

Across Borders: Understanding Transnational Fathering of Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) Fathers

Kristine L. Andaya

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Philippines
krstnandaya@gmail.com

Marilag M. Baricaua

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Philippines
marilag440@gmail.com

Charlotte I. Marquez

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Philippines
marquezcharlotte93@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research sought to understand the lived experiences of OFW fathers in transnational fathering and explore their motivations and the decision-making process that resulted in their intention and willingness to work abroad despite having to leave their children behind. This study also aimed to describe their ideal construct of a father and how they negotiate this construct with their actual experiences as an OFW father. Nine (9) OFW fathers were interviewed regarding their experiences as OFWs who practice fathering from a distance. In agreement with the premises of Lee's theory of migration, the OFW father's decision to work overseas despite leaving their children behind was revealed to have been influenced by the disadvantageous conditions in the Philippines and personal factors as well. The study found that OFW fathers' construction of fatherhood is a mixture of role expectations derived from both traditional and "new" fatherhood discourses. Some of the role expectations in this construction of an ideal father, however, prove to be unattainable because of the transnational nature of their parental engagement. As a result, to maintain and reconfirm their identity, they tend to restructure their practices, further internalizing a more contemporary version of a father. Finally, the study illustrates some facets of the labor migration experience among OFW fathers and its implications for their families.

Keywords: OFW fathers; Transnational fathering; Fatherhood; Migration; Sociology of Family

INTRODUCTION

The socially ascribed responsibilities of raising children make the parents the primary agent of children's socialization (Gelles, 1994). However, such functions are challenged when geographical and spatial differences are present. Such is the case for transnational families which are defined as having a family arrangement where at least one member is physically separated from the family group and lives across national borders yet maintains communication with the family (Bryceson, 2019). These family arrangements occurred for several reasons. One of the most prevalent motivations for working overseas is to seek employment opportunities (Zinn & Eitzen, 2005).

Because of the Philippines' unstable economy, many Filipinos migrated to other countries in search of work as temporary migrants or for permanent residence. Thus, migration can be observed in the Filipino culture over time to improve one's standard of living (Asis, 2017). Looking back at the country's social-historical conditions, during the late President Ferdinand Marcos' administration, the economy could not accommodate the Filipino workforce which resulted in millions of unemployed Filipinos (Sicat, 2023). This was further exacerbated due to inconsistent population policies (Herrin, 2002) that produced a rapid increase in the Filipino population, resulting in more Filipinos than jobs available. To counter this the late president introduced the labor export policy, from which the OFW phenomenon emerged (Medina & Pulumbarit, 2012).

Although it was originally intended to be a stop-gap measure, it has become a phenomenon (Institute of Health Policy and Development Studies, 2005) due to socio-economic conditions such as the scarcity of good-paying jobs in the Philippines and the government's encouragement of overseas employment since the OFW remittances do not only support their families but also, the Philippine economy (Sicat, 2023). Thus, the OFWs earned the label of "bagong bayani" or modern-day heroes (Encinas-Franco, 2016). Additionally, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) were founded to promote Filipino labor migration and protect the rights of OFWs (Orbeta, Cabalfin, & Abrigo, 2009).

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2022), an estimated 1.83 million Filipinos are working abroad from April to September 2021. The results from the 2018 National Migration Survey showed that 12% of Filipino households have a family member who was or had been an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). With this kind of living arrangement, the family faces the challenge of maintaining familial connections among its members which is important to sustain the collective belonging to a family unit with notions of shared welfare and responsibilities (Shih, 2015; Christou & Kofma, 2022).

In recent years, there have been many studies revolving around the transnational parenting of OFW mothers and not much about the transnational parenting of OFW fathers (Parreñas, 2008). The existing literature about OFWs is mostly about the experience of OFW mothers and has seldom made OFW fathers the focus of their research. Previous studies mostly inferred the position of the migrant father in the family from the accounts of the mothers and children. Fathers were almost always presented as distant parents and were portrayed as not particularly involved in emotional labor within the household (Cabanés & Acedera, 2012). By only fulfilling their roles as breadwinners by sending remittances back to the family, they leave the caring of the left-behind children to the mother (Dalisyay & Tan, 2021).

This study sought to inquire into the phenomenon of OFW fathers as well as provide nuances on how they conduct transnational fathering by answering the following questions:

1. What are the motivations of OFW fathers for working abroad and leaving their children behind in the Philippines?
2. What are the factors considered by OFW fathers in deciding to work abroad and leave their children behind?
3. What are the OFW fathers' ideal perceptions of a "father"?
4. What are the lived experiences of OFW fathers in transnational fathering?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach where data and responses were collected from OFW fathers through in-depth and semi-structured interviews. All participants were able to select their preferred platforms for the interview. Four out of nine participants were overseas during the conduct of the study and chose which virtual platform would be used. The remaining five participants were interviewed during their stay here in the Philippines, either through an in-person interview or through virtual platforms based on their convenience. The participants were OFW fathers who were employed abroad, or temporarily in the Philippines for a visit during the duration of this study. At the same time, the OFW fathers take on the social role of a father and have a child or children residing in the Philippines to capture their experiences in transnational fathering. These characteristics were essential to capture their experiences in transnational fathering. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent, which was later then transcribed. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data in the study.

