

Filipino Wives in Foreign Lands

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Makikita sa mga iba't ibang karanasan ng mga Pilipinang may asawa na nagtrabaho sa ibang bansa at mga Pilipinang asawa ng Australyano ang pangingibabaw ng ilang suliraning pinag-uusapan tungkol sa mga kababaihan. Ang mga ito ay: (1) ang lipunang may dobleng pamantayan na kumikiling sa mga kalalakian lalo na sa aspeto ng sexualidad ng kababaihan na ang paniniwala ay pag-aari ng mga kalalakihan; (2) ang tungkulin bilang isang asawa at ina na ang pagtutupad ay nagdudulot ng pagiging pagkababae na siyang nagpapanatili sa kabuuan ng isang pamilya at hindi pagkakawasak ng pagsasamang mag-asawa; at (3) ang kaunti o kaya'y kawalang pagdama ng mga babae mismo, ng mga lalake at ng lipunan sa mga karapatan ng kababaihan na siyang nagpapanatili ng kanilang mababang katayuan sa lipunan.

Introduction

Women's roles as mothers and wives are given primary value in Filipino culture, but for Filipino wives working abroad, functioning as mothers and wives becomes secondary. For them, economic imperatives for the sake of their families prevail over the fulfillment of such roles and husbands left at home are expected to absorb the responsibility of functioning as mothers. In the case of wives left by their husbands for overseas employment, assuming the role of both father and mother to their children seems to have been difficult but rewarding. Ramos-Jimenez (1988) examined the fertility and behavior patterns of wives temporarily left by their husbands who were overseas contract workers. She found that the wife underwent

personal growth and development because of the added responsibilities in the absence of the husband. Are husbands fulfilling the expected responsibility in the case of their wives' absence? Do they also undergo personal growth and development?

A useful framework for contextualizing and assessing these realities and issues are gender-related topics at the forefront of current discussions and debate on the issue. These include the double standards of society, the social and psychological costs of migration for married women (i.e., marital breakdowns, physical, mental, psychological and social deterioration of children and husbands left behind, domestic violence, abuse and maltreatment, mutual exploitation), the stereotyping of Filipino women as bar girls, prostitutes, slaves, subservient and diffident wives, and the further marginalization and increased subordinate position of Filipino women in society resulting from the type of work they are usually engaged in (i.e. domestic service and entertainment).

This paper attempts to discuss the double standards issue and the social and psychological costs of migration in relation to marriage and family ties. Individual situations vary enormously. But in all these situations, the experiences of married women are central to the life of the family. It is their role as mothers and wives that are primarily valued in any culture. One also obtains a deeper understanding of gender sensitivity in society from the perceptions of women and men.

Two data sources were tapped for this paper. The first involved in-depth interviews and focus group discussions a Japanese student and I held in Hong Kong and Singapore in 1994 with domestic helpers and the second involved in-depth interviews I undertook in Australia in 1988 with Filipinas married to foreigners. These data sources reveal the extent of gender sensitivity among these married women, particularly with respect to the realities and issues mentioned earlier.

Family Ties: Filipino Wives Working Abroad

Marriage basically starts the formation of a family. However, keeping marriage and family intact depends on the couple and the children with the wife as the prime mover. As mothers and wives, women's experiences are central to the life of the family and their efforts are devoted to ensuring the well-being of their children and husbands and other members of their families.

What is the best balance of family ties for a Filipino wife working abroad and for her husband left at home? Diverse and divergent perceptions were expected as typified in the responses of some of those interviewed in-depth in Hong Kong and Singapore.

What couples value most and see as priority tasks in their lives is one possible answer to the question of best balancing family ties. For example, faithfulness to each other is highly valued and giving the best to their children is a priority such that the husband is open to equitable sharing of domestic work.

HK Respondent A: My husband and I have remained faithful to each other and we are both striving to provide our children with a brighter future. He even stopped working to take care of our children.

Faithfulness is a value and infidelity a major cause for worry among husbands with wives abroad.

HK Respondent B: My husband worries about me falling into infidelity. Whenever we talk by phone or he writes, he reminds me to be very careful because Hong Kong is a free country and to remain faithful to him.

To keep the family together, the value of constant communication cannot be overemphasized:

S Respondent A: My husband always writes and sends me his taped messages.

However, some serious marital problems are almost inevitable:

HK Respondent C: My husband who was very honest with me before I left has now been gallivanting according to my son who keeps on writing me. He has already sold our motor vehicle without my consent.

HK Participant A: My husband frequents beerhouses with men and he womanizes. My son wrote me that his father is up to no good.

Interestingly however, no matter how serious the marital problems were, marital breakdowns rarely occurred, largely due to the efforts and determination of the wife. Being a mother, the family is very important to her and she holds the family together in her role of reconciler. Being successful in her role as wife and mother and in preserving the family, the Filipino woman is given the highest status in Philippine culture.

