

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Left-Behind Children (LBC) in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has put the world into a standstill affecting the everyday lives of individuals. The Left-Behind Children (LBC) of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are not spared as conditions change in labor receiving countries and in the Philippines. The challenges faced by the migrant parent(s) abroad and the repercussions brought by the pandemic immediately impacts the lives of LBC in the country. Towards elaborating how, in broad brush strokes, this exploratory study will use, draw, and compare studies on LBC done before and during the pandemic. This study answers questions such as how did COVID-19 affect the migrant parents' ability to support their children financially?; and how did the pandemic affect the migrant parents' ability to be emotionally present for their children? This paper also asks whether or not and how the pandemic increased the insecure financial situation of the LBC, if already present. Finally, this paper inquires into the LBC's

coping mechanisms during the pandemic. This study found that LBC and family were able to mediate through the uncertainties and financial insecurities despite the delay or decrease in remittances. The LBC were observed to have initiative and a role in the budgeting of household expenses, and have adjusted accordingly to the realities they face. Psychologically, they are steadfast even if worried about the condition of their OFW parent. This paper found that their coping mechanisms alongside sustained communication with their OFW parent to be significant to their well-being. Despite worrying about their OFW parents, LBC acknowledged that it is much safer for their parents to be abroad than at home.

Keywords: COVID-19, Left-behind children (LBC), Philippines, Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), migration, well-being.

Introduction

As of 2019 there are about 2.2 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) worldwide according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) (2020). As they migrate to work abroad for various reasons, they leave behind their families and children. These left-behind children (LBC) are then taken care of by the remaining parent and/or others. They face specific challenges in the absence of a parent such as parenting themselves and/or siblings, the changes in family dynamics, learning to be self-sufficient, and the emotional impact of being left behind among other challenges. The LBC and, by extension, the left behind family maneuver through emotional and economic challenges using respective coping mechanisms.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the mobility of individuals, it has also touched upon the lives, experiences, and struggles of the LBC in the Philippines. In the immediate sense, it can be expected that challenges faced by the migrant parent(s) abroad will affect the conditions of LBC back home. Towards gaining an understanding to the pandemic's impact on LBC, this exploratory study asks: 1) how did COVID-19 affect the ability of the migrant parent(s) to support their children financially?; 2) and how did COVID-19 affect the ability of the migrant parent(s) to be emotionally present for their children? This paper also asks whether or not and how the pandemic increased the insecure financial situation of the LBC. The paper will also inquire on the LBC's coping mechanisms during the pandemic. In painting a picture of the impact on LBCs, this study will use, draw, and compare studies on LBC done before and during the pandemic. The current study conducted semi-structured online interviews using the Google Meet platform and phone calls with LBC college students of Bulacan State University in region III or Central Luzon - the region of origin that has the second highest percentage of OFWs sent to work abroad (13%) according to the 2019 Survey on Overseas Filipinos conducted by the PSA. This study aims to contribute to the nascent literature done regarding the LBC during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background on parental migration and effects on LBC

Based on the latest government survey on overseas Filipinos, 40% of OFWs work in elementary occupations, distantly followed by those who work as service and sales workers at 18%, and those who work as plant and machine operators and assemblers at 12% (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). LBC acts as an unwitting participant in the phenomenon of OFW migration and of the phenomenon “the international transfer of caretaking”. Parreñas’s (2000) concept of “international transfer of caretaking” results from the entrance and migration of Filipino women in domestic work. The phenomenon is a three-tier transfer of reproductive labor between three groups of women in sending and receiving countries: middle class women in receiving countries, migrant domestic workers, and third world women too poor to migrate. She posits that class-privileged women purchase the low-wage services of migrant Filipina domestic workers; they then purchase the lower-wage services of women in the Philippines. It is a social, political, and economic relationship between these individuals in the global labor market.

Media, culture, and even the Catholic Church at times reinforce the idea that children suffer from transnational households. The geographical distance between the parent(s) and LBC also adds to the emotional strain. “The choice of maximizing their earnings as transnational low-wage workers denies them the intimacy of the family,” (Parreñas, 2000, p. 576) thus making international caregiving a more painful experience for both the parent(s) and LBC.

OFWs leave or send children back to the Philippines mainly to mediate unequal levels of economic development thereby taking advantage of lower costs of reproducing their families in their home countries. They rationalize their distance through the concept of sacrificing just to give family a better life through material needs. This enables them to provide greater material benefits for their children and with their remittances helping to lift households out of poverty. The benefits that families derive from this arrangement depends on how and where they spend their remittances (Ang, Jha, Sugiyarto, 2009). Remittances are usually spent on investments in physical assets and human capital such as education and health which stimulate growth. Such benefits include employing another woman for

domestic work, comfortable housing, the ability to make savings, to own property, and even to start their own businesses.

It is not only the LBC but also the other counterpart left behind to deal with the reconfiguration of the family dynamic. In their absence, the role of the migrant parent is replaced by the non-migrant parent or extended family members. Most fathers have full time jobs and pass the caregiving responsibility to other relatives because “it is unusual for fathers to nurture and care for their children in the Philippines (Parreñas, 2000, p. 572). A study done by Scalabrini found that “When men migrate, the left-behind wives indeed assume more responsibilities with their dual roles as fathers and mothers. But when women migrate, it appears that families go through more adjustments...if women assume men’s responsibilities when the men are not around, men do not readily take up caregiving.” (Scalabrini, *Hearts Apart*, 2003). Although the extended family may take up the act of child rearing, parental absence always has an emotional aspect and cannot negate the longing children feel for the love and care of their biological parent(s).