RESULTS

Motivations of OFW Fathers to Work Abroad

The motivations of OFW fathers for working abroad consist of economic and personal reasons which they considered in acquiring occupation in foreign countries despite being separated from their children and spouses.

To provide more adequately. Many of the participants attribute their desire to work overseas to their role as a father. They saw their primary obligation as effectively providing for their family, which they believed could only be accomplished by working abroad. Although most of the participants had worked before their engagement in labor migration, they still chose to pursue a job abroad since the Philippines could not provide them with the life they desired for themselves and their families. By working outside of the Philippines, parents obtain the financial resources that they need to ensure that their children eat daily meals of meat and rice, attend college, and have secure housing. One participant mentioned, "*Para mapunuan 'yung mga 'di ko kayang ibigay dito sa Pilipinas kaya nag-decide ako na mag-abroad.*" [so that I could provide them with what I could not when I was still working in the Philippines. . . that is why I decided to work abroad].

This promise of a better future encouraged the participants to look for work abroad despite the uncertainties migration may bring.

More opportunities abroad. Career advancements, personal growth, and disparities in earnings have been identified as important motivators for their desire to leave the Philippines since many participants were discovered to have done informal labor prior to deciding to work overseas. One of the study's participants cited his desire for a better living and more diverse working conditions as the reason he chose to work abroad, "*Pumunta [ako] ng [name of the country] para ano, medyo gumanda 'yung buhay. medyo maiba-iba naman yung trabaho.*" [[I] went to [name of the country] in the hopes that my life would improve a little. . . that my job would be very different [from what it had been in the past].]

In addition to having greater salaries than local standards, as disclosed by another participant, working abroad is also considered vital for career advancement. While the first category is focused on providing for the family, this category describes the fathers' aspiration to have a more stable job abroad. Their pursuit of job security is aligned with their dedication to fulfilling their aim to provide for their family.

Influence of family and peers. According to the participants, they were influenced by their family members who also work abroad and how such action improved their economic realities. Some of the participants have also stressed that becoming an OFW corresponds with the course they took in college which was influenced by the opinions of their parents and relatives, who were providing for their education.

OFW fathers' decision-making process

For the participants, the labor migration decisions are made under conditions of high uncertainty and disadvantages. All participants reported that *“being away from their family”* and *“unable to be with their children as they grow up”* are the most disadvantageous conditions of labor migration, which weakened their resolve to work abroad. One participant also has worries about discrimination and language barriers, whereas another father has concerns about adjusting to the *“time difference and the different food and climate of the host country.”* All of these, however, are overcome by assessing the benefits migration may bring. OFW fathers, in particular, rationalize their absence as a necessary sacrifice for their families' future. They reinforce and amplify their desire by seeking approval and negotiating support from their families, particularly their spouses. Some participants also ascribed their decision to act on their aspirations to a sense of urgency brought about by their fathering responsibilities. The following explores the variables that influenced the decision-making process of Filipino fathers to eventually participate in labor migration despite the uncertainties associated with the transnational situation following their departure abroad.

For economic gains. All the participants explained that the reason for their venture abroad is their economic interest. Despite their aspiration to be always present with their families, the need to meet material demands as well as the vulnerability of their jobs and salaries have led them to eventually push through their intention to work abroad because this guarantees higher wages than working in the Philippines. These factors, combined with the various opportunities available overseas and success tales from other OFWs and their families about their journey out of poverty, further strengthened their resolve to work overseas despite the possible disruptions in family dynamics that migration may bring. One participant shared that he endured being separated from his family most of the time in hopes of elevating his family's financial situation and providing them with comfortable living conditions, *“...na makaahon ka talaga sa hirap, pati pamilya mo ay malagay mo talaga sa maayos na buhay”* [...That you can get out of poverty, also giving your family a comfortable life].

Although some of the participants' wives conveyed the intention to work abroad, participants expressed disapproval as they emphasized the dangers attributed to women becoming OFWs. One participant shared that he did not want his wife to suffer in other countries *“especially as there is a lot of news about violence and discrimination against [OFW] women overseas”* and that he, as the father, should be the one to sacrifice and *“experience the hardships, loneliness, homesickness.”* Aside from this, the participants have stated that their decision to delve into labor migration instead of their wives is influenced not only by the traditional notion that becoming the primary provider of the family is the role of a father and that mothers are supposed *“to focus on the children and in taking care of them”* but also by economic considerations as many of the participants

have educational attainment and skills that are more advantageous in searching for jobs in other countries. One participant, in particular, has expressed that he will earn more abroad as he has more skills and experience in informal jobs, which are preferred by employers. According to him, *"being versatile and having prior experience and certifications in various jobs and skills has a higher chance of getting employment abroad."*

The consideration of the choice of destination among the participants is also economic in nature. One participant shared that he transfers from country to country depending on the salary offered,

... kasi syempre nung naransanan ko nang magtrabaho sa [redacted], eh parang gusto ko na lumaki yung sahod ko. Humanap naman ako ng sahod na malaki-laki. Kaya ayon sabi ko try ko sa ibang bansa naman. Kaya nung may hiring sa atin na may pa-[redacted], nag try ako don. Sabi ko sige try ko kasi mas malaki nga yung offer. Ganun din sa iba. [So of course, when I already experienced working in [redacted], I want a better salary. I search for other jobs that have higher pay. So, I said, "Let's try in another country." That's why when there was a job opening in [redacted], I applied, especially because the salary was higher. This is also what I consider when I move to other countries.]

