

*The Consequences of Overseas Employment on  
Parents Who Go and Children Who Stay*

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### ***Abstract***

This paper examines the consequences of overseas labor migration of parents who leave children behind in the Philippines on those migrants themselves and on their children. We draw on two sources of data, semi-structured interviews with parents who migrated to Ireland in response to opportunities created during the Celtic Tiger era, and semi-structured interviews with high-school aged children in the Metro Manila area who had one or both parents overseas. The interviewees are not related to one another, but each describes the consequences of the parents' migration for the family. The children's interviews focus primarily on their own experiences, while the parents' interviews examine a range of impacts on the entire family.

### ***Background:***

In the Philippines, the overseas migration of adult members of the family is not a new phenomenon. While early overseas migration was often male migration, recent structural changes in many receiving countries (including 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 United States, newly-hired female Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) have outnumbered males in most years since 1992 ([www.poea.gov.ph](http://www.poea.gov.ph)). Thus, in addition to an already significant number of children who experience growing up without a father for a significant portion of their lives, the rapid increase in the number of female migrants 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.

One new destination country for Filipino migrants is Ireland. The economic boom in the decade of the 90's, dubbed as the Celtic Tiger era, transformed Ireland from a net emigration to a net immigration country beginning in 1996. This reversal in migration flow placed Ireland in a position both as a seasoned emigration country and as a neophyte host country. Ireland's inexperience in hosting immigrants has led to State policies that are evolving and have had a profound influence on the way immigrants and their families live their transnational lives.

Filipinos were among the immigrant groups who responded to the economic opportunities in Ireland. In 1991, there were only 257 officially registered Filipinos in Ireland, ninety percent of whom were "romantic immigrants" (Filipinos married to Irish nationals) and domestic workers employed in diplomatic missions. By 1999, however, this number had begun to climb with the arrival of Filipino aircraft engine mechanics, mechanical engineers, and sales workers. By the year 2000, Filipino nurses were also arriving. Data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) reveal that 126 Filipino nurses emigrated to Ireland in that year. The following year 1,529 Filipino nurses were added. Nurses have since become the predominant Filipino occupational group comprising the majority of all Filipinos with work permits and visas in Ireland. From 2000-2006 the POEA data shows that the Philippines sent a total of 3,512 nurses to Ireland, 82 percent of whom were women. In 2002, a new group of Filipino workers

arrived in Ireland. Filipinos who had been working in Malaysia and Singapore as domestic workers were recruited to work as nannies in Ireland.

### ***Parents who go***

Many of the workers just described left spouses and/or children behind in the Philippines. Some eventually brought their spouses to Ireland, as an initial phase of family reunification. Typically, if both spouses agreed that they could make a life in Ireland, the next step would be to bring their children, a third phase of family reunification. Over the course of this process, however, there are frequently extended periods of separation between husband and wife and parents and children. In this paper, we examine the process of separation and strategies designed to mitigate the hardships involved, as transnational lives take shape. We discuss perceptions of transformations in household division of labor, parents' remittance behavior, communications strategies, and the return visits and the potential impacts of these changes on the well-being of both children and parents.

### ***Children who are left behind***

While overseas employment often brings significant economic benefits to the family left behind, the consequences on children's development and well-being are less clear. For example, a number of studies have found that Filipino children who are left behind experience psychological and emotional stress (Cruz, 1987; Parrenas, 2001; NIRP, 2001), while others suggest that the children have better self-reported physical health (NIRP, 2001). Although some researchers have found that children with absent parents are less well socially adjusted than those in intact families (Gastardo, 1998), others (Paz, 1987) have reported results to the contrary. The extent to which children's academic performance is affected is also unclear, as evidence on this topic is meager and has also been mixed. Analyses by researchers across disciplines, most of which have been based in the United States and other industrialized countries, have often indicated that being part of a single parent family has negative consequences for children's educational outcomes (Amato, 1988; Coleman, 1988; Krein and Beller 1988; McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994), but the reasons for these findings vary and tend not to include migration as a cause for the household structures examined. Recent analysis by Arguillas and Williams (2010) also provides mixed results regarding the effects of overseas labor migration of parents on children's education outcomes.

### ***Data, methods and study sample***

#### ***Information on parents:***

We draw on field research that took part in two phases. The first phase took place in Ireland from mid-June to mid-July 2007. Through an initial contact, the first author on this study was introduced to several key informants who were interviewed for background on the establishment of a "migration system" between the Philippines and Ireland. Through chain and snowball referrals, subsequent interviews were conducted with a cross-section of Filipino migrant workers – domestics workers, sales workers,

hospitality workers, hotel and restaurant workers, engineers, and nurses. Questions focused on their migration experience in Ireland, including living conditions, working conditions in different occupational categories, and the impact of dynamic state policies (both in Ireland and the Philippines) on them and their families. In addition, questions addressed the support structures that make transnational life possible.

