

***Educational aspirations and outcomes of children:
Experiences of children of overseas Filipino workers***

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Many studies on the consequences on household structure on children, especially in the US, were motivated by a growing concern for children's well-being that developed with a concern over 'non-traditional' family structures. The literature on the family in western settings has contrasted families in which both biological parents are present with other family forms and has focused on non-marital childbearing, divorce, and death of a parent as primary reasons for these other household types.

In the Philippines, alternative family forms also exist, including the increasingly common family pattern characterized by a combination of solo and overseas parenting that has been brought about by large scale international migration. The migration of adult members of the family is not a new phenomenon in the Philippines, but early migration was often male dominated. Recent structural changes in many receiving countries (such as the Middle East and Asia) have opened up job opportunities for women in the service sector and entertainment industry. The rapid growth in demand for female workers in these sectors has contributed to the large volume of overseas migration among women from the Philippines and other developing countries. In the Philippines, for example, newly-hired female overseas contract workers (OCWs) have outnumbered males since 1992 (www.poea.gov.ph). Thus, in addition to an already significant number of children who experience growing up without a father, the feminization of labor migration has also created a large number of families in which the mother is abroad. An additional (smaller) number of children live through their adolescence without either biological parent present, as in certain cases both the mother and father are overseas workers.

The overseas employment phenomenon often brings palpable economic benefits to the family left behind, but the consequences on children's development and well-being are less clear. For example, some studies have found that Filipino children who are left behind experience psychological and emotional stress (Cruz, 1987; Parrenas, 2001), while others have indicated that specific emotions, such as feelings of loneliness, anger, fear, being unloved, or being different from others were observed only for children of migrant mothers (Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People-CBCP/Apostleship of the Sea-Manila, et al., 2004). Also, while one study found that children with absent parents are often less socially adjusted than others (Battistela and Conaco, 1998), earlier research (Cruz, 1987) reported results to the contrary. Whether children's academic performance is affected is also unclear, as evidence on this topic is meager and has also been mixed (e.g. Cruz, 1987; Battistela and Conaco, 1998; Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People-CBCP/Apostleship of the Sea-Manila, et al., 2004).

Our study seeks to compare the educational outcomes and aspirations of high school teens in different family structural arrangements that have developed specifically because of overseas migration of one or both parents. Through the stories of children, we will identify the adaptive strategies that families implement to support children through high school and deal with the absence of parents.

Preliminary findings

Educational aspirations and outcomes

In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 high school students from public and private schools in Metro Manila. These students were from families with different overseas migration experiences (10 with only the mother away, 10 with father only away, 10 with both parents away, and 10 with neither parent away). Results of a previous study reveal quite interesting results of the impact of overseas migration of parents on children's schooling completion, and these interviews constitute a follow-up to that study. The full paper will provide information from both data sources, and will highlight information from the new indepth interviews. In this abstract, we provide some preliminary results from the indepth interviews only.

First, quite high education aspirations are observed across family types, as most of the children interviewed viewed education as key to success. The high educational goals of children of overseas Filipinos workers were largely seen as a tribute to their parents' hard work and sacrifice, and this view was generally shared by children whose parents remained in the Philippines.

"...after college, ..., I intend to work and take care of my family. I do not want to my mother to return abroad so that they can [experience] a good life here in the Philippines" (female, mother abroad).

"Education... is important, because papa and mama are working in America for me, so in order to return the favor for working there, I need to study well so that their weariness for our sakes may be eased a bit." (male, both parents abroad).

"Education is important so I could show my "thank you" to my parents for what they do to us, their children... for their hard work to send us to school..." (female, both parents in the Philippines)

Adaptive strategies

Of particular interest is that there appear to be few negative consequences of the overseas migration of one parent on children's studies/education. On the whole, children in different family configurations enjoy going to school and report reasonable grades. Poor educational outcomes, for example repeating courses, are observed primarily when both parents are away and children are left in the care of a non-relative (or a helper). However, positive schooling experiences can be evident, even in the absence of both parents, when the extended family gets involved and relatives provide emotional support and guidance for children. Specifically, for the children in this study, their grandparents act as surrogate parents when both their mother and father are overseas.

Reconfiguration of the roles of family members appears to be a strategy that families use to deal with the absence of one or both parents. This is particularly true in the case of mother's absence in the home. The husband and the daughter left behind share in the housework, including laundry, preparation of daily meals, and care of younger children. While children from other family types also perform household tasks, the experiences of those whose mothers are away show an more marked increase in their share of housework. In addition, when house-work

conflicts with school demands, children may reduce the number of hours that they devote to school work to be able to perform the requisite household tasks.

“I like it when my mother was here ... when I had examinations, she would not let me do household work... she said that I should just study...”
(female, mother abroad)

“She (mother) tells us, just study, that’s what you should do, not work.”
(female, mother abroad)

“Before my mother left, I did not do the laundry but now I wash my own clothes ... “(female, mother abroad)

While migration often has considerable economic benefits for the family left behind, it also has some costs, especially to the children. Children expressed sadness and longing for their parents, especially for their mother.

“ ... we are not complete as a family. We may be rich, but we are not complete. We prefer that mama is here, even if we do not get all of what we want, at least she is here...” (Female, mother away)

“I cry whenever I miss her .. I prefer that she be around so I can share my problems with her ..” (female, mother away)

It’s difficult, because, especially ... it’s been many years since my parents left, my father 6 years traveling to and fro, I see other families that are complete, I find it difficult, I feel jealous. I long for mama and papa. I miss them.... It’s happier when your parents are around, it’s happier when you live together, talking to each other, laughing together, like that. In our case, we cannot do that because they are in another country, and then, if you think of it, they are there working. (Male, both parents away)

To counteract the loneliness that many families experience, the use of technology, and cell phones and the internet in particular, help them cope. Girls (more than boys) also reported sharing their problems with their close friends in school. Peers are an important source of emotional support. Regardless of the children’s family type, peers provide a great deal of help for children who have difficulty at school.