Encouraged and supported by their wives. The participants also emphasized the role played by their wives, some are not married yet at that point but in a relationship with their current wives, pushing them to finally decide to work overseas amidst their uncertainties. Five (5) out of the nine (9) participants shared that their spouses supported the idea of them being an OFW because they understand that it is for the betterment of their family. The wives and partners of the participants were all aware of their financial status when they were seeking opportunities abroad. One participant said that it was his wife who suggested he continue his career as a seafarer because they are both having difficulty finding job opportunities here in the Philippines:

Totally, she is the one who encouraged me. She said 'The child is growing up. Our baby has already been born and we are both unemployed.' So I told her, 'There's no problem for me. If you can take care of the child alone, then I'll go.'

Despite this support, the participants shared that they still negotiate their family arrangements with their wives before their departure, as they are aware that their absence will require their wives to take on roles traditionally performed by them.

On the other hand, wives who are neutral or have expressed explicit resistance to the participants' migration decision justified their position mostly by raising concerns about the safety of the participants, who will be alone abroad, as well as the safety of their left-behind families, who will be missing a strong supporter. To convince them, the participants revealed that they have had numerous conversations with their wives

about how the benefits of working abroad outweigh its disadvantages. One participant recounted how he pleaded with his wife to allow him to continue working abroad:

...I explained to her that I really need to continue [as an OFW] so I can provide for the children as they grow up... So as much as it pains me to leave them, I pleaded with her, 'Let us just sacrifice.' You know, I do not have a permanent job in the Philippines. I just took whatever job was available, which is why I continue to persuade her...Well, she eventually gave in, which is why I was still here after several years.

The participants stressed that the opinions of their wives are significant in deciding whether they should pursue and act upon their desire to work abroad or not. In their reasoning, they emphasized their identities as fathers, framing their decision to work overseas as an act that would allow them to fulfill their roles and also highlighting the negative consequences of not doing so, noting that not migrating would make them “inadequate fathers.”

Having children or expecting to have a child. For the participants, when to migrate is preceded not only by the decision but also by job searching and preparation. However, this supposed timeline has been sped up by the pregnancy of their wives or the birth of their children. Four participants, in particular, said that one of the reasons for them to ultimately decide to work abroad is the fact that they are expecting an additional child or that their children are growing and they are aware of the additional expenses to support them. One participant conveyed that the new responsibilities ascribed to him about this event have accelerated his job search and preparation to migrate to ensure that he is already earning abroad once his child is born:

The one that really compelled me to diligently apply for work overseas is because my wife is pregnant. There will be a baby coming. And I knew this would be another big financial challenge. Although, basically, even before the news of her pregnancy, I already had a plan to apply abroad. But when the OB really said, 'Yup, you're gonna have a new baby,' I accelerated my pace and became more diligent and attentive in searching for employment abroad.

Although they are aware of the possible damage their departure will incur in their relationship with their family, they still choose to become OFWs and be away from their families over being present but not having enough food on their plate. However, doing so results in confusion and frustration as they are unable to be with their children to watch them grow. These feelings were also pronounced among participants who became OFWs before becoming fathers. They expressed that their departure after becoming fathers was far more difficult compared to when they first went abroad. One participant also noted that having a child of his own has changed his perspective on working abroad from being “for myself and my siblings” to being “for my wife and children as well as their future.”

To summarize, the decision of the participants to act upon their desire to work overseas despite its drawbacks is made in the context of needs and fathering roles. Their concerns about the uncertainties and risks of migration are reduced by weighing the costs and benefits of working abroad. OFW fathers present migration as highly desirable, downplaying its negative aspects while glorifying its rewards. Long-term grievances stemming from economic and social exclusion, a desire to improve their families' economic standing, and an emphasis on their personal need to fulfill their perceived fathering roles eventually lead them to ignore the disadvantages and choose to work abroad despite having to leave their children behind.

OFWs' Understanding of the Social Roles of a Father

The participants' definitions of the various social roles that they perceive a father should adhere to are being a provider, ensurer of family's financial stability, ensurer of their children's brighter future, disciplinarian, "*haligi ng tahanan*," effective communicator, active role model, source of emotional support, and protector.

Father as a Provider. All of the participants perceived their role as fathers to be the provider for their families, even if it meant being away from their loved ones for extended periods of time. They described that providing means being the provider of their family's needs and wants. When they describe their role as a provider, they mostly mean in terms of providing material and tangible needs. A participant, in particular, shared that a father's first job is to persevere and work hard for his family's needs and survival, "*Dapat ang gagawin ng isang tatay, ang unang-una diyan, magtrabaho ka para sa pamilya mo, para 'di naman sila gugutumin, kailangan magtrabaho ka.*" [The first thing a father should do is work for your family, so they do not starve, you need to work.]