The second phase of the field research was carried out from mid-June to mid-July 2008, exactly one year after the first phase. Building on information gleaned from the initial fieldwork regarding the social, economic, cultural, and political context in which Filipinos in various occupational groups were working in Ireland, the next phase addressed matters pertaining to the transnational lives of married female Filipino nurses who had arrived in Ireland prior to March 2004, especially the reunification process, role (re)configurations in the household division of labor, and transnational practices including communication, cash and kind remittances, and visits to the origin community.

The decision to focus on the families of married female nurses was made for the following reasons. First, more than half of the Filipinos working in Ireland are engaged in the nursing profession and many were among the pioneers. Of these, a great majority (82 percent) were women. Importantly, the focus on families of married professional women provides a different perspective in the study of transnational families, which have mostly examined the experiences of women in low skilled occupations (Parreñas, 2005; Zontini, 2004, Asis, et. al., 2004).

In all, nine in-depth individual interviews were conducted with married female nurses, seven were conducted with husbands of nurses, and nine interviews were conducted with nurses and spouses present. The respondents were identified through snowball referrals. The couple interviews ranged from 2 to 4 hours, while individual in-depth interviews ranged from 1 to 4 hours. Most individual in-depth interviews were conducted at the respondents' home, in their place of business, in their places of work after their shifts, or in a quiet corner of a coffee shop. All but one of the couple interviews were conducted in the respondents' home.

To supplement the in-depth interviews, two group interviews were conducted with married female nurses. The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours. The participants were recruited with the help of community leaders. The discussion focused on their opinions and experiences regarding Ireland's immigration policies, family reunification and role (re)configurations in the division of labor in the household 1) before the migration of the nurse-spouse, 2) after migration the migration of the nurse-spouse but before reunification, and 3) after reunification. In addition, their transnational practices of communication, cash and kind remittances, and visits were also covered.

In addition, two focus groups were conducted with husbands of nurses. These also covered topics pertaining to family reunification and role (re)configurations in the household division of labor before and after the migration of the nurse, the spouse, and the children (where applicable). Participants were selected with assistance from community leaders. Some of the participants knew each other because they reside in the same county in Ireland, but this did not appear to inhibit them from sharing their opinions about the topics discussed. On the contrary, it appeared to contribute to a more engaging discussion as they were comfortable with the topics, the moderator, and with the participants in the FGD. Themes that had emerged in the nurses' group discussion were also raised in the FGDs to get men's perspectives.

### *Information on children:*

The Survey of Households and Children of Overseas Contract Workers survey was conducted in 1999 by the Departments of Psychology, and Sociology of the University of the Philippines (UP), Friends of Migrant Workers, and the UP Population Institute. Respondents included children, 10-21 years old from four primary OCW-sending areas in the Philippines: City of Manila, Davao City, Iloilo City, and Pangasinan. Because the survey was conducted only in urban settings, the results of our analyses can only reflect the experiences of children who reside in urban areas.

Respondents in this study were interviewed if one or both of their parents had been overseas for at least three consecutive years, or if neither parent was overseas. Children who had one or both parents abroad, but whose parents had left more recently were not interviewed. Although it might also have been desirable to interview teens from single-parent families that developed as the result of separation or factors other than migration, teens from those families were not included in the original survey design.

We have augmented the survey data with in-depth interviews with teens with one or both parents abroad (and with a comparison group whose parents have not migrated). All interviews were conducted in 2008 through 2009 in Metro Manila, an important disembarkation site in the Philippines. We screened students who are two years from completing high school in the local school system and assigned them into categories according to the groups interviewed in the original survey. We interviewed ten students whose mothers had been overseas for three or more years, ten whose fathers had been overseas for three or more years, ten who had both parents overseas, and ten who are living in households in which both biological parents were present.

We had them describe their experiences in school and at work (and those of their siblings); we ascertained who (if anyone) helps them with school work, what their hopes and expectations are about future schooling (and what their parents' expectations are), what their commitments are to work at home or in family enterprises, whether they currently hold outside jobs, and expectations about future work and family circumstances. We asked about parents' migration, amount of financial help (to the extent that that is known), and parents' anticipated return. We asked how much contact teens and parents had maintained and how that contact (or lack of contact) might affect school outcomes.

### *Human Subjects*

The protocols employed to address the study questions in all phases of the research were IRB-approved. Confidentiality was promised to all respondents and no Identifying information is included in our write-up.

### *Study Limitations*

This study looks at the experiences of a particular set of international migrants and a relatively small sample of children left behind in Metro Manila. We do not claim to represent the experiences of all international migrants or children of overseas workers.

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