Pre-COVID studies on LBC

Studies are split concerning the well-being of LBC in their findings of parental migration’s effect on the LBC. A few studies argue that “migration in and of itself is not associated with negative outcomes on children’s well-being” (Gassmann et al., 2013, p. 1), while others stress its positive effects on LBC. The 2003 study by Scalabrini, for instance, found that LBC were generally fine and fare better than the children of non-migrants. Edillon (2008) for her part finds that children of OFWs are academically active in that they join academic organizations and extra-curricular activities, and that they received academic and non-academic awards compared to children of non-OFWs. Many studies (Cruz, 1987; Asis, 2000; Parreñas, 2005) also show that there is no significant difference in academic performance between children of migrants and non-migrants.

There are also studies however that find that parental migration has more negative than positive effects on LBC. One study argues that “For young children, they only see migration as a form of abandonment of their parents; while adolescents may either be receptive or resentful.” (Reyes, 2007,

p. 2). Regardless of the material benefits and the possible care that LBC receives from their parents from a distance and/or from their relatives, Parreñas (2005) notes that children of migrants, particularly of migrant mothers, still consider migration as a form of abandonment. They have higher expectations for mothers to provide care for the family even from abroad and do not easily recognize the economic benefits they are gaining as a form of care. Most of them have not really gotten to know their parent(s) well because they have not lived with them for years.

To cope with the emotional challenges, family communications and communication with the migrant parent is observed to lead to low levels of anxiety and loneliness of the LBC thereby transnationally fostering and maintaining familial bonds. Milla's (2016) qualitative study on LBC of female Indonesian migrant workers revealed that God-reliance, self-reliance and diversion seeking are major coping mechanisms of these children with God-reliance being a significant coping mechanism. In contradiction to the positive notes of other studies on LBC coping mechanisms, studies observed that children of migrant parent(s), specifically of migrant mothers, reported being lonely, angry, unloved, unfeeling, afraid, different from other children, and worried compared to all groups of children.

LBC in the time of COVID-19

The impacts of Covid-19 are all encompassing, studies on the impact of the pandemic on children's behaviour has been done in China (Bai et al, 2020). During the initial lockdowns and restrictions on mobility, children cannot return to school on time and cannot physically communicate with their peers. Children tend to react negatively to long term negative events (Buchanan, 2017) such as reduced learning time, the increased usage of electronic devices, and even changes in sleeping patterns (p. 3). Children can also become more irritated due to the constraints on their mobility and the fact that they miss their classmates and friends that could lead to aggressive behaviour and disobedience (Marques et al., 2020, p. 3).

With families-left-behind dependent on remittances, a crisis which could cause massive layoffs in the destination country would create much larger crises at home. A jobs crisis is generally bad news for migrants in

labour receiving countries. Custodio & Ang (2012) provided a snapshot view of the impact of the Global Economic Crisis (GEC) on overseas workers and the families-left-behind. Their study finds that a number of affected households indicated decreases in their family income during the crisis period. There are relatively few affected workers that have returned home as most chose to stay in the destination country in hopes of better opportunities.

To cope with the unstable financial situation, families-left-behind adjust accordingly by implementing coping strategies such as cuts in spending, seeking extra jobs, and a reduced allocation in savings. Savings, recreation and food expenses were the top three expenditures affected by the cut in spending (p. 257). Custodio & Ang's findings are in line with previously done studies (Fiezbien, 2003) wherein household coping strategies are adaptive, that households are active in seeking extra sources of income, and use a social network strategy such as seeking help from relatives. Their report showed that there was an insignificant number of families affected by the crisis and observation revealed that the Philippines was able to avoid larger impacts due to the resiliency of its remittance flows. Adaptable and resilient OFWs were employed in a wide range of industries and are in every country and territory which may have cushioned the possible effects of the GEC (p. 253).

Increasing evidence of domestic violence against women and children at home have also been a concern for researchers, international organizations, and mainstream media due to the recommendations of the World Health Organization measures to combat the pandemic. There has been an increase in reports of violence across the world due to "...the regional or global nature and associated fear and uncertainty associated with pandemics provide an enabling environment that may exacerbate or spark diverse forms of violence" (Peterman et al, 2020, p.1). Women experienced an increase in their load of housework and care for family members. The access to public services and institutions for protection and alternatives have been jeopardized with schools, churches, daycare centers, and social protection services being reduced or suspended. All these factors contribute to the pre-existing conditions of violence according to Marques et al. (2020).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach through a purposive semi-structured interviews of LBC and comparing results with existing literature on migrant families and LBC. Semi-structured interviews is a hybrid type of interview between a structured interview and an in-depth interview wherein a list of predetermined themes and questions is used while allowing the interviewee to talk more freely about any topic raised (Wahyuni, 2012). This method was chosen due to its flexibility allowing the participant to share their experience, thoughts and perspectives. The subject of the matter is a case study which requires to be answered in-depth. Thematic analysis was done after data preparation. Seven LBC college students were selected through a non-probability purposive sampling among college students of Bulacan State University. Purposive sampling, which falls under non-probability sampling, aims to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population of interest (Lavrakas, 2008). Given the sample size of participants and research approach, the results of this study cannot be generalized with the level of confidence to the population of interest - i.e., LBC in the Philippines. Nonetheless, a deep understanding of the impacts of Covid-19 on LBC is the major consideration in employing qualitative approach and gathering qualitative data in this study.