These needs include funding their children's education, daily expenses, house bills, projects around the house, house appliances, acquiring some properties, and emergency purposes such as hospitalization. Another participant also included buying appliances for the things he provides for the family as this can bring comfort and ease to his wife and children.

Aside from providing for the needs of their family, the participants also shared that as a father, they should be able to give their families some of their wants. One participant aspires to be "*a good father to them, one that can provide what they want.*" Similarly, another participant also shares the same sentiment wishing to provide everything his family wants to obtain, "*If they want to buy delicious food or the things they want... you want to provide them all the things they want.*"

Father as an Ensurer of Family's Financial Stability. All participants emphasized that one of their roles is to ensure their family's financial stability. They fulfill this through constant and scheduled remittances at the expense of being away from their families.

Ensuring comfortable housing is one of the most pertinent investments of the participants. Several of them clearly stated that they are working abroad to save money to build a house of their own, to support the education of their children, and to ensure the financial stability of their family in the future, especially when the time comes that they are unable to continue as OFWs. This role aims for their family's financial security thus they give importance to managing their finances efficiently and making sure that they have savings. One participant emphasized that securing a fund for the family is one of his top priorities as this would not only allow them to have a budget for their daily needs but also, for emergencies and future use. One participant emphasized the need to go and work in a foreign country to afford to have savings. He said:

Syempre kailangan na may ipon ka. So, kapag nasa Pilipinas ako di ko magagawa yun. Di ako makapag ipon. Wala ganun lang, surviving lang—survivor lang tayo doon. Sa sahod ah trabaho, sahod iyong ganun, di sapat, surviving lang talaga, survivor pero walang ipon, yun. [Of course, you must have savings, and I am unable to do that while in the Philippines. I cannot save money. We're just—just surviving; we are just survivors there. My wages are insufficient [to save money]; we're merely survivors with no savings.]

Another participant mentioned the state of inflation in the Philippines and saw that the economy of the country cannot give his family financial security in the long run. This further strengthened his desire to work abroad despite having a stable job in the Philippines.

Father as an Ensurer of Children's Brighter Future. All the participants shared that one of the reasons they are enduring all the hardships of being an OFW is to ensure their children's future by funding their education and supporting them with their educational endeavors. They highlighted the significance of formal education as it raises the chances of a brighter future for their children. A participant, specifically, stressed the importance of completing formal education in terms of job opportunities, noting that it is also an indication of one's diligence and determination. The participants emphasized that this role goes beyond economic-related duties, whereas they give advice to their children and make sure to ask about their children's education from time to time to monitor their studies. Bearing the role of a father, the participants desired their children's success through their sacrifices and hardships to provide them with their needs so that they could be independent and confident. Subsequently, when questioned about his hopes for his children, a participant pointed out:

...maging successful, maging masaya 'yung mga anak namin. Kumbaga, makuha talaga nila 'yung gusto nila, mapunta sila sa trabaho na gusto nila at maging successful sila. [for our children to be successful, to be happy. So to speak, they can get what they want, get the job they want, and be successful.]

Father as a Disciplinarian. As fathers, four (4) participants said that part of their aspirations for their children was to grow into respectful adults, especially when interacting with other people. Thus, they share that part of their duty as a father was to correct the wrong and unpleasant behaviors of their children by disciplining them. They emphasized that the behaviors of their children, especially outside their home, are a reflection of how they are raised, having well-behaved children serves as a basis that they are performing effective parenting, together with their wives. They described well-behaved children as those who are respectful to their parents and other elders, know how to socialize, and value education and learning.

Father as the “Haligi ng Tahanan”. Four participants claimed that fathers are the “*haligi ng tahanan*” (the foundation of the home). This implies a steadfast and dedicated image of a father, in which they see themselves as having the responsibility to be the strongest supporter of their families in all aspects of life, whether financially, emotionally, or psychologically, even if it means that they will have to sacrifice their comfort and be separated from their loved ones for a significant amount of time. A major element of this ideal construct is familial loyalty and sacrifice. This entailed always thinking about and putting the interests of the family first, especially their children, acting in accordance with these interests, and ensuring that the family will always be firm, avoiding “*quarrels and resolving issues that may damage the household.*” Another aspect of this construct includes sacrificing time, pleasure and energy in order to ensure the well-being of their children.

Related to being as steadfast as a pillar, the participants described that fathers should be stable, and in the case of transnational fathers, be sturdy in the midst of the challenges brought by migration. One participant shared that being a father means being the one to make sacrifices:

Kasi si misis gusto niya din magabroad eh pero sabi ko ako nalang, ako na yung daranas ng lahat ng hirap dito, ako na dadanas ng lungkot, ng homesick, lahat, ako nalang para sa kanila. So, parang masabing magiging tatay, para sa akin ang pagiging tatay kailangan mong mag sacrifice para sa future ng pamilya. [Because my wife also wanted to work abroad but I just said it should be just me, I would be the one to experience the hardships here, I would be the one to experience the sadness, the homesickness, everything, I will endure for them. So, to say that you are a father, being a father for me should be making sacrifices for the future of your family.]

Father as an Effective Communicator. Participants articulated the importance of being able to actively engage in open communication with their children, where they take the time to listen to their children and give guidance if needed. One participant, in particular, saw being a communicator as an expression of caring for them and being

involved in their lives, particularly in discussions about their schooling and their future. A participant explained

As a father, you need to ensure the well-being of your family and your children. Part of this is that you must always talk to them about their education, their future, and how you can assist them as a father in those areas until they complete their studies.