The importance of marriage and the role of children are other strong factors in the amicable settlement of marital disputes, no matter how serious. Children bind marriages highly susceptible to breakdowns as evident in the following quotations:

HK Respondent I: My children prevented me from separating from my husband. They are working hard in making their father change for the better and I hope he will not disappoint them.

S Respondent D: My daughter has been trying hard to influence her father to become her loving father and my faithful husband. During my last home visit, my husband strove to make up.

The sanctity of marriage to Filipinos may be another important factor. There are indications that even before the

arrival of the Spaniards to colonize the Philippines, marriage was upheld as a permanent bond. One indication is the observance of pertinent marriage rituals which are still prevalent in the Ilocos region. Such rituals relate to the signing of a document by elders of leadership status attesting to the permanent union of the bride and groom and the rigid formal arrangements made by both families of the prospective couple covering the agreement on dowry from the groom's side aimed at preparing the couple for their life together in the future. However, it was understood that it was the responsibility of women to ensure that the marriage bond remained intact.

Family Ties: Filipino Wives of Australians

In the '80's, Philippine and Australian media gave full play to problems faced by Filipino wives of Australians. These problems included marital breakdowns, domestic violence, abuse and maltreatment, mutual exploitation and the stereotyping of Filipino women as bar girls, prostitutes, slaves and as subservient and diffident wives.

Differing reactions were elicited by these highly-publicized marital problems. Some were angry and upset at degrading labels like 'white slavery' and 'uneducated sex slaves' (Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila as cited by Humphries, 1987). However, Watkins (1982), an Australian man happily married to a former Filipino school teacher, questioned the stereotype of the meek, obedient and subservient Filipino woman.

Research also disclosed divergent results. The study by Guido Vogel, a former coordinator of the Catholic Migrant Centre in Perth (Fraser, 1985:11) showed that one in two Philippine-Australian marriages ended in divorce, the major causes of which were physical violence, unequal relationships, financial problems, the husband's relationship with his ex-wife and lack of support from the husband's family. However, Broinowski (BIPR, November 1993:21) cites a 1986 study

showing that divorce rates between Filipino wives and their Australian husbands were no higher than the national average. A four-month investigation of 1000 Australian-Filipino marriages in Queensland by Father Paul Byrne, a Columbian priest (cited by Roberts, undetermined date) found that 90 per cent of the marriages were successful; of the 10 percent which ended unsuccessfully, there were wives who had been forced to eat dog food, ordered to deal in drugs, bashed repeatedly by their husbands or married to psychiatric patients, alcoholics and criminals.

All of the Filipino wives of Australians I interviewed in Canberra were proud of being successful wives of Australians. They claimed that their husbands shared in domestic work and in caring for their children as typified in the following responses:

Respondent A: My husband works in the government. I am very proud of him as a very kind, understanding and loving husband. I never have a problem with him. We go out together often. He also cooks although I do most of the cooking.

Respondent B: I am very happy to have a husband like him. He never complains and whenever we have some misunderstanding, we always settle it amicably. He helps me in taking care of our children. He plays with them. We often go out as a family.

However, Canberra may have been unique in being a place where most of the Filipino wives of Australians I interviewed had no serious marital problems. Our casual talks and frequent meetings over four years in social gatherings, picnics, multicultural affairs, and dance shows did not indicate any serious marital problems.

Many researchers hypothesize that the news regarding marital problems in Australian-Filipino marriages is locale-specific and may have been limited to mining areas or the

barely inhabited bush areas of Queensland or the Northern Territory. However, Bailey's article (1986) on Filipino brides in Mount Isa responds that Australians became better men after marrying Filipino women. Murdock (1987) quotes some Australians claiming to have been happier with Filipino wives. More research is needed to obtain a broader picture of their situation. Then too, a better knowledge of the origin and destination of Filipino brides may provide greater insight into the factors behind such problems in Australia.

Although divorce is legal in Australia, most studies seem consistent in showing that a majority of Australian-Filipino marriages are intact. Why do such marriages remain intact? Answers to this question may be complex. However, I would like to reiterate my argument that it is largely due to the efforts of the Filipino woman in playing her role as wife and mother. For a deeper understanding of my argument, let us turn to a statistical background first.

The 1991 Australian census reveals the Philippines ranking tenth as a birthplace of the enumerated Australian population (BIPR, July 1993:59). More detailed statistics from earlier censuses showed that more than half of the enumerated Filipino females aged 15 and over were married. Gray (1987:372-373) found Filipino women ranking much higher than Filipino men in the marital index of social distance (an indicator of marriage attraction from one social group to another). Gray explains that:

... Some Australian men, often older, widowed or divorced men, prefer Filipino brides and there has been a thriving overseas branch of the Australian marriage market in which Australian men visit the Philippines for the express purpose of arranging marriages or engage their brides by correspondence through agency advertisements in Australian newspapers.