There are two areas of concern in this study, the economic well-being and the social well-being of the LBC during the pandemic. The economic aspect was thought of in terms of the parent(s) reasons for working abroad, remittances and household expenditure, the current situation of OFW parent(s), and education of LBC during the pandemic. For the psychological aspect, the areas of concern is the emotional connection or communication before and during pandemic. The psychological well-being of LBC will be explored. What intervenes in their well-being are LBC's coping mechanisms and the presence of other parental figures.

The interviews were conducted through online video calls via Google Meet platform and through phone calls. Doing online interviews especially during the pandemic, necessitated the use of other avenues for researchers to conduct a study. In this research, doing interviews online provided a more convenient, accessible and secured space for the participants to share their experience with the researchers. However, the researchers also

encountered some challenges such as problems in internet connection, inaudible audio, and the inability to observe nonverbal cues which may have impeded against a more meaningful interaction with and sharing by the LBC participants. LBC participants have signed consent forms as written agreement of their participation in the study and permission to record the entire interview. The study was conducted in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 to ensure that their identities will not be attributed to data provided by them.

Findings

Socio-demographic Profile of Left-Behind Children

LBC participants are youth ranging from 18 to 23 years old. Three are female while four are male. All are students at Bulacan State University; Four LBC are currently in their first year and three are in their third year at the university. Four LBC have OFW mothers who are domestic helpers whilst three LBC have OFW fathers: a painter, a mechanic, and a dental technician. In identifying participants, regions or receiving countries of LBC's parents were not part of the criteria; LBC in this study all have OFW parents currently working in West Asia. This reflects national migration data that indicates the majority of Filipino temporary workers are in that region. As of January 2020, there are about 2,221,448 overseas Filipinos in said region composed of permanent and temporary residents, and undocumented or irregular migrants according to the Department of Foreign Affairs.

OFW parents of LBC have been working abroad for over five years. Six LBC in the study came from households with a parent working abroad for at least eight years. Two LBC have mothers that have been working abroad as domestic helpers for 15 to 20 years. This means that the LBC have lived more than half of their lives with only one parent or with other relatives (grandparents, aunt, or uncle) as their caregiver. Four families-left-behind fall under the nuclear type consisting of the two parents and the child/children whilst three LBC have extended families – from families with separated parents. Notably, LBC 02, in a nuclear family, takes care of his siblings whilst his father works in another province to support them. LBC's parents abroad have different frequency of vacation ranging from every two to four years.

Except for one, all of the LBC have sibling/s. In terms of economic condition based on dwelling units, four LBC live in a house owned by their families, i.e., a house owned by their parents, grandparents, or relatives. On the other hand, two LBC are currently living in a rented house, while one LBC did not specify their type of dwelling unit.

This study found a common situation of LBC having separated parents. This could not generalize the entirety of family dynamics and situation among OFW families in the country. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that this family situation among LBC in this study depicts the situation of many OFW families.

See *Table 1* for full details of the profile of LBC and families.

Economic Aspects

LBC's appreciation of parents working abroad

The results of the interviews indicate that the primary motivation for their parents' migration is to earn money and increase their income to sustain household expenses. LBC 05 whose mother is the OFW vividly illuminated this rationale:

"Siyempre dahil si Papa po tricycle driver lang, si Mama ume-extra lang po ng paglalaba, hindi kaya ni Papa din po yun. Kaya si Mama nag-decide na din mag-ibang bansa. Tsaka yung bahay kasi namin, gusto niya na rin pong ipagawa nung time na yun [My Father is a tricycle driver and Mother has part-time laundry jobs, and he could not provide and sustain everything. That's when my mother decided to work abroad. We also wanted to renovate our house back then]."

Table I. Socio-demographic Profile of Left-Behind Children (LBC) and OFW Parents.

Participant (P)	LBC PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE				OFW PARENTS' PROFILE				FAMILY DYNAMICS				
	Current level of education	Sex	Age	No. of Siblings (Excluding P)	OFW Parent	Country of work	Job	No. of Years as an OFW	Interval of vacation in the PH	Family Type	P's age when OFW parent started working abroad	Caregiver of LBC	Dwelling Unit
01	1 st year college	F	19	1	FATHER	Kuwait	Dental technician	10	Every year	Nuclear	10	Mother (unemployed)	Owned house - family
02	1 st year college	M	20	3	MOTHER	UAE - but currently in Bahrain with her boss	Domestic helper	8	Every 4 years	Nuclear	12	None (he takes care of his siblings) - father works as a car painter in another province; sometimes visited by their grandparents from a separate household	Rented house
03	1 st year college	F	18	3	FATHER	Dibat	Mechanic	8	Unspecified	Nuclear	5	Mother (currently unemployed, had part-time jobs before)	Rented house
04	3 rd year college	F	20	0	MOTHER	Quar	Domestic helper	Around 20 (as soon as she gave birth to P)	Unspecified	Extended	Month/s old	Broken Extended family, lives with grandparents, aunt, uncle, and cousins - her father has other family now	Owned house - family (with relatives)
05	3 rd year college	M	23	3	MOTHER	Saudi Arabia	Domestic helper	6	Every 2 years	Nuclear	16	Father	Owned house
06	1 st year college	M	18	3	MOTHER	Kuwait (previously in Hong Kong for 2 years)	Domestic helper	15	Every 4 years	Extended	1-yr old	Broken Extended family, lives with their aunt	Unspecified
07	3 rd year college	M	21	8	FATHER	Saudi Arabia	Painter	Almost 12 years	Every 3 years	Extended	9	Broken Extended family, he lives with his grandmother, aunt and uncle, other siblings live in their old house	Owned house

