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Looking after the left-behind families of overseas Filipino workers: The Philippine experience

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Abstract

Article 16.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “[t]he family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” This task has become a lot more challenging in the age of migration, particularly under a migration regime wherein only workers are allowed admission to another country under specific terms while their family members are left in the countries of origin. To date, the protection and promotion of the welfare of left-behind families is assumed to be the sole responsibility of countries of origin. Based on the experience of the Philippines as an origin country, this paper outlines the impact of international migration on the families of migrants; describes institutions, programs and services developed by the government and other stakeholders to promote their protection and welfare; and concludes with recommendations for transnational cooperation to ensure that the families of migrant workers are not left behind as participants in policy, research and advocacy.

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Introduction

Transnational migration for employment is now a fact of life in the Philippines. Since 2006, a million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) have deployed annually—including both new hires and rehires (i.e., those who renew their contracts), and land-based and sea-based workers—to various countries and territories throughout the world (Tables 1, 2). Although the destinations of OFWs have diversified over the years, the oil-rich Gulf countries are still the primary countries of employment for Filipino workers (Table 3; Figure 1). Women migrants comprise the majority of new hires among land-based workers, and about half of the annual total deployment (considering new hires and rehires, and land-based and sea-based workers) (Table 4). Thus, gender is an important dimension of labor migration from the Philippines, particularly in discussions concerning the relationship between migration and the family.

Over the course of almost four decades of state-supported migration for employment, the Philippine government has developed a comprehensive legal and institutional framework to govern the different phases of temporary labor migration—before migration, while migrants are overseas, and upon their return to the Philippines. The various programs and services developed by the Philippine government combine the facilitation of labor deployment on the one hand, and the extension of support to protect OFWs and their families.

The country's long experience with temporary labor migration has shaped a view of transnational labor migration as a widely accepted livelihood strategy at the level of individuals and families. The family or household context of migration in the Philippines is embedded in the different phases of migration:

- During decision-making, the promotion of family welfare is the driving force in the migration of individual members who seek jobs.
- In preparing to migrate, prospective migrants rely on family networks for information about migration, employment opportunities abroad, and very importantly, funds to carry out their migration plans.
- While migrants are abroad, the families at home are the principal beneficiaries of the migration project, but at the same time, the family provides critical support to migrants that enables them to work overseas. Without the possibility of family reunification, the left-behind families of migrant workers in less skilled occupations essentially bear the welfare and social services costs that destination countries would otherwise bear. In other words, migrant workers contribute to economic production in destination countries while social reproduction is maintained by the left-behind families in the origin countries¹.
- Upon their return to the Philippines, the family figures as the object of migrants' investments in the case of successful return or it becomes the migrants' safety net where return migration is under distressed conditions.

Risks And Costs of International Labor Migration

Although Philippine society has become accustomed to international labor migration, unease over the social costs of migration continues to cast a shadow on its purported benefits, particularly concerns about the ill consequences of migration for migrants and their families. If remittances are the most recognized "development" impact of labor migration, the host of family problems attributed to migration tends to outweigh the positive consequences.

In the court of public opinion, the separation of family members is feared to sow instability, jeopardizing marriages and parents-children relationships. Parental absence due to one or both parents working abroad has been linked to problems such as juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy and early marriage among the children of migrants. The migration of mothers is particularly regarded as problematic because they're remittances have traditionally been implicated in the contribution to the families of migrants

becoming materialistic, losing initiative to work, and dependency on money received from abroad. Some of these issues and concerns have been subjected to research; many remain under-researched.

Research in the Philippines and other countries in the region generally presents a more variable picture of how international labor migration has affected the families of migrant workers. A recently completed study interrogating the impact of parental migration on the health and well-being of children under 12 years old found that the children of migrants were not disadvantaged in terms of health and well-being outcomes when compared with the children of non-migrants (SMC, 2011)². In the Philippine study, preliminary findings point to the emerging role of fathers as carers in mother-migrant households³, and indicators suggesting that young children cared by fathers do not significantly lag behind children in other migrant and non-migrant households. These new findings depart from the results of previous studies in the Philippines suggesting the fathers' lack of involvement in child care and young children in mother-migrant households having more difficulties, being more anxious and performing poorly in school compared to children in other migrant and non-migrant households (Battistella and Conaco, 1998; ECMI/ AOS-Manila, SMC and OWWA, 2004). The full reasons for this change are not yet known, but one of several possible reasons may be related to methodology—in general, it is difficult to reach and involve husbands/fathers as research participants. On the whole, CHAMPSEA-Philippines revealed that children in father-migrant households cared by their mothers tend to show good outcomes compared to children in other migrant and non-migrant households. Such households have better economic conditions made possible by the fathers' overseas employment and the least disruption in terms of child care because this is assumed by mothers.