A Filipino wife married to an Australian through commercial mediation is likely to come from the economically disadvantaged sectors of Philippine society. Marriage to an Australian then enhances her status and frees her from economic marginalization. In the local social stratum she came from, she acquires prestige in being wife to an Australian especially if she is able to send money to parents, siblings and relatives back home. Making her partner a happier man means the realization of her self-identity. In short, it is her role as wife and mother which is highly valued in Filipino culture that keeps the marriage intact and the family together in Australian culture.

Gender Sensitivity and Subordinate Position in Society

Amidst success in upholding marriage and family inspite of marital problems are realities which reveal how sensitive these women and their husbands are to gender inequalities. For instance, it is painful and distressing for a wife working abroad and striving very hard to provide her family a better life, if her husband belongs to a world characterized by double standards. These are exemplified by two respondents:

HK Respondent D: I really underwent tensions and pressures. When I arrived in the Philippines in my last visit, my husband was not at home because he was then living-in with another woman. It was very painful especially when I saw that all the appliances I purchased were all gone.

S Respondent B: When I went home, I found my husband living with a woman whom he impregnated. He spent all our money for that woman.

What is striking is the apparent tolerance of these wives of the infidelity of their husbands, implicitly accepting the power and dominance of men in Philippine society. The concept of equal respect does not seem to prevail, suggesting

a low level of gender sensitivity among these wives as indirectly implied by one respondent:

HK Respondent F: Men are weaker than women when it comes to sexual pleasure. Having no wife for a long time is unbearable for husbands.

In this climate, perseverance, faithfulness to work, prayer and being with friends during their day-off surfaced as the main coping mechanisms of wives working abroad. Their primary role as mothers surfaced as they reiterated their prime motivations to go on for their children whom they wanted to give the best to.

HK Respondent E: I learned to accept the truth. I leave everything to Our Lord, imploring His assistance to give me strength for the sake of my children needing my financial support.

S Respondent C: I just take my problem easy, perform my job well and meet friends on Sundays; all for my children.

Why is it primarily men who express sexuality outside the family? This is a clear example of gender discrimination in matters of human sexuality. What is worse is that the unfaithfulness of husbands and their sexual expression outside their homes is readily accepted by their wives and by other women. Thus, it seems that women's sexuality is not their own but men's, an indication that both women and men lack gender sensitivity. With female sexuality owned by men, to be desired by and married to a man becomes a primary goal of the woman, supporting the assumption that Harcourt (1993:26) succinctly puts:

"in many cultures...women are defined by their sexuality in relation to their social function as mother, wife or lover but this sexuality is not theirs nor does it necessarily reflect their own desire or individual needs."

Thus, whereas man's infidelity is acceptable, the woman is expected at all times to be faithful. Filipino wives' unfaithfulness is stigmatized and devalues them socially while their husbands' unfaithfulness is socially condoned. This is another indication of women's subordinate position in society and of men's power and dominance.

Correcting such a perception to one in which woman's self-expression is as important as her husband's is one means of wife emancipation. In addition, a new morality to replace the double standard which has long been tolerated by almost all societies is essential in enhancing the status of women. In double standard societies, husbands regard women's sexuality as their property and for their exclusive use. Gender sensitivity and equal respect call for husbands to accept that woman's sexuality is not for use by men but owned by women and respected by men. Husbands then should be aware of the basic rights of wives to physical integrity.

Through my association with some Australian-Filipino couples over four years, I found that satisfaction at being desired by and married to an Australian was pervasive among some Filipino women. The reasons vary. An increase in self-perception is noted especially when these Australian husbands claim to have been made happier by their Filipino wives. Another reason is some element of freedom. Some Filipino wives are free to earn and spend their own money. As one interviewed wife said, "Even if I do not keep his money, he allows me to work and I own the money I personally earn". Another reason may be the implicit acceptance of male dominance in Australian society.

Conclusion

The marriage and family experiences of Filipino wives working abroad and of wives of Australian men reveal varying situations that provide a deeper understanding of gender issues.

There are instances where some gender sensitivity is manifested so that husbands share in domestic chores, shouldering the responsibility of the absentee wife and remaining faithful to her. There are also situations in which the husbands live up to the double standard. However, it is living up to her role as wife and mother in traditional Filipino culture that acts as the primary force in keeping families intact and marriages from breaking down. But while the family is the center of women's lives so that their efforts are devoted to ensuring the well-being of their husbands and children, it is not so for the men. In male dominated societies, women are subjugated in various forms and deprived of making personal choices regarding sexuality and the family. Women's sexuality is not theirs but of men. Implicit acceptance of such a reality by many women, men and the society in general clearly maintains women's subordinate position in society. There remains much room for improvement in gender sensitivity among wives working abroad, those married to non Filipinos, their husbands and society in general.

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