

# The Consequences of Overseas Employment of Parents on the Education and Well-being of Filipino Children

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## INTRODUCTION

While overseas employment of parents frequently brings tangible economic benefits to left-behind children and other family members, many other consequences of parental absence are less positive. Several studies have found that children who remain in the Philippines while parents work abroad experience psychological and emotional stress (Parrenas, 2005; Arellano-Carandang et al, 2007; Asis, 2006; Anonuevo and Anonuevo, 2002; ECMI-CBCP/AOS-Manila, SMC and OWWA, 2004)). And evidence concerning the effects of parental migration on children's academic performance is mixed (Arguillas and Williams, 2010).

We contribute to this debate by analyzing educational and emotional outcomes of children in different family structural arrangements that have developed specifically because of overseas migration of one or both parents. We pay particular attention to the ways in which outcomes may vary according to the gender of the child.

## METHODS

We collected data in two waves of in-depth interviews. In the first wave (2008-2009), we interviewed 40 high-school aged children to compare the experiences of those from households in which one or both parents were overseas with households that had remained intact in the Philippines (10 interviews each for children in mother-absent, father-absent, both-absent, and both together households). The second wave of data was collected in 2013, and captured 7 children with the mother away, 7 with father overseas, one participant with both parents overseas, and 5 children with neither parent abroad. We compare the narratives recorded in the two sets of interviews.

## LIMITATIONS

We had hoped to re-interview all 40 children during the second round of interviews. Despite extensive efforts to locate all respondents, however, only 20 have been reinterviewed to date. Those lost to follow-up have either changed residence within the Philippines or have joined their parents abroad. Two children were not available for interview despite repeated call backs. Those interviewed are from a large urban area and we do not claim that this small sample is a representative one.

## Father away

### Parent-child relationship:

It's not everyday that tatay is here. That's why whenever he is here, we make the most out of his stay here... Whenever he's here it is livelier... He loves to make us laugh that's why it's happy whenever he's here (Rita, female).

Now my father reminds us to be careful. That's what's he is like, when he finds out something he will message us asking how we are and that we should be careful. Communication is better now because we could chat every day (Liza, female).

### Will finish school, honor sacrifice, and contribute to household:

I also promised my father that I will fulfill his dream of becoming an engineer. My father wanted to be an engineer but his family did not have the means to send him to college so he got a vocational course. He is an electrician. Now I am continuing my father's dream. It's very important for me to finish. My father is abroad and he is working very hard there. I want to finish so that he does not have to work anymore. I'll provide their income. It's a way for me to repay their sacrifices. (Melo, male)

### Relationship between parents:

There was a time that my father fooled around. Like, he did have someone abroad. It also became our problem. Maybe because he got lonely there abroad that's why he had someone like-... (Kris, female).

### Parent-child relationship:

It is okay. Our relationship is not as open as with my mother since he is away. He comes home only occasionally so our closeness is just enough I think. (Mark, male)

### Importance of education:

Because my father said that it is the only thing that he could give us, education. And when I graduate, it's like nobody can step on me because I have education; that's why it is important (Liza, female).

### Economic survival:

I realized that, being a man, my father needed to work overseas, to survive. At first, it crossed my mind, why my father had to work overseas, that I want him to stay here, but then I realize that he has to go abroad for us (Jim, male)

### Relationship between parents:

For us, it is just normal, especially that my mother is an OFW. My father nowadays is... kind of screwing around, we even heard news that he's got another woman. Of course, my siblings are affected because they hear our father talking in the cellphone, sometimes angry, and then sometimes murmuring something to someone (Che, female).

### Relationship between child and co-resident parent:

I'm not sure why it came to that. I don't really understand. Before, when I was younger, every time I'd ask my father to go out with me, he readily says yes. But when my mother left, my father became closer to my younger siblings... the younger ones needed more of his attention, especially our youngest, who was very young when my Mother left. It's like he was making up for my mother's absence to the younger ones... (Allan, male)

### Able to stay in school:

And in our case, my father has work and my mother works abroad. And they are able to provide for our needs, unlike others who stopped schooling and their needs are not provided (Allan, male)

## Mother away

### Relationship between child and overseas parent:

It's like the closeness between the child and the parent is lost. (Leah, female).

When your parents become OFW, it's difficult to adjust to a lonesome life... that it seems as if you don't have anyone with you. So what I can advise to others, if you see... if you have an opportunity here in the Philippines, grab it. If there's no need to go abroad to earn money, just stay here because when you leave you'll think of the people you left behind. You'll think of what might happen to them when you leave them. And also what might happen to you when you leave... Because "you don't know what you have unless you lose them. (Sonny, male)

**Personal:** I became more 'confident, unlike the time that my mother was still here, I was always hiding behind her. When she left, I became 'confident' with myself, became independent (Allan, male)

**Economically better now than before:** ...when my mother went abroad, things got a little better than before because she sends cash regularly... before, it wasn't that regular but now it helps us with our daily living. (Che, female)

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Parents often tell their children that education is their only legacy. Most endeavor to send their children to school, and to an increasing number of parents working overseas, ensuring that their child is educated is one strategy for intergenerational mobility. Almost all children of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who were interviewed in round II remain in school, generally perform well in their studies, and are highly motivated to obtain a college education. Most report wanting to repay their parents, who have sacrificed and endured many years of separation. Dreby and Stutz (2011) argue that the sacrifice of overseas parents motivate "compensatory achievement" among left-behind children and the narratives of the children in our study are consistent with that argument. In addition, the children of non-migrant parents in our study appear similarly driven. Most children we interviewed see a college degree as a ticket to a better life (at home or abroad) and for children of OFWs, it may pave the way for family reunification.

Many children report experiencing emotional hardships when their parents work overseas for a prolonged period of time. Some fail to develop strong emotional bonds with their parents (fathers, in particular), especially when those parents leave before their children are born, or when they are still toddlers. Not surprisingly, tensions in parents' relationships are not uncommon, especially in cases involving infidelity. Overall, however, children report adjusting well to their parents' absence and demonstrate considerable resilience.