



Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research



Journal homepage: <http://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/IJOMR/>

Experienced Challenges and Coping Strategies of Overseas Filipino Working Mothers Beyond Borders

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ABSTRACT

This study endeavors to understand the resiliency of Filipino mothers working as domestic helpers outside the country outlining their challenges and coping strategies and helped in understanding substantially the challenges and managing systems of migrant working mothers in keeping harmonious relationships with their families in terms of (a) parenting with children (b) marital responsibilities to partners (c) financial obligations. The study revealed overarching themes on challenges such as long-distance parenting, maternal separation anxiety, dissatisfied marital duties, and financial stress. In coping with these challenges, strategies like frequent computer-mediated communication, hope, and optimism, openness in communication with partners, and perseverance to work were all perceived as mediating strategies to cope with the challenges posed by separation due to working abroad among the informants. Premised on the totality of the findings, we recommend that our government agencies look into the possibility of supporting our Overseas Filipino Working mothers by granting them free quality gadgets with high internet access and the unrestricted use of technologies while working abroad to maintain uninterrupted communication with their families in the Philippines. With this, the supposed expenses for purchasing high-end gadgets and the internet would be added to the financial obligations that they usually send to the Philippines for support.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted/Received 08 Feb 2023

First Revised 19 Mar 2023

Accepted 14 May 2023

First Available online 15 May 2023

Publication Date 01 Sep 2023

Keyword:

Challenges,
Coping Strategies,
OFW Mothers,
Resiliency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, several Filipino workers choose to work abroad considering its countless benefits. For example, in contrast to developing countries, highly developed countries have more job opportunities for immigrants to generate better socio-economic revenue. And since the Philippines is still a developing country, job opportunities here are much fewer than in highly developed and industrialized nations. In addition, a study conducted by [Parreñas \(2001\)](#) found that working outside the country provides workers like parents with the financial resources to ensure that their children can meet their needs, such as eating daily meals of meat and rice, college attendance, and safe housing.

In the last two decades, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs reported that the number of international migrants has increased significantly, with 281 million people living outside their home country in 2020, up from 173 million in 2000 and 221 million in 2010. International migrants currently account for around 3.6 percent of the world's population. Women and girls make up nearly half of all international migrants worldwide. In Europe, Northern America, and Oceania, female migrants somewhat outnumbered male migrants in 2020, partly due to women's higher life expectancy (see https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/--dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_713238.pdf). According to the data from the Philippine Statistics Authority's 2018 survey on Overseas Filipinos, there are presently 2.3 million estimated Overseas Filipino Workers. And Filipino women make up 56 percent of the 2 million overseas Filipino workers (OFW) whose contracts were processed by the POEA in 2019.

Additionally, in a report on labor migration in the Philippines, there are 10 million Filipinos living abroad, and more than 1 million Filipino leave the country each year to work overseas (see https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/--dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_713238.pdf). Among these Filipinos working afar, most of them are women mothers with children here in the Philippines. Moreover, the study of [Avato et al. \(2010\)](#), the Philippines has made the country one of the biggest labor-exporting states in the world.

Many of the Filipino labor migrants or overseas Filipino workers are mothers who left their husbands and children behind to work abroad. According to [Garabiles et al. \(2017\)](#), many Filipinos in this country experienced poverty and poor employment opportunities, thus, pushing either of the heads of the family to work beyond the borders in the hope of seeking greener pastures. To alleviate poverty and provide sufficient resources for their families, numerous mothers have left the Philippines.

Working as an OFW can be challenging. However, the truth would reveal that migrant workers face different challenges, especially in leaving their families in the Philippines. According to [Valdehuesa-Mahilum \(2013\)](#), OFW workers face family-related issues. The most concerned ones are OFWs' relationships with their partners, decision-making, and communication, which generally transport challenges to mothers working abroad. Migrant women's problems include stress, exhaustion, and anxiety (see <https://www.ceslam.org/our-publications/perils-and-prospects-of-international-nurse-migration-from-nepal>). This may be due to their challenges to balance their role in the workplace and concern for the family and children.

