

Wives Left Behind: Filipino Women with Migrant Husbands

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ABSTRACT Male Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) migration reshapes family dynamics, forcing left-behind wives to manage households and assume paternal roles. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of ten middle-aged women in Lucban, Quezon, whose husbands work abroad. Using a narrative approach guided by Family Resilience Theory, the research identifies personal struggles and analyzes how paternal migration alters family structures. Findings reveal a stark contrast: while remittances ensure financial stability, they fail to offset the heavy emotional and psychological burdens placed on these women. Key challenges emerge as critical to their lived experience, including decision-making autonomy, marital dissatisfaction and infidelity, increased caregiving, and shifting, often disadvantageous, gender roles. By highlighting these frequently overlooked female perspectives, the study advocates for enhanced support systems from government and non-government organizations to safeguard the mental and financial health of women left behind

Keywords: Overseas Employment, Family Dynamics, Women Left Behind, Migration, Family Resilience Theory, Gender Roles

INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal-based migration has been the practice of the dominant population worldwide, whereas the males were expected to suffice the economic needs of the family being left behind. A literature supporting this narrative by Gu et al. (2021), found that the breakdown between male and female migrants was relatively different, making the former higher in a population, compared to the latter. The underlying reasons for migration have been pointed out, such as the uncertainty of job availability and low-income employment that would be sparse for the family (Lei & Desai, 2021). As mentioned, family reasons were the driving force of migrant-based labor, however, it is also the family dynamics that have been a concern in exchange for the benefits brought by the globalization process. Mustaqeem (2020) has stated that migration has brought significant changes in the role of each family member in the scope of family dynamics, particularly in displaying a gender based role under social normativity. Women left behind have to be present in taking on the role of a homemaker, a wife, and a father figure while their husbands are off to migrate.

These situations become burdensome to the homemaker, as Ghimire et al. (2021) have found that wives with migrant husbands have a different experience from wives with non-migrant husbands, specifically in practicing autonomy within the household. It has also been a determining factor in shaping the family, and gender roles and responsibilities, given that the wives were left as both the homemaker and the wife. Associating autonomy with the financial aspect, it has been determined that remittances brought by the migrant

worker in the family are one of the key determinants of whether or not the system in the familial relationship is satisfying. Money has also been a parameter for some to showcase positive relations (Zharkevich, 2019). Albeit, study by Ahmed (2020), showcasing the standardization of men leaving the home to seek opportunities, leaves no room for women to execute their becoming, which resonates with their inferiority. Contextualizing the phenomenon of migration in Southeast Asian countries, these findings were prominent to consider.

These influencing factors and stressors were essential in exploring the family experiences, particularly in dealing with the changes in the family system throughout the life span of an individual. It has also been articulated that financial pressure could cause familial disruption, especially since emotional vulnerability and stress were higher in middle adulthood (Neppl et al., 2021). Additionally, middle adulthood was currently the precursor of societal adversities, aside from the susceptibility of health risks, and lack of interventions due to the shift in dimensions. Studies concerning middle adulthood narratives remain undiscovered, which could lead to further research (Infurna et al., 2020). As a starting point along similar dispositions, this study will be relevant in presenting the current landscape of family dynamics and its execution in the present era, highlighting the narratives and challenges of middle-adult women left behind, and the effects of migration in executing a family setting.

Several studies have concentrated on Filipino children's well-being and lived experiences, compared to assessing the well-being of Filipino women or wives left behind. Botor (2023) has utilized Froma Walsh's Resilience Framework to determine the results and findings, which could be navigated in this study. Moving closer to CALABARZON's state, Dicolan & Bacongus (2020) only pertained to the positive experiences of the 45 selected women left behind in CALABARZON, hence, it does not include the negative experiences or the adversities and challenges they have faced throughout nurturing their family. This would support the gaps in vulnerability of the left behind individuals throughout the vulnerabilities of migration (Gilogi et al., 2024). It would also be best to consider the direction of choices of the women left behind through their reproductive health (Shattuck et al., 2019), career path, and marriage life amidst globalization (Krieger, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Region IV-A (CALABARZON), Philippines, which was identified as possessing the largest population of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) across the 17 regions in the country (PSA, 2024). Quezon Province was the particular locale of the study, aligning with NEDA's accounts hailing Quezon as one of the provinces in CALABARZON facing the highest poverty incidence despite the benefits of migration phenomenon through financial sustenance and alleviations. (NEDA, 2023). Most of the participants were based in Lucban, Quezon, which served as a resource material due lack of existing data consisting of migrant families and women left behind brought by paternal migration.