They see initiating conversations as a way to build a stronger relationship with their children, where they can understand their views and experiences better so that they can offer guidance better.

Father as an Active Role Model. Despite the simultaneous articulation of the need to be the provider and the need to be a disciplinarian, the participants said it was crucial for them to be active role models in their children's lives. For most of the participants, this responsibility revolved around embodying what they wanted their children to be as they grew up. This includes promoting a healthy lifestyle and avoiding negative behaviors, as well as internalizing values like hard work and empathy. One participant describes being a role model as being a responsible parent, which included showing children what it takes to be a responsible individual and family member. Another participant, on the other hand, perceives the importance of being a role model in his children's growth. as they tend to idolize fathers and consequently emulate their behavior.

Father as a Source of Emotional Support. One participant strongly stressed that aside from being a financial provider, he also desires to contribute to the emotional aspect of parenting. He had this notion that a father, specifically an OFW father, should provide more than just financial stability. Their roles go beyond monetary means and should also participate in the emotional aspect of family life. He considered that neglecting this part of being a father means that he does not practice parenting:

I want to also provide for them emotionally. When we say emotionally it comes back to me being a remote father, but I will still fulfill my role as a father. So, I provide for them emotionally as [a] father, so if they need to talk to me, to ask for my advice, relationship advice, and everything.

Father as a Protector. Only one of the participants explicitly stated that a father must protect their families, especially their children against external forces that may harm them. He connected the act of protection to being a provider, as the act of providing offers the children more security for their safety and future. Aside from this, he stated that one aspect of his responsibility as a protector is being able to safeguard his family from natural calamities and illness. He stressed that the father must ensure the safety of his children as long as he is alive and *"that they are not harmed."*

Fathering from a Distance

This section discusses the lived experiences of OFW fathers in transnational fathering as well as the adjustments in family dynamics and household structure. The geographical distance between the OFW fathers and their families challenges the relationship of the migrant fathers with their children, especially in circumstances where the child has been born while the father is already an OFW. Sending money, communicating with their children, discipline, giving advice, and efforts to be as involved as they can are the practices observed that the OFW fathers use to form and maintain a relationship with their children. Despite these, missing their children remains part of their reality in fathering from afar.

Sending Remittances. Part of the fathering practice among all the participants is sending remittances to their spouses monthly; some are even sending monetary support more than once a month. The participants need to have a constant and clear schedule of remittances as they see this as the main reason for enduring their separation from their families. In cases where they experienced some difficulty in sending remittances, the participants tried to settle the problem as soon as possible by borrowing money from their colleagues or friends in the Philippines to transfer money to their families for that month. This showed their dedication and commitment to act on their supposed role of providing financially for their families.

Keeping in touch. Among the nine (9) participants, six (6) of them have easy access to the internet via Wi-Fi and data connection which allowed them to contact their families regularly, as they had already set a schedule for when to get in touch with their left-behind families, ranging from two times a day as the most frequent to three times a week as the least frequent. The remaining three (3) fathers, on the other hand, shared having difficulty accessing the internet due to erratic signals in their location. Thus, they only call and message their family whenever they can and often opt for voice calls only as video calls are more expensive and data-consuming. For all the participants, their usual conversations revolved around everyday routines and mundane things that the left-behind family members do in their daily lives. In particular, when asked about their usual conversations, one participant shared:

Yung mga ginagawa sa bahay, anong ulam. Yun mostly itatanong mo eh, anong ulam, kumain ka na ba, anong ulam, kumusta ang panahon dyan. Yun ang karamihan eh. Yun lang ang ano eh. . . Ulit ulit lang yon. Pag gising mo naman, ganon na naman ang pag tawag, yun na naman ang itatanong eh. [Those house activities, what food they are eating. That is usually what you are going to ask about, what's your food, have you eaten, what's your food, how's the weather there. That's usually it. . . It's daily. When you wake up, that's what you talk about again, that's what you will ask again.]

This routinized practice makes them feel that they are still part of their families' day-to-day lives albeit physically away. OFW fathers are usually the ones who contact first, either through chat, voice call, or video call and the family member that they talk to the most is their wife or partner because some of the children do not have their own cell phones.

Making efforts to be present. Aside from frequent calls and messages, narratives revealed that OFW fathers tried to be as involved in important events and emergencies as they could. During pregnancy and birth, four (4) participants revealed that they try to come home by making adjustments to their work schedule or contract that would result in their return to the Philippines at the time of child delivery. Others, however, revealed that they were unable to accompany their spouses and witness their children's birth. To alleviate their guilt and avoid future problems, they strive to compensate for their physical distance through constant phone conversations and messages on social media apps such as WhatsApp and Messenger. On the other hand, all participants expressed a wish to participate in their children's education, as they see this as an essential milestone in their children's development. Even the participants who have children who are not yet in school show a desire to be part of their children's future educational endeavors. For those who currently have children in school, whenever they find themselves unable to take part in these milestones, they tend to celebrate by looking at pictures and videos of their children. OFW fathers celebrate special occasions, specifically birthdays with their family members through video calls, during which they share each other's prepared food to feast on. Others also experienced filing leave to celebrate the special day or rescheduling the day of celebration to match their day off.

