

Family Ties in a World Without Borders

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THE FAMILY IS, BY FAR, the most important, the most cherished, and the most durable institution in Philippine society. Noting its importance, McCoy (1994:7) comments that the family has survived even as Philippine society has gone through three empires and five republics in the past century. Indeed, recent studies suggest the continuing salience of the family among Filipinos. A study at the University of the Philippines (Sycip, Asis and Luna, ongoing), for example, finds that the well-being of Filipinos is anchored on the family. Six of the top ten most important components of the good life identified by the study's 498 respondents pertain to the emotional support provided by the family. Faith in God emerged as the most important, followed by good marital relations and having a permanent job. All the other remaining components mentioned by respondents are related to the family. These are being with children, love from children, love of spouse and love of parents/siblings, being with spouse, and respect from family. These are also the same factors that elicit high satisfaction ratings among respondents—the aspects of life that they are satisfied about.

While many wish to think of the Filipino family as a fortress, it is also widely acknowledged that it is not impervious to the winds of change. Among other ongoing developments, the magnitude of today's international labor migration has touched off alarm bells on whether the family can weather its negative consequences. The Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) estimates that currently, there are some six million Filipinos abroad of which the greater number, 4.24 million, are migrant workers and 1.76 million are emigrants (Office of the President, 1995).¹ It is further estimated that of these 4.24 million migrant workers, 2.45 million are documented while 1.79 million or as many as 42 percent are undocumented. In turn, the sheer volume and still increasing incidence of international labor migration has stirred concerns about children growing up without fathers, mothers, or both parents, and about the stresses that migrations impose on marital relations and the stability of the family as the basic unit of society.

More recently, the Flor Contemplacion tragedy highlighted and concretized all the things that can go wrong when fami-

lies are separated by migration—infidelity on the part of spouses, and early marriages, adolescent pregnancy and estrangement on the part of growing children.² Although the experience of the Contemplacion family may not be representative of the situation of migrant families, their private pain has come to represent the costs of overseas employment. The institution that has survived empires and republics now appears somewhat fragile against the tempest that is international migration.

The tempest has its roots in the 1970s when the Philippine government launched the overseas employment program. Faced with rising unemployment and decreasing foreign reserves, the demand for labor in the oil-rich Gulf countries in the 1970s offered some relief to the country's economic crisis. The convergence of domestic and international factors thus set the stage for overseas employment. Although the deployment of overseas workers was intended as a stopgap measure, it has not abated over the years. Apart from the continuing economic crisis, overseas employment has since become patterned and institutionalized and facilitated by various social networks including that of family and kin members (Asis, 1992). Between 1975 and 1979, the deployment of overseas workers averaged about 77,765 annually; in the 1980s, the yearly average soared to 380,305. As the phenomenon extends into the 1990s, the yearly average of 630,402 suggests that the saga of overseas employment will continue for some time.

The increasing feminization of overseas employment has further heightened the uneasiness about the phenomenon.³ Although labor migration flows were

heavily male when they began, by the end of the 1980s, women migrant workers had outnumbered men. Between 1989 and 1992, female migration grew faster than male migration at 5.6 percent and 2.7 percent respectively, spurred by the increasing demand for domestic helpers and entertainers in foreign countries (*Today*, May 28, 1995:3). As of 1994, 52 percent of the deployed land-based workers were women (Department of Labor and Employment, 1995:6). It is to be noted that when men migrate in search of work, they are seen as fulfilling their role as breadwinners. But women who leave their families to work abroad, especially mothers, defy the traditional cultural prescription of mothers as keepers of hearth and home. Consequently, scholars consider emerging trends in labor migration as grist for further sociological study and inquiry (Go, 1993; Medina, 1991; Mendez et al., 1984).