Although apart, family relations have been maintained with regular communication. The nationwide study of Filipino families and young children in 2003 found that the importance of the family was true for children in OFW and non-OFW families (ECMI/AOS-Manila, SMC and OWWA, 2004). In recent years, communication has been greatly facilitated by a variety of new media which provide instantaneous communication between migrants and their families (see also Madianou and Miller, 2012). It is crucial, therefore, that migrant workers are able to communicate with their family members. In the Philippine context, the migration of one or both parents does not result in a care deficit. At least as far as child care is concerned, left-behind families have been able to cope with the support of the extended family. Even with migration, child care continues to be provided by family and kin. The care of the elderly in OFW families is an area that has yet to be explored.

The well-being of the left-behind families cannot be divorced from the conditions of the migrant family member. At the pre-migration stage, in the event that a prospective migrant is victimized by illegal recruiters, the family can be thrown into debt or lose capital when the funds allocated for the migration of a family member goes awry. During migration, the assurance of decent working and living conditions of the migrant family member can help alleviate the pain of separation. The abuse of domestic workers, the non-payment of salaries of construction workers, the kidnapping of seafarers or the unscheduled return of migrant workers due to economic or political crisis are examples of conditions that can exact a toll on family members in the origin countries—these costs are hidden, difficult to quantify and are often not reckoned with in analyses of the costs and benefits of migration.

Addressing The Risks and Costs

Government Actions

Key government actions to promote the protection of OFWs and their families are outlined in Figure 2. The focus of these actions is the OFWs and programs specifically aimed at families are secondary.

The two key migration agencies, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), are both attached agencies of the Department of Labor and Employment. The POEA is mainly responsible for regulating the recruitment process and the processing of work contracts to secure the protection of OFWs, while the OWWA is the main institution tasked to look into the welfare of OFWs and to provide support and assistance to their left behind families. The OWWA manages a single trust fund pooled from the US\$25.00 membership contributions of foreign employers, land-based and sea-based workers, investment and interest income, and income from other sources. Maintaining the viability of the fund is important to enable the agency to cover the various needs of its members. Membership in the OWWA provides departing OFWs with various services while they are onsite: social benefits, training and educational benefits, and welfare services for their family members (for details, see http://www.owwa.gov.ph/wcmqs/programs_/).

The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 (also known as Republic Act or RA 8042) and as amended by RA 10022 (which took effect on 13 August 2010) are specifically aimed at strengthening the protection of migrant workers throughout the migration cycle. In addition to health coverage under PhilHealth (the national health insurance for OFWs and their dependent family members), in the Home Development and Mutual Fund or Pag-ibig Fund (to enable OFWs and their families to access housing loans) and coverage as OWWA members, RA 10022 provides for mandatory insurance coverage for land-based workers hired by recruitment agencies to cover death and permanent total dismemberment, repatriation, subsistence allowance benefit, compassionate visit, medical evacuation and medical repatriation⁴.

Renewed government efforts to strengthen the programs and services of the National Center for the Reintegration of OFWs (NRCO) are a welcome development. The country's recent experiences in dealing with the displacement, repatriation and reintegration of large numbers of OFWs from Libya and Syria are yet another wake-up call to develop the capacity to effectively respond to these kinds of situations.

A good practice that has been adopted by other countries of origin is mandatory pre-departure orientation seminars (PDOS) to equip departing OFWs with information and knowledge to facilitate the adjustment and to know their rights and responsibilities. Only OFWs are required to attend the PDOS; families of OFWs would also benefit from PDOS, but so far, it has been logistically challenging to include family members as PDOS participants. Other information programs, including those offered by NGOs, have tried to address this gap.

In general, the programs for OFWs are aimed at enhancing rights protection and social protection. Programs for the left-behind families tend to be welfare-oriented and developmental to some extent (e.g., scholarship programs). OWWA has tried to organize OFW families into OFW family circles to facilitate the delivery of services.