Research Design

Qualitative research design further dissects the complexity of predetermined social phenomena, which in this study, is the migration phenomenon. This type of research design undermines the importance of creating a comprehensive overview of the phenomena, as well as determining the strategic options for navigating the predicament's diverse layers and utilizing the narrative design through narrative inquiry tradition to elicit participants' lived experiences (Lim, 2024; Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019). Through areas of the humanities, psychology, sociology, and history, the lived experiences of Filipino middle-aged women underscore the impacts of paternal migration in shaping family (Creswell, 2014). Finally, the inductive approach was also applied to chronologically generate conclusions, codes, and themes based on the participants' narratives, particularly zooming into challenges encountered by the Filipino middle-aged women left behind (Lim, 2024).

Participants

Ten (10) Filipino middle-aged women were classified as participants of this study. They satisfied all three (3) criteria, such as (1) a woman aged 40-65 years old, (2) married to an OFW with more than 10 years, and (3) the OFW was in service for or more than 10 years. The women left behind may be women practicing their profession or as homemakers. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant as well, and informed consent and limitations were obtained. Critically, the study acknowledged the "expense of emotional burden on shared narratives" by incorporating a 30-minute grace period during interviews. This allowed sessions to extend to two hours, providing participants with the necessary time and space to navigate sensitive topics at their own pace.

Data Collection

After being qualified in the eligibility phase, containing all the criteria, the participants were required to fulfill a semi-structured key informant interview (KII) and a signed the informed consent of voluntary participation, and assent to record the interview. The semi-structured interview questionnaire traced the challenges and coping strategies of the woman left behind, streamlining the inequalities of gender subjectivities, psychosocial dilemma, quality of marital satisfaction and familial relationships, and the challenges of being a wife and a mother. Each interview session ranged from 45 minutes up to 1 hour and 30 minutes (1 ½ hour). The allowable time granted another 30-minute grace period, as the participant/s needed due to the expense of emotional burden on shared narratives, leading for the interview to have a maximum of 2 hours. The exceeding minutes were discouraged to respect the participant's time. All interviews were conducted face-to-face given the technological concerns of some participants. The collected data has been subjected to transcription for the purpose of data analysis.

Data Analysis

The six stages of thematic analysis were utilized to adequately elaborate the results from the KII. The process of selection of quotation, keywords, coding, themes, conceptualization, and development of conceptual framework were followed sequentially. The determined overarching and frequent themes along with the examined codes were discussed and expounded to represent the results' synthesis of the study's objectives (Naeem et al., 2023). The meaningful results presented the distinct yet similar lived experiences of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Women Left Behind and Coping Strategies

Table 1. Challenges faced by women left behind, and coping strategies

THEME	DESCRIPTION
Two Sides of the Coin: Challenges of a Mother, Strains of a Wife	Participants' role duality entailed distinct challenges and strains based on their role positioning, as wife and mother, as they surpassed these challenges through varying coping strategies.
Hurdles of the Mind, Battles of the Heart	Psychosocial, emotional, and underlying personal adversity were identified as one of the focal challenges that women left behind undergo.
Conflicts among Societal Norms, and the Triumph through Selfhood	The gender-related tribulations such as gender-based expectations and comparison, gender discrimination, and women as a subordinate individual to men were noted as one of the hindrances in the fulfillment of their selfhood.