Moreover, supporting the LBC's education is also an essential factor for labor migration. The same LBC emphasized this idea by stating:

"Kasi po...ako tapos yung sumunod sa'kin nagsabay na po kami mag-college po 'non [Because me and my sibling went to college at that time]."

It is interesting to note that when asked if they want their parents to come home during the pandemic, they have a contrasting opinion on the matter. In general, participants want their parents to return but recognize that working abroad is important to meet their financial needs.

According to LBC 01, *"...Pero po kasi mas mahihirapan kapag nandito po lahat. Wala pong trabaho [It would be more difficult if we are all here in the country but unemployed]."*

LBC's OFW parent during the pandemic

In terms of job security, six LBC said that their OFW parent is still in decent working conditions abroad resulting in a generally good situation for almost all OFW parents. Hence, these LBC continue to receive remittances from their OFW parents. LBC 02 whose mother is now on holiday with her employers was made possible by the trial COVID vaccine from Pfizer.

"Sa ngayon po, stable naman yung work niya...nasa bakasyon daw po sila sa ibang bansa. Wala po sila sa United Arab Emirates (UAE)...kasi...nakapagpaturok na...sila ng vaccine, sa UAE [Right now, her work is stable and she's currently in a vacation in another country with her employer. She is not in the UAE but they were able to get a vaccine in the UAE]."

However, due to the pandemic, two LBC reported changes in their parents' workplaces despite good working conditions. One had changes in the work schedule and reports to work alternately because of a skeletal workforce while the other must stay in their office. LBC 03's OFW parent was repatriated from the UAE as the company was about to close during the pandemic.

“Parang one month na po siya rito. Kasi end of contract na talaga siya nung September. Tsaka alam ko din po magsasara na din yung kumpanya niya [It’s been a month since he was repatriated because his contract ended last September (2020). Their company was about to close at that time].”

When asked about the process of repatriation, LBC 03 stated difficulties faced by her father due to quarantine protocols.

“Nahirapan po siya. Parang na-extend yata ng mga two o three weeks. Tapos, nung nakalipad na po sya, quarantine po siya sa Alabang. Tapos, nung pag-uwi dito, quarantine din siya dito...Sobrang hirap po [He had difficulties in the process. His flight was also delayed for about two to three weeks. When he arrived here in the country, he went into a quarantine in Alabang. It was really difficult].”

Nevertheless, she stated that their family is already qualified for the financial support that the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) is extending to repatriated workers.

LBC, Remittances and the Financial Effect of COVID pandemic

The continuous economic downturn, closure of companies and repatriation of labor migrants because of the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably affects remittance-dependent countries such as the Philippines. In fact, as stated by Kikkawa et al. (2020), the ADB forecast indicates that remittances to the Philippines will decrease by about 20.2 percent. This was observed in this study. In general, there are some changes to the remittances from parents abroad. For instance, LBC 01 stated that his father’s salary is reduced resulting in smaller remittances.

“Ah yung sahod po nila, kinaltasan po. Parang kalahati po ata ng sahod nila. [Their salary was deducted. It seems like half of their salary]’

On the other hand, three LBC stated that their families experienced delays in receiving remittances due to quarantine restrictions and regulations abroad.

LBC 04: *“Ano... ang nangyari lang po, hindi na siya per month [ang sahod]. Kasi nade-delay yung sahod nila. [It just happened that their salary is no longer given per month. Because... because their wages are delayed.]”*

LBC 05: *“May times po [na nadedelay]. Kasi yung amo po ni Mama is matanda na po. Kasi ang sweldo po ni Mama is every seventh po ng month. Tapos minsan nade-delay po ng dalawang araw po. Kasi siyempre dahil nga rin po sa pandemic. [There are times that salary was delayed because my mother’s employer is old. Sometimes it is delayed for two days. Of course, because of the pandemic.]”*

LBC 06: *“Nade-delay po, opo. Kasi po mayroon... nagkaquarantine... may quarantine din po sa kanila. Para pong nakasarado lang po yung mga banko. [There are instances that salary was delayed because of quarantine protocols. The banks are closed]”*

To raise additional money, some OFW parents also took loans.