Based on the cited sources, it is evident that most of the Filipino migrants who chose to work abroad for socio-economic reasons are women mothers. Hence, this study was designed to determine the challenges experienced and coping strategies of working Filipino mothers beyond borders. With the theoretical framework that informed this study outlining the challenges and coping strategies of the participants, this study has helped in understanding substantially the challenges and managing systems of migrant working mothers in keeping harmonious relationships with their families in terms of:

- (i) Parenting with children.
- (ii) Marital responsibilities to partners.
- (iii) Financial obligations.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

- (i) What are the challenges experienced by Filipino mothers working beyond borders in terms of (a) parenting with children, (b) marital responsibilities to partners (c) financial obligations?
- (ii) How do they cope with the identified challenges?

2. METHODS

2.1. Research design

A qualitative method was used in this study with a narrative inquiry research design as it entailed the participants' stories and lived experiences of the subjects of inquiry. Narrative research is based on the premise that people understand and give meaning to their lives through their stories. Qualitative research is also described as an unfolding model that occurs in a natural setting, enabling us to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experiences.

2.2. Locale of the study

Since the participants of this study were women migrant workers, they were interviewed virtually via Zoom meetings and teleconferencing. The participants came from the two Gulf nations and one Asian country to wit; Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Hongkong.

2.3. Research participants

Six participants are from Tacurong City recruited purposively and willfully accepted the invitation to participate. We reckoned that many six participants were sufficient to commence data gathering. Determining the adequate sample size in qualitative research is, in a way, a matter of decision and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected (see https://www.academia.edu/44407547/Risky_Sexual_Practices_of_Filipino_Gay_Men_having_Sex_with_other_Men_in_the_Philippines_HIV_Risk_Transmission_of_Planned_Behavior). After gathering the narratives of the six informants, we were satisfied with the results as they categorically answered the research questions. Pseudonyms were used to protect the real identity of the participants in this study.

2.4. Sampling

Purposive sampling was used as a non-probability sampling technique in this study. The purposive sampling technique, or judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of participants due to the qualities and characteristics they possess vis a vis research problem. Simply put,

we decided what needed to be known and set out to find people who could and were willing to provide the information on their experiences.

2.5. Instrumentation

It was common to use interviews as an instrument in most qualitative research. Hence, we in this study employed the same with a semi-structured interview guide. According to [Doyle \(2020\)](#), a semi-structured interview is a meeting where the interviewer only follows a formalized list of questions, but, in this study, researchers ask more of open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the interviewee rather than a straightforward question-and-answer format.

2.6. Data gathering procedures

We observed a systematic and ethical process in commencing data gathering for this study. Before the participant's selection, we sought an approval letter from the Dean of the college duly approved by the school President. After securing the letters, these were sent to the MMML Recruiting Agency located at Marvin Building, National Highway, Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat. The said recruitment agency provided us with the details and list of names of women OFWs under their agency. Referencing the list provided, we contacted the prospected participants individually through their Facebook messengers. Of the twelve (12) initiated calls, only six (6) participants fairly accepted the invitation.

We conducted the interviews via Zoom meetings and teleconferencing. Before the start of any discussions, we re-asked permission from the participants if they are willing to participate in the research study. And since most of the participants agreed unreservedly, we sustained by informing them on the nature of the study, including its purpose and clarification, and what participation would mean for them. Moreover, we informed the participants that a video recorder was used to document the whole duration of the interview to guide we in the data transcription.

2.7. Data management and transcription

We transcribed the data in toto regarding the screen video and Zoom audio recordings and were translated into English as intimate as what the participants narrated. After transcription, the data were referred back to the informants for verification. Qualitative data recordings should entail all the relevant information that sought to answer the research questions (see https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=q52atssAAAAJ&citation_for_view=q52atssAAAAJ:9yKSN-GCB0IC). Thus, we guaranteed the richness and reliability of the data by ensuring that all answers responded to the research questions. Furthermore, in upholding privacy, we confirmed that the screen video and audio recordings were stored in a secured device and crashed after the data analysis.

