



The Experiences of Left-Behind Fathers: Breaking the Traditional Filipino Paternal Roles in Parenting

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Abstract

Many societies, including those in the Philippines, subscribe to the traditional concept that the father's essential responsibilities are being the provider and protector of his family. In Filipino parenting, fathers are providers for the family's economic needs while mothers are responsible for nurturing. More women are migrating to work abroad, leaving fathers to assume all primary parenting roles as providers, protectors, and nurturers. This has created a new family dynamic in recent years. This research paper explores Filipino fathers' experiences with a wife working abroad. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher interviewed some employed fathers to reveal how they accepted, adapted, and made sense of the family set up as they simultaneously fulfilled the roles of both the father and mother to their children. Research revealed that when the mother left to work abroad, the father embraced their role in caring for their children. Filipino fathers are open to reversing traditional parenting roles. Although some fathers still let their wives take care of the children, many have become the primary caregivers. Parenting alone has helped them understand the importance of being involved in their children's upbringing.

Keywords: *Filipino fathers, parenting, paternal roles, provider, nurturer*

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INTRODUCTION

The feminization of labor migration in the country, specifically of Filipino women working abroad, has changed the family landscape, particularly in the roles of the parents in taking care of their children. Care arrangements, gender roles, and practices within the households changed significantly as the traditional tasks of the mother in providing care to their children shifted to the left-behind father. (Lam, 2016) A mother leaving her family to find a greener pasture has created a vacuum in the family, forcing left-behind fathers to assume all the primary roles of the parents - provider, protector, and nurturer. In this setup, the father must involve himself in all his family affairs, especially his children. The dynamics in the Filipino family are evolving because of globalization and migration and the socioeconomic status of the family trying to stop the cycle of paucity (Jaffery, 2022).

Recent reports from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) revealed that more Filipino women worked overseas than men. In 2021, 60.2 percent or 1.10 million who left to work abroad were women. (Dennis, 2021) A similar trend was observed: 59.6 percent or 1.06 million in 2020, 56.0 percent or 1.23 million in 2019 (Dennis, 2020), and 55.8 percent or 1.28 million in 2018 (Josie, 2019) of the total Filipinos who migrated, respectively. This research paper investigates the emerging challenges to Filipino families, such as the growing percentage of Filipino mothers working abroad to augment their family income. The aim is to make sense of how Filipino fathers embraced the new and emerging family setup where mothers left to work overseas.

Recent studies on Filipino families with left-behind fathers who care for their children show how the family reformulated their family setup, household tasks, and, most significantly, in taking care of the children. When the mothers leave to work abroad, a change of household strategy is necessary. The traditional roles assigned to the mothers shifted to the left-behind fathers, who stepped up to assume the roles vacated by the mothers. (Theodora, 2016) Fathers said it was difficult when asked how they felt when they assumed the task of taking care of the household. They explained that it was hard for them because they were not used to that kind of overwhelming household responsibility (Antonietta, et al, 2018).

Filipino fathers who care for the households and the children are called househusbands. Accordingly, fathers experienced feelings of embarrassment when they assumed the roles culturally expected from the mothers. Still, they rose above the situation and coped with the challenges, fulfilling the left-behind tasks of providing care and nurturance to their children. (Jed V, et al, 2015) Filipino househusbands have to bear all the challenges and responsibilities left by the mothers to work abroad. They endure and survive the pressure of the role switch because they want to maintain a marital relationship, withstand the feelings of guilt, and survive the stigma coming from the sexist norms. (Annabelle, 2022) In another study, with the absentee mothers, fathers became involved in the households, expressing their social, emotional, and financial concerns with both the wife and the children. Further, the father's presence in the household reinforces the father and children's relationship and the significant role of the father in the children's lives (Anne, 2008).

The following review of literature attempts to provide an objective and adequate definition of fatherhood in both international and local contexts. The expected roles of the fathers in their family were highlighted to underscore Filipino expectations of a responsible father, especially in a new emerging setup – a family with an absentee mother who left to work abroad and a left-behind father taking care of their household.