LBC 02: *“Ganoon pa rin po [ang sahod]. Nabago lang ngayon kasi after niya pong mag-loan sa crisis fund po ng sa ibang bansa po, ngayon nakakaltasan kasi dahil dun sa ni-loan niya. [The salary is still the same. It changed after the loan he took from the other country’s crisis fund. Now, it’s being deducted because of the loan.]”*

It is also important to note the extended effects of the pandemic for LBC and their families which results in a much higher vulnerability for the LBC especially for those who are currently renting their dwelling unit. For instance, LBC 02 said that their family had to adjust their household expenses during the pandemic:

“Kasi po ito pandemic, honestly po, nagpalipat-lipat po kami ng inuupahang bahay. Kasi nagkakaproblem sa may-ari ng bahay. Siguro dun kami nag-adjust sa paglipat. Kasi sa upa ng bahay siyempre may deposit at advance dun. Siyempre nag-aadjust po

kami sa pera [Since the start of pandemic, honestly, we've been moving to different houses. We had problems with the landlord. We needed to make some adjustments (in finances) because of that. We had to consider the deposit and advance payment for the rent. That's when we had to adjust in terms of finances]."

As for the expenses on education, LBC mentioned the need to spend money for prepaid load and internet connection, printing of learning materials or resources, and provision of electronic gadgets. It was emphasized by LBC 02 when explaining the problems he encountered in coping up with online learning.

LBC 02: "Sa mga kapatid ko po, hindi naman masyadong nag-adjust sa pera in terms of education. Pero sa'kin po, yung load kasi every week 299 pesos. Siguro po nag-aadjust po kami kasi po naka-prepaid WiFi lang po kami. Katulad po ngayon, kahapon po hindi po ako nakapagklase sa dalawang subject namin kasi hindi po nakapagpload. Kasi po naubusan. [My siblings did not adjust much in terms of money for education. It is not the same for me because I need to buy 299 pesos worth of load every week. Maybe we are adjusting because we only have prepaid WiFi. Like yesterday, I was not able to take a class in our two subjects because I ran out of load.]"

Nevertheless, other LBC did not consider these needs as a burden. LBC 03 said:

"Kaunti lang naman po yung napupunta sa education namin kasi parang pambayad lang ng WiFi. Kasi kapag pumapasok kami, parang mas magastos po eh kasi pamasaha, baon, ganyan. Pero ngayon po, parang one side lang po parang isang buwan na po tapos tatlo po kaming nag-aaral [Money that we spend for education is not a lot and it's mostly payment for the WiFi. Face-to-face classes before are more expensive or costly because of the transportation cost, allowances, and the like. But now, expenses for education in one month, which is supposed to be for one person only, can already cover the three of us who are currently in remote learning]."

Psychological Aspects

Graham and Jordan (2011) defined psychological well-being as the state of one's being in the absence of indicators of psychological distress.

Emotional Aspects of being a LBC

Scalabrini's study in 2003 associated low levels of anxiety and loneliness among LBC to secure communication with migrant parents. This is true in the case of LBC in this study. Although the study did not use any scale to measure levels of loneliness of the LBC, they all acknowledge their loneliness due to the absence of their parents. Two in our study mentioned that they usually miss their parents when they are not present during special occasions or unexpected circumstances (e.g., Christmas, graduation, death of a loved one). Another LBC is envious towards other children who had their mothers or fathers with them when they were younger. LBC 02 mentioned that he was able to manage his sadness as he grew older. They also appear to be resilient and coping through their emotions because of their transnational connection and communication. Loneliness did not seem to be a crucial aspect of their well-being as LBC. However, as expected, given the worldwide implementation of quarantine regulations and protocols, the respondents did not get to physically see their migrant parents during the pandemic.

For LBC 05, "...Kasi pagkabata talaga namin, si Mama na po...kahit nga po nung first year college ako kasama ko pa po mag-entrance exam yun. Talagang minsan po naiisip ko na lang kung nandito si Mama hindi kami nahihirapan. Sinanay niya po kasi kami ng asikaso... 'Pag ngayon nalulungkot po 'ko tatawag ako sa kanya, kakamustahin ko po siya. [Ever since we were young, our mother has always been taking care of us. Even when I was in first year college, she was with me during my entrance exam. Sometimes, I would think that if only my mother is here, it would not be difficult for us. We were used to her care... Now I would call her whenever I get sad]."

Communication during the pandemic

Overall, there has been no major change in communication between the LBC and their OFW parents pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. Generally, LBC have regular communication with their OFW parents at least

once a day, although one of them has less communication with her mother - i.e., during vacant hours at work only. Facebook Messenger video call is the most common platform of communication used by our LBC. They all emphasized the importance of modern technology in communication. All LBC consider communication as something that connects them with their OFW parent hence positively affecting their overall well-being.

Interestingly, LBC participants maneuver and build transnational bridges to communicate with their parents through video calling. LBC 02 mentioned that they communicate while an occasion is ongoing for them to feel their parent's presence. LBC 05 also notes calling during the holidays to greet his parents.

"Nagvi-video call lang po kami habang nag...ongoing yung occasion [We would video call while the occasion is ongoing]."

"Ivi-video call na lang po namin siya 'non. Babatiin namin na parang "Ma, Merry Christmas!", ganoon po. Kahit New Year po [We would video call her. We would greet her, "Ma, Merry Christmas! Even during New Year."]."

Worry over OFW parent during the pandemic

All LBC are worried about their parents' situation in receiving countries. In particular, they are worried that their parents might be infected with Covid-19 while working. LBC 03 displayed extreme worry over her parent:

"Lahat po kami dito nag-alala sa kanya. Dito po, sama-sama kami. Tapos siya lang mag-isa dun, nagtrabaho. Lalo kami nag-alala kasi lumalabas siya para magtrabaho...Hindi natin malalaman...kung yung katabi ba natin affected...Kaya pinag-iingat po namin siya [We are all worried about her. We are together here. She is there all by herself, working. We are more worried because she goes outside to work. We really can't tell if the person next to us is infected by the virus so we would always remind her to be cautious]."