2.8. Data analysis

We used thematic analysis anchored from what was suggested mostly by qualitative data analysts for beginning qualitative researchers. According to [Braun and Clarke \(2012\)](#), thematic analysis is an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular qualitative data analysis method. Moreover, they suggested that it provides us with a foundation in the basic skills needed to engage with other approaches to qualitative data analysis. Therefore, regarding this method, we formulated codes, sub-themes, and overarching themes derived from the participants' narratives that answer the research problems.

2.9. Ethical considerations

We emphasized using the ethics statement provided by [Bell and Bryman \(2007\)](#). Before the actual conduct of the study, we ensured that this paper had been meticulously reviewed and deliberated by panel members during the final defense vis-a-vis rationalization of the methodologies employed and the results thereafter. More so, the papers were slightly modified to incorporate the panel members' suggestions. Regarding the actual conduct of the interviews, we made certain that the participants were well-informed on the nature of the study and were also asked about their consent to participate. The participants were also given a copy of the guided questionnaires in their language.

Confidentiality was consistently observed in the process, and only we had access to the recordings. The participants were also asked if they decided to withdraw participation even during the middle of the interviews. We have consistently shown the utmost respect for such a decision—fortunately, none of the participants deferred in any of the discussions. We also observed sensitivity in processing follow-up questions premised on the participants' narratives. No other persons or animals of whatsoever kind were harmed in this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the data drawn from the narratives of the informants, the following overarching themes emerged concerning the challenges experienced and coping strategies of working mothers beyond borders in keeping a harmonious relationship with their families in the Philippines in terms of (a) parenting with children (b) marital responsibilities to partners (c) financial obligations. These themes were concertedly discussed below.

3.1. On Challenges Experienced in Terms of Parenting with Children (Theme 1: Long-Distance Parenting)

Families divided across national borders may make sacrifices in terms of geographical and emotional closeness. During the interviews, some participants shared that they could not be physically available for their children due to distance and were not present on any special occasions. Even in times of emergency, they could not go home immediately. These participants' experiences can be confirmed by a counseling website run by academics from Ateneo De Manila University, wherein they mentioned how a considerable number of OFWs expressed extreme concerns with long-distance parenting and missing out on important life events of their family members, especially their children on top of homesickness and adjustment concerns.

Similarly, [Gonzales \(2011\)](#) stated that physical absence and being distant from one's offspring as a parent has never been easy. Indeed, working mothers who are away from their children are experiencing difficulties. It was never easy for them to be separated from their children. As two informants shared:

'Daw kabudlay kag sakit sa dughan bilang nanay ti... kay hindi ako maka guide sa ila kag hindi ko sila makita gid na magdako sa amon. (It is heartbreaking as a mother that I am unable to guide and watch my child grow.) – Denden

May panahon sato na ang bata ko nahospital... daw indi ko bal an maano ako di kay ako nga daan gabantay sa iya dati bata pa sila kun magsakit. Hindi gid pa ako makapuli dayon kay layo ako. (There was a moment that my child was admitted in the hospital. I had no idea what to do as a working mother who is separated from my family at that time. I could not go home immediately as I am far from home." – Kaka

The participants' narratives showed that their physical separation from their children has costs particular and substantial feelings of slight emotional neglect. [Asis & Ruiz-Marave \(2017\)](#) contended that a critical issue faced by OFW families is parental absence, which then translates into a lack of emotional support for their children that would eventually negatively impact the latter's welfare due to their absences.

3.2. On Challenges Experienced in Terms of Parenting with Children (Theme 2: Maternal Separation Anxiety)

Mothers feel worried about their left-behind families' well-being and financial situation. Working mothers abroad also feel guilty for being physically away from their families.

Since mothers are working abroad, they often worry about their children in the Philippines. There have been times when they have been afraid and unable to concentrate on their work. These emotions that the participants felt can be validated by the works of [Hock et al. \(1989\)](#), who stated that maternal separation anxiety could be defined as an unpleasant emotional state due to the actual or anticipated short-term separation from the child, including feelings of worry, sadness, and guilt.