Two Sides of the Coin: Challenges of a Mother

The ten (10) participants are all mothers, wherein the majority of them ranged from having one (1) to three (3) children, while one participant had seven (7). Understanding children of their own who possess different personalities requires curated adjustments to attend to the call of their demands. In this sense, the participants have demonstrated their challenges by starting with their children, down to their struggles as mothers in coping with these expectations. They seldom mentioned their concerns and challenges, but it could be further incorporated into this study that captures their life experiences.

Quoting Participant 1 on her take on the impacts of generational gaps that she needed to adjust while honing children's discipline and maintaining mother-child positive relationships:

"It was burdensome. Particularly, the generation of children today has a different preference, but it is manageable for me at least because they still listen and obey my supervision. However, I needed to comport and orient myself to their pool of fondness. A parent should recalibrate the approaches and cope with the trends, instead of letting their children adjust to their personality." - Participant 1, Sean

Through the revamp of the parenting styles of today's generation of parents, the mother-children relationship remains amenable despite the absence of the paternal role. This is also an indication that bridging the gap of relationships due to migration is possible as long as the parents learn to unlearn their perceived concept of parenting and resituate themselves as individuals, matching the personality of their children. This generally sets the boundaries between practicing positive parenting and the healthy grounds for ensuring discipline (Caroll, 2022).

"Yuno's tournament didn't end well because he lost the competition. He cannot accept the defeat and eventually throws a tantrum. I tried to understand the situation and soothe his emotions as he cried while we were on our way home, but I couldn't control my patience anymore. My high blood pressure was triggered, so I cannot manage to talk to him calmly, instead, I dismissed his emotions.." -Participant 5, Iris

Meanwhile, aside from parenting challenges and strategies, mothers also experience worries about their children's welfare, which may concern the child's social relationships and their health conditions. This is relevant to discuss as Participant 10 shared a challenge on her children, whereas one is experiencing hindrances in making friends, while the other is a child with exceptionalities diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). She narrated:

"I am troubled by my child's absence of friends. I tend to compare myself to wayback high school, where I could have one. Sometimes, I tease him about having admiration or a 'crush' for his classmates, but he always dismisses the idea of it. Though he is okay, I still feel troubled. My other child is generally okay also, however, he was diagnosed with having ASD when he was around 2 and a half years old.." -Participant 10, Angeline

Given some challenges presented above, a mother's internal challenge is being overlooked. This only pertains that mothers prioritize the children's well-being compared to their personal growth and development. Some participants noted that they lack physical activity due to the overwhelming workload that they have to accomplish within the day. They lack self-compassion, which becomes a problem in having a positive view of the self (Simpson et al., 2022). They stick to their daily routine, which is to clean the house, cook food for the family, and nurture their children. The routines were accomplished within the day through efficient time management techniques. Regardless of classifications, if the woman left behind is a woman practicing her profession or a homemaker, time management has been beneficial for them.

Financial insufficiencies lie between the positions of being a mother and a wife. Participant 3 disclosed that she and her husband experienced a year of financial burden due to her husband's lung concerns. He, as a seafarer, wasn't able to be on board, so they opted to find alternatives to raise financial sustenance for their family, such as selling snacks in a public elementary school, and her husband, who was a tricycle driver. There was no support from their family and relatives, as they didn't believe that the family was in a financial crisis.:

"Years have passed when Bryan [her husband] was not able to deliver monetary remittances since we planned on building our house, which was generated from a loan that caused him to stop sustaining our needs. As a result, I am the lone provider among our small family.." - Participant 9, Jasmin

Through this holistic perspective of analyzing the challenges faced and their respective coping strategies, mothers encounter, it could be argued that mothers not only shape future generations, but they are also capable of reconstructing their identity to accommodate the needs of each member. They could serve as a facilitator and educator of the changing landscape of familial dynamics and relationships (Aziza, 2020). Moreover, the aspect of financial realities that should be shouldered by the mothers, as being the women left behind, should be highlighted. Financial inclusions and tangible solutions should be granted to them, even through small-scale livelihood opportunities. It will not only improve their living conditions, but this will also engage them in the social and economic development of the communities (Hess et al., 2021). Lastly, women left behind cope with the assistance of the same group they belong to. They uphold the integrity of confiding in other women, their kin, particularly their family, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and women of their friend group. Sometimes, they also rely on their husbands, but it's seldom considered. This is due to the evidence that women can administer positive pieces of advice, share similar experiences as a sense of belongingness, and listen as they offer emotional support (Bedrov & Gable, 2023).