LBC 05 shared that his domestic helper mother felt unwell and all of their family members were worried that it was Covid-19:

“...nag-iyakan po kami kasi si Mama bigla pong inubo at sinipon pero wala siyang lagnat. Tapos dry cough at nahihirapan siyang huminga. So, kinabahan kami baka siguro nahihirapan na lang din yung baga niya kasi sa pagod din po. Lagi namin sinasabi na kapag marami pong tao dun sa lugar ng amo niya magfa-face mask po siya... ‘Tas iwasan ang paglapit po sa mga tao po dun [...we cried because Mother had cough and cold but she did not have fever. She had a dry cough and difficulty in breathing. We were nervous but we just thought that maybe her lungs were affected because of extreme fatigue. We would always remind her to use a face mask especially in her employer’s place since there are a lot of people there. We would also remind her to avoid contact with people there].”

One participant also mentioned that they worry about who will take care of their parent in case he/she gets sick abroad. Two LBC mentioned that it is better for their parents to stay abroad during the pandemic because of better government response to the virus compared to the Philippines. Receiving countries are perceived to be safer and have a more reliable government in terms of handling and mitigating the effects of the pandemic relative to the Philippines.

For LBC 07, “Feeling ko mas safe po dun eh. Kasi kung sa gobyerno po titignan mas organized po yung ano nila dun eh. Mas okay po yung gobyerno dun. Kung walang pandemic po, siguro mas okay dito kasi may edad na rin po yung tatay ko [For me it is safer there (in migrant receiving country). If we look at the government’s response to the crisis, they are more organized compared to us. Their government is handling the crisis better. But if there is no pandemic, it would be better for him to be here since my father is already old].”

Still, all LBC want their parents to stay in the Philippines “for good” after the pandemic or after they’ve reached their goals abroad (e.g., LBC

having completed their education). Those whose OFW parents could not go home however mentioned economic reasons such as financial problems, the lack of available jobs in the Philippines etc. LBC 02 expressed that:

“...Kasi po sino naman yung hindi gugustuhin na makasama yung mother at tsaka father nila. Kaso wala pong magagawa, kailangan po. Kasi sabi ng Mama ko sa’kin, hindi daw siya uuwi hangga’t hindi daw po ‘ko nakakagraduate [...Who doesn’t want to be with his/her mother and father? Unfortunately, we can’t be together and we can’t do anything about it. My mother told me that she will not go home until I finish my college education].”

Notably, LBC are aware of the precautionary measures to help prevent the spread of Covid-19. Most of them mentioned that they keep reminding their parents about these precautionary measures and the importance of practicing and following them.

Difference of having an OFW parent

Some of the LBC did not mention any differences on childcare despite the noticeable absence of their migrant parent. Of those who mentioned differences, a common observation is the absence of a “father figure” for LBC who have OFW fathers while one of them mentioned that a “mother’s care and nurturing” is different and incomparable. This study found that the presence of parental figures for both mother and father is still important for the LBC especially during their younger and formative years. Nevertheless, LBC mentioned that they’ve learned how to be independent and responsible due to parental absence especially for participants whose parents are separated.

The LBC’s role at home is evident. Most of them have responsibilities to their siblings and family that made them become more independent, especially in the case of the eldest LBC wherein they do household chores for the family. Notably, two LBC handles and budgets their parents’ remittances considering that our participants are within the age wherein they are capable of making financial decisions.

Families divided in terms of national borders may have economic benefits but the emotional closeness is sacrificed in exchange for these material things (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, 2001, as cited in Graham and Jordan, 2011). In the case of LBC 04 whose mother left as soon as she gave birth to her, the geographical distance and absence of her mother somehow made them aloof to each other:

“Sakto lang, close...laging nag-aaway...Aso’t-pusa kaya okay lang na hindi kami laging nag-uusap. Kasi sanay na ‘ko na wala siya. Close naman kami pero kapag may mga issue lang ako na nira-raise sa kanya, dun lang talaga na nakakapagsagutan kami parang hindi niya naririnig yung rights ko as anak. Parang hindi niya natutugunan [We are close but we usually fight with each other which is why it is okay that we don’t talk a lot. I am used to not being with her. We are close but whenever I would raise an issue with her, we would argue because it seems like she does not listen to and attend to my rights as her daughter].”

Coping Mechanism of LBC and presence of parental figures

Persistent communication plays a big part in building and maintaining relationships between LBC and OFW parents. God-reliance is also one of the major coping mechanisms of Indonesian LBC making them more optimistic in their outlook about their situation (Milla, 2016). In the case of LBC in this study, two LBC mentioned the importance of their faith through praying to God:

For LBC 02, *“Every night nagdadasal po. Pinagdadasal na lang po...yung kalagayan po [We would pray every night about the situation].”*

When asked about how he copes with his worries over his father’s situation, LBC 07 replied:

“Una po talaga...nag-pray talaga. Pray. Tapos yun, yung mga protocol binanggit ko din kay Papa kasi hindi masyado siyang updated... ‘Tas yung mga dapat gawin [First of all, we would pray. We would also remind our father about the protocol and other things to do since he is not always updated].”