Fatherhood is appropriately defined according to the roles and responsibilities of fathers to their children, including care, protection, and well-being, and shaping them to reach their optimum development. (Charline, 2007) Even though the meaning of fatherhood continues to evolve, many cultures steadfastly subscribe to the traditional concept that the father's main obligation is to be the provider of each family member's economic needs (Peter, 2024)

Fatherhood is a complex field studied through varying theoretical lenses by different academic disciplines. It is variegated and continually changing because of the evolving societal changes. (Marica, 2016) Growing research in fatherhood on the interrelated fields of Developmental Psychology, Human Development, and Family Studies includes relationships between fathers and children, the role of fathers in every stage of child development, teenage fatherhood, single parents, absentee fathers, fathers of children with special needs, the challenges and effects of parents' separation to the children, among others.

Fatherhood remains a hot topic, especially regarding roles and expectations. A good father can be defined according to his duties – caring, nurturing, and involvement in his family affairs, including his children. (William, 1995) The study of fatherhood is not only sociological but also political and religious. Politically, men must be active and involved with their children to lessen the burden and balance the roles of the mothers in the households. Accordingly, fathers who are actively involved in raising their children promote familism. Familism is a cultural value that stresses intact family connections and can be achieved with warm parenting conduct among fathers. (Roseanne, 2020) From a religious Christian point of view, responsible fathers are good providers to their intact families, promote Christian values, and have full-time wives caring for their children.

In the book *Redefining Fatherhood*, three common patterns of fatherhood are presented. First is a single-parent father who solely cares for the child and fathers his offspring like a mother. Second, two-parent heterosexual families where the father acts as a supporting parent to the mother, and both parent their child similarly in form, function, and style. Third, a man with limited attachment to his child, which normally happens among divorced, separated, or never-married couples. This father is only a biological father to his child but does not have a nurturing relationship with the kid. (Nncy, 2000) The second form is the most typical in the Philippines.

One of the most explicit phenomena is the changing family structure regarding roles and expectations for both the fathers and the mothers. The transformations affected the current definition of fatherhood. A research study conducted in the United States of America underscored four significant social trends, namely (1) mothers' joining the labor force; (2) absentee fathers due to failed marriage or, for some, because of overseas employment; (3) intact families whose fathers are becoming involved in their children's affairs; and (4) the growing cultural diversity. (Natasha, 2010) One can easily acknowledge that the change is geared toward the growing involvement of fathers in caring for their children.

In addition to the definitions of fatherhood already presented, it can also be defined according to what the law prescribes. Fatherhood is voluntary, for nothing in the law supports nor sanctions fathers who are not nurturing their children. In the

case of divorce or separation, fathers cannot be sanctioned for not caring for their children. However, when the father fails to support the children financially, the mother can sue the irresponsible father. Hence, from the legal point of view, economic fathering or supporting one's child is the father's primary responsibility. In many cultures, responsible fatherhood is usually equated with financial adequacy.

Fatherhood in the Philippine Context. In the Philippines, like in many countries, males are expected to provide the livelihood of their families. It was deeply ingrained in their culture that the rightful roles of the males were to become the breadwinners and the decision-makers. These roles are explicit expressions of love towards their families and are interpreted as a sign of a truly responsible household leader. Culturally, Filipino husbands are expected to assume the roles of the provider, house repairman, leader, and official family spokesperson in the community. It is his pride to be accorded the position of authority, respect, and headship in his household. Conversely, a man's abandonment of one's financial responsibility to his family is deemed negligence and desertion of his responsibility.

Manliness and Masculinity. One's affirmation of masculinity and gender identity in the Philippines usually happens when the child reaches adolescence. Boys experience different treatments in their families as well as in the community. For instance, boys can dwell outside until late evening while girls must be at home helping their mothers attend to the household chores. Boys can play rough and physical games, for they are to be raised to become strong and healthy, while girls are to be prepared for home-keeping and providing care. Girls are coached to become nurturing wives and mothers, while boys are to be developed to become responsible household heads and breadwinners.