Two Sides of the Coin: Strains of a Wife

Under the sanctity of marriage and family, the marital duties and responsibilities greatly differ from the previous position orientation of motherhood. Being a wife is an entity that encapsulates the importance of maintaining intimacy, connectedness, trust, respect, and communication. It unveils the interrelatedness of power dynamics through decision-making, the sense of obtaining financial autonomy, and overcoming marital disagreements and conflicts (Compennolle, 2021; Lavner et al., 2016). Marital satisfaction could be measured through the observance of the set marital roles. This satisfaction could lead to dissatisfaction once the expectations and demands were not met adequately and competently by the individuals involved in the sphere of marriage (Randall & Bodenmann, 2017; Li, 2018). Corresponding to Filipino culture and household practices, the wife should show utmost subordination to their husband as a sign of respect, and in compliance with the Philippines' recognition of conservative religious bound principles.

Among women left behind in this study, they all perform lists of necessary duties for their in-laws, such as assisting them through their monthly health check-ups, observing occasional visits to their ancestral houses, monthly financial sustenance, and even living under the same roof as a direct caregiver. Thus, this set of customary duties can be considered a vicious cycle when the presence of a threat, particularly violence due to in-laws' actions, affects the welfare of the wife and the children recurrently. Physical abuse, interference with decisions, and emotional abuse are some of the identified threats that have been found in this study. It is employed by the in-laws of the women left behind while their husbands are absent from home. Studies also found the perpetrated abuse and violence by in-laws (Waila et al., 2023).

True enough, Participant 9, named Jasmin, lived with her in-laws for 15 years. Jasmin and her two (2) daughters experienced abuse from her mother-in-law, particularly verbal abuse directly to her, and recurring both verbal and physical abuse to her eldest. She denoted:

"[My challenge includes] my mother-in-law. When I was residing in my in-laws' house, as my husband left us and entrusted me with my children, my children received verbal confinements and scoldings. Of course, as a mother, I am wounded. It pains me to see that my children were being treated badly and being shouted at furiously. I could still recall when my eldest suffered from hitting, one incident included hitting with slippers, and another that broke my heart was when my eldest complained that she was hit by a dipper to her head." – Participant 9, Jasmin

Participant 6, Andromeda, has undergone a year of coping through reading self-help books, confiding with her family, friends, and churchmates, to recover from the impact of her husband's infidelity. At the end, she chose to forgive her husband for the sake of her family and concealed her emotions, and stated:

"[I] found out that my husband was having a third party. He blamed me for his actions and defended himself. As for him, he wanted to have someone beside him taking care of him, especially when he was sick. I don't want to have a broken family, so I chose to forgive. If you love your husband, you need to forgive him." - Participant 6, Andromeda

Five out of the ten participants engage in virtual sex through videocall sex, sex on call, or sending intimate pictures of themselves. Three out of the ten have set boundaries on only engaging sexual roles through personal connection. Meanwhile, two mentioned having a low sexual drive and libido and difficulty in showing affection due to aging. They only diverged on recreating the concept of intimacy through acts of service and quality time. However, reinstating their claims, this concludes that women left behind view sexual intimacy as an obligation to fulfill, whereas a sample direct quote from Participant 1 showed:

"Of course, I am his wife. It is truly my duty and obligation to give it to him. The usual period of sustaining this duty is around one week to one month after he comes home. I see it as a normal thing since the longing towards one another is at its peak. But when the longing slowly fades, we do not engage in sexual activity anymore. We communicate and negotiate on ways to be affectionate instead. Back to the usual set-up, per se." - Participant 1, Sean

Family positioning and structure is one of determinants in the quality of marital satisfaction, as well as the sense of connectedness that fulfills the physical, emotional, and financial needs (Mucci et al., 2019). The quality of marital relationships and the chances of resolving marital instability could be managed through communication that should be employed by both parties (Li, 2018).

