (2023), who identified career growth and the nature of nursing work as key motivations among Filipino nursing students. Additionally, the emphasis on learning and skill acquisition supports the findings of Harlan, M. D., Rosenzweig, M. Q., & Hoffmann, R. L. (2021), who noted that structured and technology-assisted learning environments reflect students' desire to improve competence. The stronger emphasis on recreational experience among those preferring overseas work further suggests that exposure to new cultures and environments influences international career aspirations.

3.3 Differences in Work Preferences Based on Socio-Economic Profile

3.3.1 Gender, Family Income, Parental Occupation, and Education

The analysis revealed statistically significant differences in work preferences when nursing students were grouped according to gender, monthly family income, parental occupation, and parental education level. Gender differences showed that female students were more likely to prefer working abroad compared to male students. Family income was also significant, with students from lower-income families more inclined toward local employment, while those from higher-income families preferred overseas work. Parental occupation significantly influenced work preference, particularly among students whose parents were Overseas Filipino Workers or professionals, who were more likely to choose employment abroad. Parental education likewise showed significant differences, with students whose parents had higher educational attainment being more inclined toward international employment. These findings highlight the strong role of socio-economic background in shaping nursing students' career decisions. The influence of gender supports findings by Maurud et al. (2022), which noted differences in career motivations between male and female nursing students. The preference for local employment among students from lower-income families is consistent with findings from The Open Nursing Journal (2019), which reported that financial constraints often limit overseas opportunities. The strong effect of parental occupation aligns with earlier findings that children of OFWs are more likely to aspire to international careers due to exposure to overseas employment benefits (Abu Dhabi, 2020; Canillo et al., 2024). Similarly, the role of parental education reflects

findings by Yazici and Yazici (2021) and Perna (2021), which emphasized that educated parents provide guidance and confidence that encourage children to pursue broader career opportunities.

3.4 Influence of Employment Packages and Social Support on Work Preference

3.4.1 Predictive Role of Employment Packages and Social Support

The multinomial logistic regression analysis showed that employment packages and social support significantly predicted nursing students' work preferences. Welfare programs and salary were significant predictors of choosing overseas employment, while employer reputation showed a moderate influence on national employment preference. Family influence was also a significant predictor but negatively associated with overseas employment, indicating that strong family ties reduced the likelihood of choosing work abroad. In contrast, professional development opportunities, job security, and peer influence did not significantly predict work preference. These results emphasize the importance of financial incentives and benefits in motivating nursing students to pursue overseas employment. The findings support the European Journal of Research on Employee Welfare (2022), which highlighted that strong welfare programs enhance employee commitment. The influence of salary is consistent with Jiang and Yang (2020), Acharyya (2020), Joblisto Blog (2023), and Meyeding (2018), all of whom emphasized income as a primary motivator in career decision-making. Conversely, the negative effect of family influence on overseas employment aligns with Li, Z. S., and Hasson, F. (2020), who found that strong family ties and cultural expectations often encourage individuals to remain close to home. The limited role of employer reputation and the non-significance of job security and professional development suggest that immediate financial benefits may outweigh long-term organizational considerations in students' work preferences.

3.5 Extent of Effect of Socio-Economic Factors on Work Preference

3.5.1 Direct Effects of Socio-Economic Variables

The regression analysis revealed that gender, monthly family income, and parental occupation significantly influenced work preference, while parental education did not show a significant effect. Male students were less likely to choose overseas employment compared to females. Students from low-income families were also less likely to prefer working abroad. Those with parents working as Overseas Filipino Workers were substantially more likely to aspire to overseas employment. Personal aspirations were found not to mediate the relationship between socio-economic profile and work preference. These results indicate that socio-economic factors directly influence nursing students' work preferences rather than operating through personal aspirations. The lower likelihood of overseas employment among male students may reflect cultural expectations or differing career priorities. Financial constraints among low-income families may limit access to international opportunities, reinforcing local employment preferences. The strong influence of parental occupation, particularly OFW status, supports earlier findings that exposure to overseas work encourages similar aspirations (Hsu and Ling, 2019; Li et al., 2020). The absence of a mediating effect of personal aspirations confirms that while aspirations are associated with work preference, they do not explain the relationship between socio-economic background and career choice. Consequently, the null hypothesis stating that personal aspirations do not significantly mediate this relationship cannot be rejected.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

This study concludes that the work preferences of nursing students in Sulu Province are shaped primarily by socio-economic factors, employment packages, and social support. Although most students prefer local employment, female students demonstrate a stronger inclination toward working abroad, while male students show a slight preference for national employment. Higher family income and having parents working overseas increase the likelihood of choosing international employment, whereas students from low-income families tend to prefer local work. Welfare programs and salary significantly motivate overseas employment, while strong family influence discourages working abroad. Other factors such as job security, professional development, and peer influence do not significantly affect work preference. Furthermore, personal aspirations do not mediate the relationship between socio-economic profile and work preference, indicating that financial conditions and family background exert a more direct influence on nursing students' career decisions.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that policies and programs support nursing students' career decision-making by strengthening financial assistance mechanisms, career counseling services, and institutional partnerships that address both local and international employment pathways. Nursing schools and relevant agencies should enhance guidance programs that consider family involvement, improve awareness of employment opportunities, and reduce barriers faced by students from low-income backgrounds. Efforts to improve salary levels and welfare benefits in local healthcare institutions are also necessary to encourage nurse retention. Additionally, future research should focus on tracking actual employment outcomes of nursing graduates, examining family influence through qualitative approaches, comparing work preferences across regions, and assessing how educational support and job placement initiatives affect long-term career decisions.

Compliance with ethical standards

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the relevant institutional and/or national research committee and with the Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board/ethics committee prior to data collection.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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