Masculinity or manliness is highly valued in Philippine culture. The traditional Filipino father is expected to provide for the family's financial needs, while housekeeping and childcare are tasks expected from the mother. The father is considered successful when he can carry out his roles and responsibilities for his family. Traditional gender role differentiation is highly valued. Terms such as *padre de pamilya* (father or head of the family) and *haligi ng tahanan* (pillar of the home) are the key roles of the fathers in the family. (Michael, 2022) The ideal husband is exclusively committed to his wife and works hard to provide for his family adequately. On the other hand, the ideal wife prioritizes her husband's and

children's needs. Those who faithfully follow these traditional cultural norms earn the community's respect.

Because of some social circumstances, such as migration, Filipino families are transitioning from the traditional setup to new emerging forms of families. Filipino fathers, for some good reasons, are starting to embrace roles traditionally assigned to mothers. However, the mothers or wives are ultimately responsible for housekeeping and caring for the children.

Role reversion currently, the role of husband and wife is changing due to difficult economic conditions. Women today are joining the workforce and pursuing a career in society. Changes in the roles in the family are always geared towards greater gender equality. In effect, roles are no longer delineated and become more fluid and flexible. Still, some men subscribe to the traditional roles in the family. While the concept of "househusband" is gradually being accepted, many males are counter to it, for it is viewed as opposed to the "macho" image of the husband.ⁱ For them, if the husband can adequately provide, the wife should not work but instead focus on the children. And if necessary for the wife to work, the husband will not take the role vacated by the wife. Still, he may involve himself in some household work but will not accept a full reversal of roles, for it is interpreted as a man's failure to deliver his responsibilities. His manliness or macho image is threatened, and he feels insecure.

It is reported that if the father migrates to work abroad, the woman takes the roles of both the father and the mother. This means that the mother assumes the roles of caregiver, protector, and disciplinarian. However, when the mother is the one who left, the man stays the protector and the provider but will find someone, probably a relative, who will assume the roles vacated by the mother. This cultural practice has narrowed the definition of fatherhood to mere providers and protectors but not in childcare. Explicitly, there is a substantial difference in the role expectations if the mother is the one who left at home in contrast to the father.

Gap in Study. The review of related literature on the different perspectives of fatherhood in international and local contexts gave us a glimpse of the dynamic, flexible, and evolving definitions of the subject field of study. The researcher highlighted Filipinos' understanding of ideal fatherhood according to the country's

acceptable norms, culture, and gender expectations. The reversal of the roles in the family due to the absentee mother was also underscored because of its significant impact on the emerging roles in the family.

The review of related literature is clear. While the shift in the perspective of fatherhood has already been transitioning, further research on the topic is necessary, especially in a society with a culture of male hegemony. There is a need for a more holistic, balanced, and contextual understanding of fatherhood, particularly for families who have mothers working abroad and fathers taking care of their children. There is a need for a renewed appreciation of the roles of the fathers to serve as a model to Filipino fathers – involved fathers who are willing to embrace parental roles, whether assigned to mothers or fathers, and are not enslaved by some discriminating cultural and gender practices.

METHODS

This qualitative research study employed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). (Jonathan, 2007) IPA aims to examine, in detail, the lived experience of the person being studied and interpret his own experience, looking for patterns of convergence and divergence among the cases and interpreting through the researcher's lens. The primal concern is the person's experience and how they make sense of it. Using purposive sampling, the researcher interviewed selected employed fathers to elicit substantial information about their lived experiences of being left-behind fathers. The purpose is to uncover how they accepted, adapted, and made sense of the odd family setup as they simultaneously fulfilled the roles of both the father and mother to their children.