Similarly, [Storm and Ridley-Johnson \(1995\)](#) stated that maternal separation anxiety influences maternal behavior, attitudes about employment, and employment decisions made by mothers. Indeed, maternal separation anxiety can affect them, the work that they do, and the living that they have abroad, and it could also affect them not only mentally or emotionally but also physically because instead of worrying about themselves, they have to worry also about their left behind family in the Philippines. The following narratives support the discussion:

Wala ako iban mabuhat. Hhmhm. ang mag isip lang sa ila kay indi ako makapuli man ura-urada (I did nothing but to worry because I could not go home right away sighhh...)." – Kaka

May mga panahon na hhmhm.. nahadlok ako as nanay... Namingawan ako sa bata ko na lalaki. Sa pagpadako sa iya. Pirmi ako gaisip sa iya. (There are moments when I am afraid as a mother, hhmhmhm. I really miss rearing my son. I am always worried about him." – Tes

3.3. On Challenges Experienced in Terms of Marital Responsibilities with Partners (Theme 1: Dissatisfied Marital Intimacy)

Intimacy involves personal closeness, both physical and psycho-emotional. And in this sense, many aspects of human contact may be defined as intimate. Intimacy includes sharing feelings and providing emotional support for each other. Evident in the narratives of the participants that they were dissatisfied with their marital intimacy with their partners as they were unable to romantically and sexually satisfy their husbands as a result of their temporary

physical separation leading to the diminishing of one's affection and would often lead to frequent arguments. As three informants shared:

Halin satong nag ubra nako sa layo, indi kona mahatag sakon bana akon na responsibilidad, inang.. hmhmhm, partner's sex fulfillment sa iya kay asawa ko man sya'. (Since I worked away from my family, I am unable to meet my husband's needs, such as sexual fulfillment)– Kaka

'Wala ko na magampanan akon responsibilidad as asawa sakon bana parehas dati' (I could no longer perform my responsibilities as a wife to my husband the way I used to)– Met

'Kabudlay gid para sakon na asawa na malayo sa bana ko kay indi ko na magampanan obligasyon ko sa iya na asawa niya. Kag kis an amo na ang rason na mag away kami kay magselos na ako maski wala rason. (It is difficult for me as a wife to be separated from my husband because I can not fulfill my obligations to him as a wife. Sometimes, that is the cause of our arguments due to my jealousy out of reason) – Galbbi

Most of the participants' narratives are supported by the study of [Weinberger et al. \(2009\)](#), where they found that diminishing intimacy in marriage can be a significant cause of divorce. Similarly, it may also erode mutual trust and romance among couples, resulting in emotional impairment/distress, isolation, marital maladjustment, and dissatisfaction.

3.4. On Challenges Experienced in Terms of Financial Obligations (Theme 1: Financial Stress)

The determination to improve the family's socio-economic condition had led the mothers to work across borders, hence, the financial burden. Some participants shared that meeting their financial obligations placed them under stress. Financial stress as the unpleasant feeling that one can not meet financial demands, afford the necessities of life, and have sufficient funds to make ends meet. The surface typically includes the emotions of dread, anxiety, and fear but may also include anger and frustration. Similarly, according to [Northern et al. \(2010\)](#), financial stress is an inability to meet one's economic responsibilities and is influenced by attitudes, beliefs, and other psychological factors. As one informant shared:

Indi gid man dako ang sweldo di sa Saudi sa mga DH pero wala man ako choice kay sa Pinas wala man gehapon maayo na oportunidad. Na pressure ako daw kis a di ako katulog mag isip kay ang ginapadala ko indi kasya sa pamilya ko amo challenging gid' (The salary here in Saudi for DH (domestic helpers) is not big enough but I do not have a choice because in the Philippines, there are not enough opportunities though. I felt pressured and unable to sleep well sometimes thinking of the insufficient money that I sent to my family and its really challenging).- Denden