How has international migration affected Filipino families? What kinds of opportunities and threats does international migration offer? Do men's and women's migration have the same consequences for families? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to examine. In considering the consequences of international migration on the family, the paper starts with the premise that the family is a social product whose form and function are shaped by prevailing conditions in the larger social order. To the extent that external conditions are changing, so does the family. Rapp notes that, "As a social (and not a natural construction), the family's boundaries are always decomposing and recomposing in continuous interaction with larger domains" (as cited in Coontz, 1988:13).

As already alluded to, the paper will focus on international labor migration for several reasons. The great majority of Filipino international migrants are workers and the nature of their migration poses several challenges to the family. Unlike those of permanent migrants, families of migrant workers cannot join family members in their place of destination. Although the separation is temporary, the duration can extend into many years or indefinitely. Finally, upon their return, reintegration and adjustment processes will have to be worked out by workers and their families.

International Migration and the Family

As the basic unit of society, the family has multiple functions of meeting the production, consumption and reproductive needs of its members. To meet these needs, the family or household constantly works at finding a fit between needs and resources. It is generally accepted that migration is one of several strategies that families or households use for survival or mobility (Bach and Scharml, 1982).⁴ Harbison (1984:231) suggests that the family serves not only as the structural context within which an individual decides to migrate, but that it also serves as the unit for decision-making and maximization. The family, thus, figures in the various stages of the migration process—deciding who will migrate, raising funds for the move, directing the destination of migrants, providing assistance to migrants in the place of destination, and drawing the commitments of migrants. As a socializing agent, the family also transmits migration-related values to its members. Families that have a long history of migration are more likely to have values

and norms promoting migration. For these reasons, some scholars have proposed that the family or household is the appropriate unit of analysis for migration, or a household level analysis be at least included in the study of migration.

In the Philippines, family concerns pervade most migration decisions and outcomes. Among Filipinos, migration is rarely conceived of or undertaken as an individual endeavor. Studies consistently show that migrants seek overseas employment primarily to help their families. This finding has been reported by several surveys, including those undertaken by Arcinas (1991) and Go and Postrado (1986) on overseas contract workers who go to the Gulf region, Osteria's (1994) study of domestic helpers and entertainers in Japan, and Asis' (ongoing) study of migrant communities. Migrants are aware of the risks and sacrifices attendant to migration, but these are overcome by expectations of gains (Arcinas, 1991) or pragmatic considerations (Osteria, 1994).

In Osteria's study, migrant women, especially domestic helpers, expressed fears about their marriages and the children they left behind (1994:32). Likewise, family members who are left behind know of the sacrifices and difficulties of migrant members (Asis, ongoing study; Arcinas, 1991). In some instances, the potential costs to the family and particularly, the concern for growing children, also work to discourage prospective migrants from pursuing overseas employment. In the interest of the family, individual members take to migration to promote the family's economic well-being, although they can also be prevailed upon to stay to minister to the family's emotional sustenance (Asis, ongoing study).

The Consequences of International Labor Migration on the Family

Given the economic situation and the well-entrenched position of elite families in the Philippines, ordinary families have little chance for social mobility. Overseas employment has emerged as an effective vehicle for survival and/or social mobility for many families. Some migrants see migration as their only escape from poverty (see Osteria, 1994:32). As such, migration studies generally include, if not focus on, the economic consequences of overseas employment.

Studies concur that migrant families have benefited from overseas employment, at least over the short-term. Remittances have enabled ordinary families and households to acquire resources in a short time, and with tangible results to show for these. In sending communities, residents invariably point to new houses and other material and infrastructure improvements as indicators that their communities have achieved some prosperity. Remittances have also bankrolled the education of children or siblings, the purchase of appliances and other consumer durables, and for a few, the capital to start small businesses. Of course, the mobility of migrant families presents a stark contrast to the grinding poverty of nonmigrant families in the community. Its economic benefits to households notwithstanding, the long-term economic gains of migration are rather suspect given the country's persistent economic difficulties. Some have argued thus, that unless migrants continue working abroad, the families they left behind may be unable to maintain the standards of living they have gotten accustomed to, or they may slip back to their premigration situation.⁵

Still others have argued that although overseas employment has brought economic benefits to families, these are not exactly without costs. For one, overseas employment has been perceived as heralding the breakdown of the family. In sending communities, some community members perceive that the loss of the family cannot be compensated for by material gains. For some therefore, the refrain seems to be: what does it profit a family if it advances economically but then loses its soul?