Their experiences have also revealed their attempts to be more involved and present during times of crisis, particularly health crises. One participant admitted to staying up all night, feeling anxious, and missing work to call his wife to get an update on his daughter's condition after learning of his daughter's unexpected asthma attack.

Disciplining and Providing Guidance. OFW fathers are keen on making sure that their children will grow up well-mannered and respectful. They contribute to achieving this by providing disciplinary actions to their children, especially when they can come home to the Philippines. Three (3) of them utilize striking as a disciplinary measure. Whenever they are overseas, disciplinary measures among all the participants are limited to scolding or their wife's intervention. All the OFW fathers also practice providing guidance to their children by constantly reminding them of their studies, to remain respectful of others, to help and obey their mother, and to impart good and positive values.

Longing for their children. Spending most of their time away from their families, especially during their earlier experiences of being physically separated from their loved ones, results in challenges related to homesickness. One OFW father described homesickness as feeling left out such as not witnessing milestones with their families,

not knowing their children's interests, activities, or whereabouts, and feeling that their children are growing up without them. Despite the services offered by internet-based communication, this also tends to spark bittersweet emotions in the migrant fathers as they can see their children through video calls, yet they are also feeling sad and remorseful to see how their children have grown without being by their side. A participant noticed how so much time went by while they were away, sharing that:

Iyong panganay ko siguro ilang buwan ko lang nakakasama eh. Ngayon siyam (9) na taon na simula nung pinanganak iyon. Siguro mga isang taon lang nakasama ko iyon sa pagbabakasyon ko, eh ngayon magsasampu na pala." [I've been with my firstborn for around a few months only. Now he/she turned nine (9) years old. I've been with him for about a year only during vacation, and now, he/she's already turning ten (10) years old.]

To relieve this longing and compensate for the time that they are apart, some OFW fathers resort to giving material gifts while others resort to capturing and sharing the interest of their children to warm them up and form a good relationship with them.

Adjustments in family dynamics and household structure

The OFW fathers are attempting to fulfill their perceived obligations to their children. However, the participants are unable to physically assist their wives in raising their children or in their daily tasks. Thus, there were observed rearrangements of family dynamics and household structure in response to paternal absence.

Additional help in the house. Six (6) out of the nine (9) participants stated that there had been some form of help in taking care of their children as the spouses of the participants could not handle the responsibility of raising their children alone. These forms of help have various arrangements such as help from their in-laws or their own relatives near their house, a close relative of his wife that stays in their house, leaving their child to their neighbors, and hiring stay-in-house help. Most of the participants acquired additional help for their families during the early years of their migration, not only to relieve their wives of the sudden burden of taking on more household responsibilities but also to provide supplemental care for their children in their absence. Some of them also mentioned that they hired a housekeeper when their children were younger and still needed to be tended to. One participant shared, "*Dati, pero sa ngayon wala na. Dati noong maliit pa yung mga bata kumuha kami ng tagapag-alaga nila.*" [We used to have one before. We had a babysitter when the kids were still young.]

Establishing teamwork with their wives. Of the nine (9) participants, five (5) of them emphasized that it is important to talk about important matters concerning the household, especially their children to avoid miscommunication and misunderstandings. Participants shared that as they operate in a transnational setting, they become more

open to discussing issues and deciding what they consider major decisions, such as where to enroll their children, what payment option they would opt for if there is a tuition fee, appliances needed in the house, and how to discipline their children. For the participants, having these dialogues between their partners is a way to show respect to each other and acknowledge each other's authority in deciding for the family. One participant emphasized that open discussion and equal respect helped their family *"survive 13 years of being apart."*

The mother takes on the decision-making and disciplinarian role. Due to migration, five (5) participants also emphasized the importance of the responsibilities that their spouses play in raising their children, as they could only offer counsel and left the actual rearing of the children to the wife because of not being physically present. OFW fathers leave most of the decision-making to their wives, especially about their day-to-day lives. Even though they maintain communication with their wives and discuss essential matters together, they acknowledge the limitations of being abroad and away from their families. Thus, they allow their wives to decide how their children are raised to the point where they usually listen and follow their wives' decisions especially if they are unable to reach an agreement. One participant shared, *"I will just support my wife in what she wants for the children because she is the one who is there, she is more hands-on now."*

Although this is the case, they reiterated that they still try to help by giving pieces of advice, both to their children and wives, particularly in major matters such as education and health. This is also mostly evident in their narratives of how they discipline their children. When asked if he could fulfill his perceived role as the disciplinarian, one participant said:

Eh nagagampanan ko naman syempre pero iyong asawa ko iyong andun eh, ako taga suporta lang pero iyong asawa ko siya yung talagang nagdididisciplina. Ako, nagsasabi lang dito kasi 'di ko naman ma-contact ng personal, asawa ko lang sinasabihan ko ganun para madisciplina iyong mga bata sa paglaki. [Of course, I fulfill my role (in disciplining), but my wife is the one who is personally there, I'm just a 'support person' because I cannot really personally talk to the children. I only give advice to my wife, and my wife is the one who really disciplines our children].