3.5. On Coping with Challenges in Distance Parenting and Maternal Separation Anxiety (Theme 1: Frequent Computer-Mediated Communication)

Frequent computer-mediated communication is evident in most informants' narratives in coping with challenges in distance parenting and maternal separation anxiety. Computer-mediated communication, in a broad sense, can be interpreted as any form of communication mediated by digital technology which involves the use of the internet, emails, instant messaging, cellular phone text, multiuser interaction, etc., as cited by [Yu \(2011\)](#). Additionally, Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a generic term now commonly used for various systems that enable people to communicate with others using computers and networks. In

this part, the challenges posed to mothers can be coped with by frequently communicating with their children back home more often than usual. As two informants shared:

‘Para madula man pagka hidlaw ko sa ila kag para masigurado ko na okay sila sa balay.. hhmhmm. Ga video call ako sa messenger adlaw-adlaw para masubaybayan sila magdako maski layo ako’ (To relieve the longing and guarantee that they are fine at home, I make calls with them virtually via messenger video call every day to guide them even from afar as they grow) – Kaka

‘Gatawag gid ako mam sa WhatsApp taga gab i te kay indi man pareho ang oras di sa Kuwait kag sa Pinas. Kun gab i ako magtawag, aga na ina sa Pinas sure ako. Ginasigurado ko gid na makaluto kag makakaon sila before maglakat sa school kag mastorya si bunso. Kabudlay gid bala mam mag nanay sa layo, maka guilty sa dughan kis a isipon gaalaga ka sang iban na bata sa Kuwait pero indi ka kaalaga mayad sang sarili mo na kabataan’. (I really make calls via WhatsApp every night although there is a time difference between Kuwait and the Philippines. If I called at night here in Kuwait, that is already morning in the Philippines I’m sure. I really made sure that my children can cook food and eat for breakfast before going to school and be able to talk with my youngest. It’s really difficult to assume parenting from afar and having that feeling of guilt knowing that I am taking other’s children here in Kuwait but I failed to take with prudence to my children back home.) - Dadet

3.6. On Coping with Challenges of Dissatisfied Marital Intimacy (Theme 1: Hope and Optimism)

Because of distance and the impossibility of sleeping together as husbands and wives, most of the informant’s narratives revealed that they overcame the challenges of dissatisfied marital responsibilities to partners with hope and optimism. They constantly remind themselves that their sacrifices are for the benefit of their entire family, which is why they contemplate positively and optimistically despite the guilt they feel with their marital responsibilities. According to [Usán Supervía et al. \(2020\)](#), an optimistic viewpoint allows individuals to respond positively to adverse, critical, and even traumatic circumstances, overcoming these difficulties with effort and determination.

A similar study by [Laranjeira and Querido \(2022\)](#) stated that optimism and hope are essential adaptive phenomena that foster well-being, quality of life, and psychological adjustment in the general population and specific groups. They also stated that optimistic individuals adapt better to adversity, have lower chances of developing mental disorders, and exhibit healthier behaviors related to greater satisfaction with life. Citing these pieces of literature, it conforms to the coping of most informants.

‘Ginahambalan ko ang sarili ko pirmi na hhmhmm.. ini na mga sakripsiyong ko para sa pamilya ko kag sa bana ko kag para mahatag ko sa ila mga kinahanglan nila. Ga hope gid ako pirmi basta maisip ko sila’ (I always tell myself that, hhmhmm, these sacrifices are for the sake of my family's future and of course to provide for the needs of my children and husband. I am always hopeful when I think about them) – Met

3.7. On Coping with Challenges of Dissatisfied Marital (Theme 2: Open Communication)

Communication is essential in all areas of human life, especially the marriage relationship. She furthered that sincere communication, open and sympathetic, conveying one's feelings and needs served as solutions to marital relationship problems at a distance. Most of the narratives revealed that the informants-maintained openness and communication with their spouses to express their love for each other despite the distance. For example, two of the informants shared that:

'Ginasigurado ko gid na ga communicate kami pirmi kag open kami sa isat' isa' (I always make sure that we should communicate well and be open with each other) – Bainona

'Gahatag ako sang panahon gid mag tawag sa bana ko sa video call para mastoryahan namon mga issues sa amon na relasyon kag ma open kami pirmi kag para man mabatyagan niya man pagpalangga ko sa iya maskin ara ako sa layo.' (I also give time for my husband via video call so that we can talk about matters affecting our marriage and be open with one another, and so that he can continuously feel my love even from a distance) – Denden

Long-distance relationship couples need to be open with one another and communicate effectively to maintain a healthy relationship. These statements can be corroborated by [Kiefek-Rataj et al. \(2020\)](#), who stated that openness and communication between partners are crucial elements of dyadic coping with stress. Similarly, [Baugh and Humphries \(2010\)](#) claimed that communication is the key to a robust and healthy relationship.

3.8. On Coping with Challenges from Financial Stress (Theme 1: Perseverance)

Common to the participants' narratives is their perseverance. That they never give up easily when it comes to providing for their family's needs, and they make every effort to send money to their families in the Philippines. They tried their best to meet the family's needs by doing extra hard work and showing perseverance. These statements can be validated by a study conducted by [Domingo et al. \(2019\)](#), where they found out that with families in mind, migrants showed the characteristics of perseverance.

Perseverance is the courage not to give up when confronted with difficulties and failure, a quality that is predictive of quality work performance. While it is true, as shared by the informants, that the salary of domestic helpers is not sufficient to sustain their family's needs, however, their determination to think positively and persevere voluntarily directed their actions to strike obstacles, discouragement, frustrations, and financial stress.

"If the salary has not arrived yet and my family needs money immediately, I always find a solution just to send them money. I just do not give up easily." – Kaka

"I make every effort to send money to my family every month even if it costs me." – Bainona

"I tried my best to meet their needs by working harder, ahm, even though I am not a perfect wife or mother." – Galbbi

4. CONCLUSION

Informed by the resilience theory which views resilience as the ability to bounce back as an effect of exposure to some or other crises, its three connected components of faced adversity, the mediating process which results in the participant's being resilience have resulted in several overarching themes that have emerged based from their narratives. It is exclusive of argument that typical to their faced challenges as working mothers beyond borders in terms of parenting with their children are long-distance parenting and maternal separation anxiety.

Based on the discussions above, it is without challenges living as they worked abroad away from their children- which poses many difficulties for them as mothers. On challenges experienced in terms of marital responsibilities with their partners, it is evident that the majority have shared that they have experienced dissatisfied marital duties with their spouses, considering that they are unable to romantically and sexually satisfy their husbands as a result of their physical separation leading to the diminishing of one's affection and would often lead to frequent arguments. On challenges experienced with financial stress, it was commonly shared that their salaries are not enough to meet the needs of their families and that they always feel insufficient and anxious, thinking that their families' needs are not provided.

Reckoning in the spirit of resilience from among Filipinos in times of adversity, the participants have shared common and true to all narratives of coping with their challenges regarding parenting, marital and financial obligations to their families and that the findings in question number 2 were substantially conferred and discussed above concerning the participant's experienced challenges.

Premised on the totality of the findings, we recommend that our government agencies look into the possibility of supporting our OFW mothers by granting them free internet access and the unrestricted use of technologies while working abroad to maintain uninterrupted communication with their families in the Philippines. With this, the supposed expenses for purchasing high-end gadgets and the internet would be added to the financial obligations that they usually send to the Philippines for support. Furthermore, as the Philippine Constitution protects the sanctity of unions and marriages among Filipino families, the temporary separation of mothers from their families should not be a ground for diminishing their affection for their partners and severely compromising their parental roles for their children even as they work from afar.

Considering the limitations of this study, further research should focus on the fathers/husbands whose spouses are working abroad and look into new insights and findings from their perspectives that might delineate or confirm what the participants of this study experience.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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