In recognition of OFW families who have successfully dealt with the challenges posed by migration to family life, OWWA conducts a nationwide search for the Model OFW Family of the Year Award (MOFYA): "The Model OFW Family of the Year Awards (MOFYA) is a medium for recognizing the achievements of OFWs and their families in managing the impact of overseas employment in family life. It serves as a strategic mechanism for exemplifying the best practices

of OFW families towards optimizing the gains of migration. The Award also recognizes the ultimate results of OFW family success in terms of enterprise development and generation of employment opportunities.”

Initiatives by other stakeholders

NGOs, including the Catholic Church and other faith-based organizations, play an important role in the shaping of migration policies in the Philippines, particularly in the advocacy for the protection of the rights of OFWs and their families. Migration-oriented NGOs also contribute to developing innovative programs and approaches to address the concerns, needs and potentials of OFW families. Some of these examples are as follows:

- Awareness-raising about the realities of migration, with a special focus on the left-behind families
 - The Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ECMI) introduced the commemoration of National Migrants Sunday (NMS) to remember in prayer OFWs and their families and to use this occasion to promote discussion and reflection about international migration and its consequences. National Migrants Sunday is on its 26th year. The ECMI also sensitizes and builds the capacity of church-related organizations to organize OFWs and their families, form support groups, and provide them with various capacity-building programs. The ECMI also conducts the search for outstanding sons and daughters of OFWs.
- Organizing and empowering OFW families
 - Kanlungan Center Foundation organizes OFW returnees and OFW families to set up an Action Center for OFWs and their families, which will provide assistance and promote local development in communities of origin. The Action Center, established in Naguilian, La Union, is one of the more successful models.
- Financial literacy programs for OFW families
 - One initiative is aimed at helping OFW families manage their remittances, especially the use of remittances for investments, savings and resource-generating ventures. In 2010, several NGOs partnered to launch the Pinoy WISE (World Initiative for Savings, Investment and Entrepreneurship) targeting OFWs and their families (for details, see <http://www.pinoywise.org/>).
 - An interesting initiative is Batang Atikha Savers Club, which aims to encourage savings and to promote value formation among the children of OFWs (<http://www.atikha.org/batang-atikha/>).
- School-based programs for OFW families
 - Atikha has developed training programs and materials to develop and implement school-based programs and services to support children and carers in OFW families (<http://www.atikha.org/programs/school-based-program-in-addressing-the-social-cost-of-migration.html>).
 - Some schools have organized the children of migrants to form an organization so they can have a support group and to support capacity-building programs, such as leadership trainings and peer counseling.

The business sector also pitches in by way of giving recognition or offering services catering to the OFW sector. For example, the Bank of Philippine Islands, as a way of recognizing the children of OFWs who excel in academics and leadership and also to honor the sacrifices of OFW parents, started an award-giving search for 10 Outstanding Expat Pinoy Children in 2007⁵. Big companies, like SM and Robinson's, establish one-stop services and centers in selected malls, to offer services to OFW families (and to encourage more business as well).

Media companies also devote radio or television programs or sections in major newspapers (e.g., Global Nation in the Philippine Daily Inquirer; Pinoy Worldwide in the Philippine Star) for feature stories or news reports concerning overseas Filipinos.

CONCLUSION

The risks and costs of temporary labor migration to left-behind families are traditionally viewed as the concern and responsibility of origin countries. The dominant view of temporary labor migration as an economic mechanism to manage the flow of workers alone without due consideration for the family life of migrant workers encourages this premise. Cooperation between origin and destination countries is crucial to better promote the protection of migrant workers, which in turn, is a significant factor to the enhancement of the well-being of left-behind families.

The government and other non-government institutions in the Philippines have developed policies, programs and services to mitigate some of these risks and costs. Government actions, in particular, emphasize the protection of OFWs. There is a need to bring the national framework to the level of local government units so that local communities are better equipped to respond to the needs, concerns and potentials of migrants and their families. An assessment of existing programs and approaches for left-behind families will aid in identifying gaps and scaling up good practices and initiatives.