But findings from some studies in the Philippines (e.g., Arcinas, 1991; Cruz, 1987; Go and Postrado, 1986) and other Asian countries (see Gunatilleke [ed], 1991 for studies in Bangladesh, Korea, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand; and Gulati, 1994 in Kerala, India) indicate that the costs of labor migration to the family may not be as extensive nor as damaging as popular perceptions would lead us to believe. Arcinas (1991) and Go and Postrado (1986), for example, found that infidelity or marital dissolution was not as widespread in sending communities. Upon closer examination moreover, much of what passes as threats of migration to the family are largely impressionistic. While community members are quick to point out family problems attendant to overseas employment, they are less certain when asked for details of these (Asis, ongoing study). Likewise, when the views of migrant families are taken into account, their situation is not as problem-ridden as outsiders would see this. When asked about how overseas employment has affected family life, respondents from non-migrant families are more likely to cite problems with children, infidelity and the dissolution of the family. On the other hand, respondents from migrant families

are wont to mention their anxieties about the situation of their family members overseas. In focus group discussions conducted among children of migrant workers and parents from nonmigrant households, the latter tended to view the former as having ways different from those reared by their own parents. Lacking parental guidance, children of migrant parents were seen as spoiled, extravagant, and lacking interest in education. Discussions with the children of migrant workers, on the other hand, show that they are aware of the sacrifices of their parents and they see furthering their studies as a way of repaying their parents. Although they wish that their family were together, the children of migrant workers recognize that growing up in the absence of their parents had taught them to become more independent.

Although migration is viewed to impose certain costs and risks to families, women's migration is deemed more problematic for families than men's migration. The participation of Filipino women in international migration is basically an extension of the mobility afforded them in Philippine society. Filipino women have been noted to be as migratory as men in internal migration, particularly in rural-to-urban migration. Families and households in the Philippines have been found to have a stake in the mobility of women. For rural families, the migration of daughters to urban areas is a means to enhance family resources. Although sons also migrate, Trager (1984) and Stark and Lauby (as cited in Osteria, 1994:7) suggest that daughters are perceived to be more reliable than sons in remitting income to their natal family. But the increasing number of women in overseas employment has conjured other negative im-

ages of families being abandoned by mothers. In point of fact, however, women migrant workers comprise mostly of single women. Among domestic helpers, single women comprise 80 percent of all migrant women (Department of Labor and Employment, 1995:35). Entertainers are also likely to be dominated by single women. The consequences of women's migration on the family may differ for single women and married women.⁶ In particular, concerns about the migration of married women seem to boil down to who will assume the reproductive tasks traditionally performed by women, a question that does not arise in the migration of men. This leads us then to compare how men's and women's migration affect the family.

Research findings (e.g., Gulati, 1992; Go and Postrado, 1986) show that migrant families have generally managed well in the absence of men. Wives and mothers who are left behind assume multiple roles—as temporary household head, decision maker and solo parent—but in the process, many report they find new areas of strength, so that the experience has generally been more positive than negative (Go and Postrado, 1986). In contrast, observations of families left behind by migrant women generally suggest that men do not take on the reproductive roles of migrant women. Daughters, sisters and other female relatives step in to fill the void left by married migrant women. But although alternative caregivers are available, these are popularly seen as poor substitutes for mothers. It is not unusual for members of sending communities to say that if overseas employment is truly necessary, other family members should take on this task but the mother should stay home to rear the children (Asis, ongoing).