Hurdles of the Mind, Battles of the Heart

The ten participants in this study have undergone distinct yet similar challenges in their psychological, emotional, and psychosocial aspects across their experiences as women left behind. It varies from internal to external concerns, but their position as a mother and wife has been considered in determining their narratives. One of the streamlined challenges of women left behind is the suppression and concealment of emotions due to worries of financial instability. They could be exposed to financial risks if their husbands' welfare is troubled by their concerns. As a supporting narrative to this, Participant 4 stated:

"My husband is a decent man. Financially, he could provide. However, he has an attitude problem at times, he gets mad easily. Maybe that's the reason why I am the way I am—emotionally burdened. It is too heavy to carry, and I cannot fully comprehend it.."
- Participant 4, Cel

The pressures on handling emotional concerns were elevated into pressures and stress on providing financial alternatives due to the insufficiencies of the remittances. Some of the participants experience frustration, which could be increased to projected distress to their children whenever they feel stress. The decision-making process on providing financial alleviations would only come from the women left behind. However, on the larger scale of decision-making, men in the household hold the power dynamics (Kaur, 2020). It has increasingly become an issue for some of the women left behind

Participants 4, 6, 7, and 9 also share the same sentiments on decision-making, whereas their husbands decided solely on their individual pursuits, such as sustaining the flow of business, giving financial sustenance to their mothers, and purchasing land for a house and lot. These scenarios often leave the burden of managing these investments and responsibilities and resulting in additional stressors and psychological load to the women left behind. Through these increased workloads, the women left behind were left with no other way around to fulfill the role, in exchange for limiting themselves by reducing leisure activity and restraining themselves in honing social relationships (Dean et al., 2021). Hence, there were also accounts that women left behind were given absolute financial autonomy as compensation for the emotional burden and psychosocial dilemma they faced while their husbands were out on migration.

The opportunities include upholding autonomy, self-determination, and reclaiming decision-making power, concerning fostering a household, especially in traditional settings, such as the Filipino (Matz & Mbaye, 2023). Comparing this setting to the women left behind as homemakers to women left behind as women practicing their profession, the latter have episodes of regret, stress, and looking back on their life choices. The mix of overwhelming emotions was drawn towards their realizations of relationship gaps with their children, which have a direct impact on their psychological and emotional well-being. Participant 5 professed her unclear thoughts of understanding the stress of being unable to emotionally connect with her children due to her decision to work.

"Hmm, sometimes I feel it [the regret]. But, for now, no. I am weighing whether I regret everything [about working]. Somehow, [working] has a positive and a negative impact on our family. If there were any [regrets], it would be the years of supposedly nurturing my children.."

- Participant 5, Iris

The coping mechanisms of the women left behind were the reliance on the support of the pool of women in the family, for example, the mother-in-law, their mother, or family relatives whom they entrusted with the welfare of their children. On the other hand, it has also been noted that challenges in battling the mind and heart underscore the feeling of inadequacy, feeling of being lost, blaming oneself, loneliness, and selflessness. The husband expects the wife to be in their best shape at all times, leading to a pile of pressure to build up on the end of the woman left behind. The participants, being viewed as women, had been labeled as the primary person in nurturing their children, which equates to providing optimal care (Zhao et al., 2021).