Another participant also acknowledged that his role, unlike in the past, has been *"limited to simply 'seconding the motion'. It was essentially the mothers, the wives of OFWs, who bore the biggest responsibility in raising the children."*

Most of the participants also stressed that such arrangements persist even when they return home for vacation as one participant, in particular, noted that their children are more likely to obey their mother: *"One look from their mother, they immediately follow. They are more scared of her than me."*

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that, despite being of different ages, the reasons behind the intention and decision to engage in labor migration among the participants were similar. In general, all the OFW fathers' justifications come down to the fact that they became OFWs to earn money to support their families. Although findings have shown that many OFW fathers who were OFW before getting married and having children perceive labor migration as a strategy to transform the economic and social conditions of their families of origin, once they have children, their motivations shift from earning for their parents, possibly for their wives, as well as for their future return and retirement to the Philippines, to earning for their children and their future. For the OFW fathers, such an act is an extension of their social role of being a father and thus the provider of the family; hence, rather than deterring them, having children motivated them to advance their plan to work overseas or to directly migrate anew after one cycle of migration. This could be attributed to the significance that participants place on their identity as fathers among the other identities they have. Consequently, they perceive that providing is the most important part of their role as fathers. Essentially, becoming an OFW has become primarily a household strategy, like what Stark and Bloom (1985) claim, with their personal characteristics and social position, such as being the father of the family and thus viewed as the primary provider (Cabanés & Acedera, 2012), influencing their intention and motivation to delve into labor migration continuously and maintain their migration status. This aligns with Lee's model of migration, which gives importance to personal factors that one considers in participating in migration. In this case, the fathers considered their fathering role in deciding to be part of the OFW phenomenon.

Another factor that contributed to the participants becoming OFWs is that it is still difficult to obtain employment here in the Philippines (Domingo, 2023). Socio-economic conditions, particularly the scarcity of good-paying jobs in the Philippines, are also part of the participants' narrative, according to which these same socio-economic realities are part of the reasons why Filipino fathers are choosing to work abroad, even though decades have passed. Consistent with Lee's model of migration, in which push factors can be geographical, social, economic, political, and cultural factors, the existence of a labor export policy can be considered a political push factor as it aids Filipino workers who aspire to have a career abroad.

It was worth noting that the migration decision was rarely made by an individual alone but in consultation with other family members. Family as an important structure and social network of support is another dimension that is expected to exert a strong impact on migration intentions and behavior, especially as being family-centered is one of the characteristics of Philippine society (Jocson, 2020), making the views of close family members important. Narratives also suggested that decisions on whose member is allowed to work abroad among families with OFW fathers are made by weighing the

benefits and drawbacks of the absence of a specific member of the family. Whether they migrated in the early 2000s or more recently, participants' accounts show that the one who becomes an OFW is the one whose absence will technically have the least impact on the family and their functioning, as well as the one who will have the chance of earning more through migration.

Although some of the participants revealed that their wives had considered becoming OFWs, following in the footsteps of many Filipinas working abroad, the narratives claimed that the participants' decision to work overseas rather than their spouses was influenced by traditional gender norms and parenting practices in the Philippines. Unlike mothers, from whom family members expect emotional security and communication through face-to-face interactions, fathers can fulfill the role of being the provider without considerable threat to their notions of self. The absence of the mother is also viewed as a significant event that necessitates the restructuring of not only family relationships but also the identities and roles of fathers and possibly other family members, as it is likely to disrupt both women's gender-normative mothering roles and their sense of self. Thus, although there is a continuing trend and increase in women migrating independently in search of jobs (Parreñas, 2010; Santos, 2014), the majority of participants have stated that it is simpler and more beneficial for their families and for them, as fathers, to migrate since it is already part of their roles and for mothers to focus on child-rearing since this responsibility is "naturally" expected from them.

During the early years of migration, the participants' families were more likely to have extended kin or additional help in the household to aid with chores and child-rearing. This could be linked to their tendency to have several children every few years, with the children's ages nearly overlapping. However, when their children grew older and the fathers continued to work abroad, families' household size preferences shifted, preferring a smaller and more nuclear-oriented family. This shift in family size may indicate that wives are now capable of caring for their developing children without the need for additional assistance.

Power relations in their household are also shifting as certain roles that were traditionally assumed by the participants are rewritten and taken by their wives. Such circumstances weaken the participants' power in the family and consequently cause shifts in their meanings and interpretations of their supposed fathering roles.

Grounded in this context, participants defined their conception of the "ideal" father by emphasizing different roles from two opposing discourses, which were found to be crucial not only in understanding the meaning-making of OFW fathers but also in how they made sense of their actual fathering experience: the traditional and new father worldviews. Although the two seem contradictory, the narratives of the participants show the adoption of such worldviews simultaneously in multiple contexts. The traditional discourses, which were dominantly represented in the participants' narratives, have

been conveyed by describing the father “as the provider,” “as *haligi ng tahanan*,” and “as disciplinarian” were adopted by them even before they went to work overseas, and the principles in them were one of the driving forces of their decision to be an OFW. On the other hand, the new father discourses, such as “father as an effective communicator,” “as an active role model,” and “as emotional support,” are observed to be most common in one participant, who occupies a white-collar job, to which he expressed being involved in the emotional work of the children as part of being a provider. His difference in the notion of a father can be linked to his occupation, as those who are manual laborers engage in exhaustive work environments and, hence, struggle with regular exposure to stressful surroundings which have negative consequences on their minds and bodies (Cano, 2022), possibly hindering them from taking part in the emotional work in family life. However, findings in the study have also revealed that, while not part of their ideal notion of fatherhood, all OFW fathers are engaged in emotional work with their children, even before they migrate. Hence, like the traditional discourse, OFW fathers have also been observed to enact roles from the “new father” discourse before migrating; the difference is that their migration has further embedded this internalization to compensate for their absence.