Another common view of the negative consequences of international labor migration is that it ruptures the fabled closeness of the Filipino family. In the Philippines, it has been noted that although families are nuclear in composition, they are functionally extended (cited in Go, 1993: 14). More than residence, families are linked, sustained and nurtured by the exchange of support among kin. Even when family members migrate, their ties to the family in the area of origin are not severed. This holds true even among those who seek to permanently settle abroad. Among Filipino immigrants in Hawaii, Caces (1985) finds that their commitments and attachments were oriented to family members left behind in the *Ilocos*. Communication exchange, the sending of remittances, and exchange of gifts bridge the distance between family members. She developed the concept of "shadow households" to refer to the continuing ties among family or household members distributed in space. Family members left behind reciprocate by parenting the children of migrants.

Similar observations have been documented in countries where migration has become an established household strategy (Radcliffe, 1992; Chant, 1992; Momsen, 1992). Momsen (1992: 80) sees migration as an extension of the spatial boundaries of households with the end result that "both migrants and nonmigrants alike develop dual-place identity with family responsibilities in both source and destination areas". The extensive migration of Pacific Islanders has led to a phenomenon which James (1991) refers to as "transnational corporation of kin" linking extended families over vast areas of the world (cited in Connell and Brown, 1995: 27). Thus,

when considering the family beyond the usual husband-wife or parent-child dyads, migration expands rather than constricts family membership. Migration creates "borderless families" which can be relied on to promote family interests.

The social network perspective also emphasizes the role of family and kin in migration flows. Once migration has gone on for some time, the links between areas of origin and destination and that between migrants and nonmigrants are cemented. As has been established by various studies, migrants tend to go to areas where other kin or community members have gone to. The reason is simple—with other kin in the destination, migration is less risky. As more migrants come, daughter communities or replicas of the community of origin are established in the destination. In the Philippines, overseas migration has been sustained in part because of the efficacy of family and kin networks. Such networks have even been known to play an important role in facilitating undocumented migration. The entry of Filipino workers in countries which do not actively seek out foreign workers demonstrates the inventiveness of these networks to circumvent government regulations aimed at stemming the flow of undocumented migrants and the problems arising from these.⁷

Discerning Myths and Realities About Migrations and Families

Indeed, international migration introduces changes to the family. It should be noted, however, that factors other than international migration are also impinging on Filipino families and the larger Philippine society. Globalizing influences such as the reach of media can influence

values and lifestyles in ways that can undermine tradition and the family. Distinguishing the influences of migration and other factors that affect the family is not easy. Another difficulty in the study of the family is the intermingling of the ideal and the real. Perhaps because most of us have a personal and intimate experience of the family, we take it as a "natural arrangement", and any deviations thereof are assumed to have negative consequences (Miller, 1993:7-8).

For example, the belief that child-rearing should be provided by natural parents has been firmly etched in our consciousness. The absence of one parent is regarded as bad enough, and doubly so when both parents are absent. Almost always, alternative caregivers—grandparents, aunts and uncles, older children and other relatives—come into the picture (Asis, ongoing study). Contrary to popular perceptions, data in some communities where a substantial number of both parents are out of the country do not show the children of migrants to be more delinquent or problematic than those raised by their own parents. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, negative perceptions about children of migrant workers persist, in part because of earlier theories promoting the idea that early family socialization is responsible for child outcomes.⁸

In the face of change, the emergence of alternative arrangements is sometimes taken as a sign that the institution is on the decline. Such developments, however, can also be indicative of the capability and the resilience of institutions like the family to deal with change. A faithful rendering of the changes affecting the Filipino family should involve specifying the aspect that

is changing, the form it is taking, and the actors or institutions in transition vis-a-vis the larger milieu.

As suggested by the competing pull between family closeness and economic gains, the consequences of international labor migration on the family are neither unidirectional nor total for all groups concerned. In considering the process of change, Coontz (1988:364) cautions that "Changes in families have resolved some tensions only to create new ones. Old patterns of equality and inequality have given way to new patterns of autonomy and control. Losses for some family members have been gains for others, while gains for some family units have been losses for others". Losing sight of these transitions may mislead us into celebrating what we have gained, or lamenting what we have lost, when in fact, the family may be attempting simply to balance its gains and losses (Coontz, 1988:364).