Acceptance and resilience are also part of LBC's coping mechanisms to the absence of their parents. Participants mentioned that they learned how to accept the situation as it is and have gotten used to it as they grew older and realized their parents' reasons for working abroad. Presence of parental figures in caregivers such as relatives for those with broken families did not have noteworthy and direct effects on the well-being of LBC. Although, LBC 04 shared about her disagreements and issues with her mother over prioritizing relatives' needs in remittances instead of her personal needs as the daughter:

"...about sa issue na dapat unahin niya 'ko kasi ako yung anak niya. Na dapat yung mga pinapadala niya, mas malaki dapat yung sa akin kasi. Yung pinapadala niya pang-overall na po eh, sa dito na lahat sa bahay. And kasama na din dun yung sa mga pinsan ko. Ako yung anak niya so dapat, ako dapat yung i-prioritize niya [...it is about the issue that she should prioritize me first because I am her daughter. She should allot more money for me. Her remittances are for the entire household and that includes the money allocated for my cousins. I am her daughter so she should prioritize me over others]."

Other Significant Findings

Recent Covid-19 studies have recorded cases of increased domestic violence against children and women across the globe. In this study, there were no cases of domestic violence among LBC before and during the pandemic. Although this is difficult to ascertain due to the sensitivity of the topic. LBC has also not displayed negative or bad behaviour as is found in the literature on children and COVID-19.

Ghosh (2020) in her recent article titled *The Pandemic and the Global Economy* stated that migrant women workers are more vulnerable to the economic, social, and psychological impacts of the pandemic. Yet, OFW women in this study have stable jobs even though they are considered to be as vulnerable and who are more likely to be retrenched from work, and to be discriminated against and abused.

LBC 03 saw the best out of the pandemic especially during the enhanced community quarantine period. She mentioned that their communication and connection have been strengthened during the pandemic as they have more time for bonding, i.e., more family conversations and doing activities together such as watching movies indoors:

“Ano po, nabago po siya, ah... hindi po siya nabago ng negative. Nabago po siya ng positive...Kasi nga po dumating na si Papa, at tsaka naka-quarantine kami. Kasi dati po, nung wala pang quarantine, yung mga kapatid ko, lalabas ng umaga darating ng gabi. Pero ngayon po dahil sa quarantine, bawal po talaga lumabas. Kaya nagkaroon po kami ng more ano... connection, ng maraming pag-uusap, bonding, nood ng mga movie, ganoon po. Parang mas lalong naging close po kami, ganoon. [It changed. It didn't change for the worse. It changed for the better...because Papa arrived and because we were quarantined. Because before, when there weren't quarantine measures, my siblings would go out in the morning and return in the evening. But now because of the quarantine we weren't allowed to go out. Because of that a connection was formed between us, a lot of conversations, bonding, watching movies. It is like we got a lot closer.]”

This finding is contrary to what the literature says about the behaviour of children during the pandemic. As mentioned earlier, some studies found that children tend to behave negatively since the pandemic has started, i.e., aggressiveness, irritation, disobedience, and disturbed sleeping patterns. However, LBC's loneliness brought by being away from their OFW parents and friends in school for instance did not affect their behaviour negatively.

Analysis

The imposition of quarantine regulation, travel bans, and strict health protocols are government policies used to minimize the transmission of disease. In the Philippines, the government enables the passage of Republic Act 11469 or the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act on March 24, 2020, that grants special powers to the executive department, directs hospitals and health care

facilities to function as quarantine facilities, enforce laws on profiteering and price manipulation and provides social amelioration financial assistance to the low-income household (Vallejo & Ong, 2020). However despite this initiative, repatriation during the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be much more complex because of the following reasons according to Liao (2020). First, to promote quarantine measures for the returnees, crucial involvement of national government agencies such as the Department of Health (DOH) and the assistance of the Tourism and Transportation Departments are required. Second, the crisis brought by the pandemic has led to unexpected problems such as the restricted flights and resources amid prolonged lockdowns, the government has faced difficulty repatriating thousands of OFWs abroad, just like what happened in Saudi Arabia, according to Punay (2020).

Initiating financial assistance such as AKAP (Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong or Aid is Within Reach) program from DOLE includes one-time cash assistance of USD 200 (PhP 10,000) as well as a monetary assistance and welfare package for OFWs which aim to address the effect of job setbacks and work displacements of repatriated workers. One LBC mentioned above has applied for this benefit for their OFW parent. Aside from this financial assistance, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) also launched its new educational assistance programme offering through its Emergency Scholarship Educational Assistance (EASE) Project to eligible children of its member OFWs affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (OWWA, 2020). This is especially useful due to the increased spending of students for online learning and online classes such as buying and topping up data.

The Philippines, a major labor sending country and reliant on remittances, is without a doubt affected by the pandemic on these fronts. Providing services for OFWs and families-left-behind such as aiding them in adapting back in the home country, and OFW funds to get them through the pandemic among others is assisting the OFW and the LBC by extension. Looking at Keynesian theory which justifies government intervention through public policies that aim to achieve full employment and price stability (Jahan, Mahmud, & Papageorgiou, 2014), these measures complement the need for immediate government intervention to raise demand and jumpstart the economy as a strategy for crisis management.