Region	Permanent	Temporary	Irregular	TOTAL
WORLD	4,423,680	4,324,388	704,916	9,452,984
	47%	45%	8%	100%
Africa	4,669	62,738	7,076	74,483
Asia- E&S	288,597	644,446	299,672	1,232,715
Asia-W	5,645	2,717,046	127,900	2,850,591
Europe	314,710	253,870	95,309	663,889
Americas & Trust Terr.	3,481,263	235,135	166,958	3,883,356
Oceania	328,796	64,003	8,001	400,800
Seabased workers		347,150		347,150

Table 1: Distribution of overseas Filipinos by World Region (Dec. 2010) - STOCK ESTIMATE.
<http://www.cto.gov.ph/pdf/statistics/Stock%202010.pdf>

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
788,070 (60.0%)	811,070 (47.7%)	974,399 (48.3%)	1,092,162 (52.8%)	1,123,676 (54.5%)
1,062,567	1,077,623	1,236,013	1,422,586	1,470,826

Table 2: Deployment of OFWs, 2006-2010

Country	Total Deployment, Land-based OFWs
1. KSA	293,049
2. UAE	201,214
3. Hong Kong	101,340
4. Qatar	87,813
5. Singapore	70,251
6. Kuwait	53,010
7. Taiwan	36,866
8. Italy	25,595
9. Bahrain	15,434
10. Canada	13,885
Total Top 10 destinations (80 % of all land-based OFWs)	898,457/1,123,676

Table 3: Top 10 destination countries, land-based OFWs, 2010.
 Deployment Data (new hires and rehired)

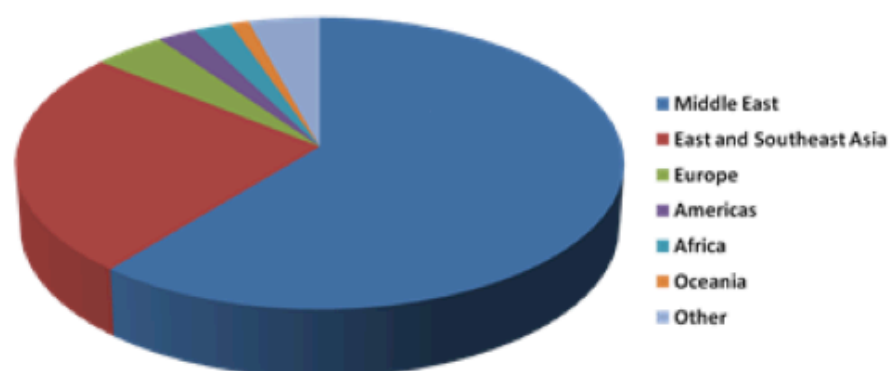


Fig. 2: Growth in diversity of destinations of overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Still the Middle East remains the primary region of destination of OFWs (2010 Deployment Data).

Pre-migration	On-site	Return migration
Regulation of recruitment agencies	One-country team approach of Philippine foreign service posts	Repatriation assistance
Standard employment contract	Establishment of Philippine Overseas Labor Offices (POLOs)	Establishment of the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO)
Regulation of placement fees	Deployment of labor attaches & welfare officers	
Cultural/language training	Establishment of Overseas Filipinos Resource Centers	
Pre-departure orientation seminars		
Other information-education programs	Support to left-behind families (scholarships, training programs, organization of OFW Family Circles)	

Table 4: Programs and services for OFWs and their families.

Endnotes:

1. Destination countries in Asia allow highly skilled and professional migrants to bring their families with them.
2. The Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam were part of the Child Health and Migrant Parents in Southeast Asia (CHAMPSEA) Project spearheaded by the National University of Singapore and the University of St. Andrews. The research project was carried out between 2008 and 2009. For details about the project, see <http://www.populationasia.org/CHAMPSEA.htm>.
3. Children in father-migrant households in Thailand and Indonesia recorded poor psychological well-being compared with children in non-migrant households. This was not the case in the Philippines and Vietnam. The different findings across different countries indicate the importance of considering cultural contexts (Graham and Jordan, 2012).
4. Membership or enrollment in OWWA (per contractor two years), PhilHealth (Php900/year) and Pag-ibig Fund (Php100/month) is accomplished as part of requirements before OFWs are deployed. Membership in the Social Security System (SSS) is encouraged to provide OFWs with an instrument for their pension.
5. See http://www.mybpimag.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=96&Itemid=760