Conflicts Among Societal Norms and the Triumph Through Selfhood

The traditional attitudes recognize the crucial role of women in practicing traditional roles and cultural norms, such as caregiving, and the typical role of a woman in a household. This could be an instrument for the psychological concerns of women to be flagged, and one is the possibility of acquiring higher threats to psychologically related health problems (Delgado-Herrera et al., 2024). This would be a concern in championing self-fulfillment in the phase of motherhood. Most of the participants have indicated that being women left behind was not their personal choice, hence, a choice expressed by their husbands. It has been imperative for them to nourish themselves as well as their family, as it seems that society regards women's functionality as being an effective care rhythm provider. It limits their chances in attaining selfhood (Lei, 2023; Wang & Ye, 2020).

"It has been our agreement. He wanted one of us should stay at home and take care of our children. However, my brother gave unsolicited comments on my position as a plain housewife. He compared our set-up to their marriage which both of them are working, I can still recall what he said: 'You don't even make efforts to find work. Try helping your husband just like how my wife helps me'. I confide in my husband and express how hurt I am by my brother's remarks. He consoles me by reminding me that it's his decision for me to nurture our children." - Participant 9, Jasmin

Aside from the gender-based comparison, the correlation of this phenomenon is through its application to the workforce. Women were most likely to be disadvantaged due to the significance of gender subjectivities and ideologies applied and practiced in society. Being a mother has been a hindrance for Participant 5 to secure an opportunity, as she was viewed as less, whereas she shared:

"When I was interviewed, the human resource (HR) uttered: 'So you already have a child.' After that interview, I cried as I realized that being a woman with a child, being a mother, has become a hindrance for me to be given a chance in the workplace. For me, women with families should have the opportunity to work, and we should be prioritized since we have a family to sustain. However, maybe the company considers the benefits that the employee should receive, especially if you are a mother, such as maternity leave."
- Participant 5, Iris

Despite the efforts to make women's career progression possible, gender stereotypes still prevail as they have been a hindrance to the attainment of opportunities and career development. Women were categorized as having low competencies compared to men (Heilman et al., 2024). Through this manifestation, the threat of perpetuating female subordination is alarming. Women were in the process of social change, whereas the change in social and economic aspects was only expected to be generated by men in society, and only work relating to caregiving was the option for women to be part of society (Mackintosh, 2023). In the aspect of marriage as a unified act of love and religious entity, women were viewed as child-bearers and should adhere to their husbands religiously, and obey the principles of their elders. The practices and cultural values were conditioned under the sphere of historical, cultural, and even religious contexts (Ellwood & McGraw, 2022). As a proving point, Participant 2, Hasmin, reflects the distinguished gender-based expectations, pressures on having a child, and the embodiment of a patriarchal-centric household.

"[I did not pursue and gave up my career as a nurse] because my sick father requested so. He said: 'Don't pursue it, and stay with me. Take care of me instead.' Sometimes, I'll look back and question myself and my decisions. It sunk in that I lost my career. However, my faith in God's will is stronger than my thoughts.." - Participant 3, Hasmin

Correlating these gender issues experienced by Filipino women left behind, it is relevant to note that the Philippines is a conservative Southeast Asian country that adheres to traditional viewpoints in gender-based matters, particularly in household settings. This only concludes that despite the changing landscape of gender positioning in both families and communities, women were still oppressed and vulnerable to certain aspects of society (Abenes, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Lived experiences vary from one to another, but they state a similar trajectory of women in society. Highlighting the relevance of middle adulthood reveals the importance of transitioning roles and priorities for life satisfaction's benefit, targeting the Generativity of Erikson's Theory. The progressive efforts of women in the household showcased their sense of creativity and urgency in providing care in the utmost manner while accommodating other roles without compromising the quality. Women in society were often overlooked, as well as their narratives. The subordination, the lack of space to express grievances, and the instilled gender inequalities hinder the fulfillment of personal development and growth. Through this study, it could potentially create a difference through theoretical by contributing to diversifying the Family Resilience Theory framework, methodological through increasing literature to narratives of middle-aged women in the society and human development studies, and lastly practical implications to expand microeconomic opportunities and offer guidance counseling—serving as an avenue for the portion of women left behind in the Philippines to narrate, share, and express their lived experiences for the benefit of further studies and to amplify their role in the family and communities.

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