The literature on the separation of OFWs from their children in order to prepare a better future for them stands true. Findings concur however in the feeling of abandonment even when acknowledging the economic benefits and the need to be apart. Observations that the Philippines was able to avoid larger impacts due to the resiliency of its remittance flows and that OFWs were employed in a wide array of jobs throughout the globe still stands true even when salaries were cut in half or were delayed. Regarding the international transfer of caretaking, the findings from our LBC show that the phenomena is not always the case because this study finds that the father or eldest child stepping up to take responsibility; the family dynamic of LBC in the study has both nuclear and extended families without the presence of a hired caregiver.

Recommendations

This exploratory study contributes to the nascent literature done on LBC in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such studies range from their psychological wellbeing such as behaviour to their insecurity in the pandemic. There is a lack of studies on LBC from other major labour sending countries and their wellbeing and experiences during the pandemic. These findings contribute to the LBC and families during these difficult times by adding to the literature, and in crafting better policy responses and actions that help console and assuage the resilience of LBC. This study also hopes to contribute to the formation of better caring and cooperative social frameworks and policies in the Philippines.

The findings suggest that the government's support on the emotional well-being of LBC and their families-left-behind is just as important as the need to support their economic well-being. Support for these two aspects of LBC's life must be the utmost priority of specific government agencies concerning OFWs, especially during this time of pandemic. This study does not negate the importance of government's financial support to LBC and their families. Although existing literature and experiences of LBC in this study have shown the social and emotional effects of migration, hence there is the need to further explore them and provide psychological support as well.

The government acknowledges OFWS' vital role and contribution in building up the country's economy and in the overall nation-building efforts (Yeung and Bacani, 2020). But according to the literature and some findings in this study, OFWS' role and contribution to the economy and the nation come at a high cost especially for the LBC, regardless of the general claim of migration scholars that migrant mothers are to blame for these costs. It comes in the form of dysfunctional families, children somehow being robbed of their childhood as they take over adults' responsibilities, and poor academic performance or worse is an increase in the number of dropouts. This study suggests that families with separated parents have an emotional impact on LBC which could also vary at different levels. It also brings another aspect of LBC and OFW families as it suggests to explore more on these emotional impacts in succeeding studies. Social Welfare Attaché Judith Yadan Bacwaden of the Philippine Consulate General's Office (PCGO) in Dubai, UAE considers that family breakdown is "one of the social costs of migration". This was manifested by many cases of marital crisis counselling to OFWs at the PCGO in UAE, and an upward trend in the cases of broken relationships among OFW families (The Filipino Times, 2019).

Government intervention and concrete plans are needed to address these issues among the OFW families. Knowing the profile of OFW families through further research and systematic guidelines that could help the government address these issues. Concurrently, it would also help the government and other relevant institutions in being aware of and in identifying the particular needs of OFW families, especially of the LBC who are part of the next generation. Having knowledge about specific needs and issues would lead to more specific and appropriate policies and programs such as providing jobs and livelihoods that match the skills and demographic profile of OFWs, proper allocation of financial assistance, capacity building activities, and overall social welfare assistance.

Conclusion

LBC and their families have been observed to adjust accordingly to their situations, the authors as researchers must do the same. All modes of communication between the authors and between the participants have been conducted online. In this research, doing interviews online provide more

convenient, accessible and secured space for the participants to share their experience with the researchers. Though convenient and safe for both parties, the observation of non-verbal cues, problems in internet connection and inaudible audio become a challenge during the interviews.

The study found that sustaining household needs and expenses were the major reasons for migration among parents of LBC, with education as a vital factor. Remittances and support of parents did not change at all for almost all LBC. Nonetheless, LBC reported significant adjustments in work arrangements of their OFW parents - i.e., alternate work schedules, skeletal workforce, and repatriation. Instances of delays in receiving remittances were only due to quarantine restrictions and regulations abroad. Through technology as a major tool, communication between the LBC and their OFW parents has been sustained pre-pandemic until during the pandemic. The pandemic did not have a huge impact on the presence of OFW parents for their LBC since the former were still able to be present virtually.

Ghosh (2020) identified three important aspects of how the pandemic brought about changes in attitudes globally, aside from its impacts in the economy and policies. First is the essential nature and significance of care work. In this study, women OFWs are all under the care industry as they are all employed as domestic helpers. Second are the reality and the possibility of unimaginable events that could alter the way of life because of the pandemic. Implications are seen on the global supply chains, lifestyles, and consumption and distribution patterns. LBC have identified their households' adjustments on all of these areas particularly in lifestyle and consumption patterns. Surprisingly, LBC themselves play a major role or take the initiative to be in charge of their budget and expenses. Lastly, the pandemic brought philosophical realizations of the things that really matter in life: good health, the ability to communicate and interact with other people, and participation in creative processes that bring joy and satisfaction. LBC have acknowledged these things in the form of communication and connection that also helped them to cope with life's situations. Further research is needed on the LBC and the effects of the pandemic through either exploratory studies or comparative studies on and between different countries or regions, and with different factors such as job categories to be taken into account. As Ghosh (2020) stated:

“These realizations could encourage the first steps toward civilizational shifts that lead to the reorganization of our societies. There is an opportunity to move away from dominant assumptions about individualistic utility maximization and the profit motive to more caring and cooperative social frameworks.”

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