Changes in general, and gains and losses in particular, also need to be examined for the individuals that comprise the family. Although the family may very well survive as a unit, particular individuals may stand to gain or lose more in the process. As acknowledged by family members and migrants alike, migration entails sacrifices on the part of migrants. In the name of the family, daughters or sons, mothers or fathers take a chance to promote the common good. But for all their sacrifices what benefits come their way? How does the family recognize or deal with the costs migration imposes on migrants? In worst case scenarios where migrants have had traumatic experiences while working abroad, how can the migrant be helped? Is the family capable of dealing

with such crises? Under what circumstances do family networks succeed or fail in dealing with crisis situations?

The gains and losses of migration may also differ for the family members left behind. Educational opportunities made possible by migrants' remittances may benefit children. The care of elderly family members, however, may be adversely affected by the departure of migrants particularly women migrants, who traditionally provide caregiving. On the other hand, it is also possible that the economic benefits of migration can enhance the care given to elderly members. Some evidence from outmigration areas in the Philippines indicate that in the event of migration, elderly family members are not left alone to fend for themselves but are cared for by other family or kin (Domingo and Asis, 1995:46).

The Filipino family has long been regarded as an encompassing institution that takes care of the Filipino from cradle to grave. As we move into an increasingly borderless world, the distribution of family and kin across space inevitably leads to changes in household composition. Although commitments to the family and the household may persist (in spite of migration), the form these commitments assume may change because of the physical separation. A division of labor has emerged where migrants contribute significantly to the economic sustenance of their families, and in their absence, family members left behind assume the reproductive tasks needed to maintain the family as a unit. Up until now, adjusting to migration is basically the responsibility of the family. It is possible that in the future the family will need help from other institutions to survive the promises and threats of an increasingly borderless world.

Notes

- ¹ Migration scholars classify international migrants into permanent emigrants, temporary migrants (which include migrant workers), undocumented migrants, and refugees.
- ² Flor Contemplacion was a domestic helper in Singapore. She was hanged for the murder of Delia Maga, also a domestic helper, and her ward, Nicholas Huang. Her death sparked protests in the Philippines. Many Filipinos believe she was innocent.
- ³ Majority of migrant women work as domestic helpers and entertainers. Their migration has kindled concern not only because of what their departure implies for their families but also because of the dangers their work expose them to. The nature of their occupations leave women vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, including sexual harassment.
- ⁴ Although scholars oftentimes distinguish families from households, I use them interchangeably in this paper. At least in the sending communities that I have studied, families and households are closely intertwined. In addition, given the functional rather than residential basis of kinship in the Philippines, I see no problem in using either term.
- ⁵ The benefits of remittances need to be qualified since they are also increasingly used to pay back debts incurred in financing migration. Overseas migration at present requires more investments than was the case in the 1970s.

⁶ In some countries, for example, there is concern that the exposure of single migrant women to urban lifestyles may affect their moral values (Fawcett, Khoo and Smith 1984:4). In the Philippines, the migration of female entertainers has raised similar concerns.

⁷ Illegal recruiters are undeniably an important player in undocumented migration. Their activities have victimized untold numbers of individuals. When I say that family networks also promote undocumented migration, I am referring to the family efforts that go into raising funds and finding job placements for family members in the destination, without resorting to government instrumentalities. Government efforts to curb

undocumented migration are premised on the notion of exploitative illegal recruiters. Undocumented migration can also be worked out by family networks, with the least risks to prospective migrants.

⁸ The social mold perspective has been influential in promoting the idea that early family socialization is responsible for child outcomes. In a thought-provoking article, Miller (1993) presents data on the limits of environmental influences and the possible role of biological influences on a range of behavior. He is aware that this can be interpreted as a return to biology and as a justification for conservative politics.

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