The availability of fathers while working overseas tends to be a factor in being involved with their children beyond providing financial support. The availability of internet access permits them to communicate and be involved in the child-rearing process, such as disciplining. Those participants who do not have an accessible internet connection mostly leave the disciplinary measures to the mothers, as they spend their time talking about other important things, such as decisions for the children, budgeting, and updates about their health, among others. It can be concluded that the age of their children, the father’s availability to engage, and their occupation influence their approach to fathering practices and the formulation of their ideal roles. The construction of their ideal types of fathering roles is influenced by their engagement with their children at various stages of their children’s lives. Their ideal roles are modified in response to their children’s current behaviors and needs in terms of growth and development.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of participants revealed several factors influencing their desire and decision to work abroad while leaving their families behind, such as the realities of low wages, few employment opportunities, and poor living standards in the Philippines. This supports Lee’s migration theory, which states that an individual’s decision to migrate is influenced by both the unfavorable condition in the home country and the perceived positive, desirable situation in the destination country (Massey et al., 1993), as well as migrant’s personal factors such as social position, age, peer influence, and family influence. The study suggested that the role of Filipino fathers was multidimensional, having various roles in the family. Given the context, the study also suggests that paternal

roles among OFW fathers might become more indistinct in a migration context. Their experiences and practices also underwent a shift from the traditional discourse of the father as the provider to a more contemporary “new father” who is more involved and open to emotional exchanges with their children. The study, however, found that despite these signs of a shift in meanings, a huge part of their ideals and practices concerning fatherhood remain tied to traditional norms of fatherhood—the intensity is the only one altering. OFW fathers in the study have revealed that they have been involved with their children prior to migration; this is, however, heightened after their migration to compensate for the social and emotional voids due to their physical absence.

Since the participants were either employed abroad or temporarily in the Philippines for a visit during the conduct of the study, they considered their economic situation and capabilities in renewing or continuing their contract abroad. The findings suggest that OFW fathers’ decision to continue to pursue overseas employment despite having to endure extended stays and remote relationships is heavily influenced by their consideration of financial stability. Despite their wishes to seek employment in the Philippines to stay with their families and perform their fathering practices within their household, this still relies on the job opportunities available in the country.

As had been observed in the findings, transnational migration had discernible socio-cultural consequences for the families of OFW fathers. The structure of the family has become less predictable as OFW fathers devise unorthodox arrangements to fill in the void their absence creates. The usual delineation of gender roles has become blurred as women often adopt both maternal and paternal roles. Contrary to popular belief that the mother assumes most of the domestic responsibilities when a father goes overseas, it is observed that gender roles, parenting, and family relationships are redefined, and the traditional family structure has become more fluid. This fluidity is salient in the fathering practices of OFW fathers and has discernible impacts on their meaning-making, parenting, and family structures.

Future researchers should utilize a holistic approach in examining the lived experience of transnational fathering through the lens of both the OFW and their children left behind. Another approach is to capture the lived experiences of the OFW father from the perspective of the spouse, the children, and the OFW themselves. Subsequently, future researchers may limit the participants by only probing OFW fathers who are currently residing in one foreign country and see if the culture of the host country plays a role in understanding their fathering practices.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KRISTINE L. ANDAYA graduated Magna Cum Laude from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines in 2023 with a degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. Currently, she is working under the gender and development unit of a national government agency, where she continues to apply her sociological knowledge in looking at the gender issues and gaps within the agency and society in general and developing strategies using assessment tools to address these disparities. During her free time, she tries to read fictional novels and academic literature to continuously feed her mind new information while helping her write effectively and creatively—her idea of active resting.

MARILAG M. BARICAUA is a committed professional who graduated Magna Cum Laude from her alma mater, the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, from 2019-2023, with a degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. She is currently employed by a government-owned and controlled corporation (GOCC), wherein she continues to apply her understanding of societal dynamics to both her work and society. During her leisure time, Marilag loves to spend quality time with her adorable cats while occasionally reading books, which provides a perfect balance between her professional life and hobbies.

CHARLOTE I. MARQUEZ completed her degree in Bachelor of Arts in Sociology as Magna Cum Laude at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. She previously interned in a government agency, where she applied her sociological knowledge and understanding of social and cultural dynamics in an organizational context. She occasionally volunteers in her local community to broaden her understanding of the needs and challenges of different groups in the community, as well as how they are addressed. Her interests range from exploring academic articles on topics such as social policy, migration patterns, and organizational development to reading literature on genres of science fiction and alternate history.