Utilizing the qualitative method in a research study, the researcher interviewed eight fathers who shared their insights on the expected and traditional roles of the fathers in the family and how they accepted the new setup of taking care of their children. Accordingly, the number of participants in an IPA study is a small sample size, enough to provide insights into the topic being studied.ⁱⁱ The fathers' responses were carefully analyzed, divided into themes, and interpreted to develop an objective reflection of the fathers' parenting experience. This paper concluded with the researcher's interpretation of the Filipino fathers 'making sense' of their experience as left-behind fathers. It examined how left-behind fathers negotiate and respond to the changes in any gender roles brought about by the mother's migration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the emerging themes that consistently float from the one-on-one interviews conducted with the left-behind fathers. These themes were significant in our attempt to comprehend the left-behind fathers' experiences in shifting paternal roles to their children.

The Primary Role of the Father is to Provide the Material Needs

When I asked each of the eight participants, they were unanimous in telling me that the father's primary responsibility is to provide the material needs of each family member. It was clarified that the answer must be in the context before their wives left to work abroad. The same question was asked, but this time after they experienced solo parenting or after embracing the roles traditionally assigned to the mothers. Surprisingly, the answer remains the same – the father's primary task is to provide for the family's material (financial) needs. Secondary roles include giving protection, providing care for the children, and attending to the house chores. In this particular question, fathers obviously expressed their gender role bias, believing that fathers are the family's providers and the mothers are the children's nurturers, the traditional roles of the fathers and the mothers in the family.

That Solo-Parenting is Challenging

When asked about the adjustments and changes they made when their wives left to work abroad, fathers said that it was difficult and they needed to adjust. They made many sacrifices to perform both responsibilities – of both the father and the mother. Joel said "Naging mahirap sapagkat nawalan ako ng katuwang, nahirapan ako ipagsabay ang mga gawaing bahay at pagbabantay sa mga bata." (It was a challenging experience because I was left alone to take care of the house chores while caring for the children.) Manuel volunteered to work at night and be home in the morning to help his children prepare for school. Manuel also admitted that he no longer joined his friends hanging out. Before his wife migrated, he spent most of his time with friends. But now, after work, he goes straight home to attend to the needs of his children. Interpreting Joel's and Manuel's difficult parenting experience, implicit in their response is that the more challenging experience is the feeling of shame and embarrassment because, in the Philippine culture, it is not

manly if the mother is the one providing the material and financial needs of the family.

That Embracing the Roles Vacated by the Mother is not an Issue

Jed elaborated that it is fine with him for his wife to work abroad because she has a better opportunity to earn more than him. Further, the gender is not an issue. He did not believe that his masculinity had lessened when he assumed the roles vacated by his wife.

Quoting Jed, *“Sa unang pag-alis ng aking asawa, pinagsabay ko ang pagtatrabaho at pag-aalaga ng anak; naniniwala ako na mas alam ng nanay ang pag-aalaga ng mga bata. Pero ok lang naman kahit umalis si Cindy (not her real name). Walang issue kasi mas may kakayanan siyang kumita ng mas malaki kesa sa akin. Di ko naman nakikitang issue yun sa aking pagiging lalake.”* (The first time my wife left, I work and took care of my children, simultaneously. I know my wife is more capable in providing care for my children. But it is fine. No gender issue there. She has a better opportunity than me. I don’t see any problem with that especially with my masculinity.)

Manuel admitted that, at first, he did not want his wife to work abroad. Eventually, he allowed her to migrate to fulfill all their dreams in life. The situation taught Manuel to embrace the roles previously performed by his wife, especially to the children, like helping them do their homework, bringing them to the doctor and health center when necessary, attending the parent-teacher conference in the school, and doing house chores.

Jed and Manuel, in their responses, provided a good justification for their decision to let their wives work abroad because of the better opportunity for the family. The event becomes a good prospect to change their gender bias, particularly on the roles of the fathers and the mothers in the household.

That When Their Wives Return, They will No Longer Revert to The Previous Setup

An interesting question was whether they would revert to their previous setup, the setup before the wife migrated to work abroad. Most fathers said they already learned to embrace the mothers’ responsibilities, like attending to the house chores. They also learned that both father and mother must involve themselves in parenting their children. Hence, they believe that they have to continue doing what

they have learned to do when their wives leave. However, they clarified that they would not stop their wives from taking care of their children. That is also their right and responsibility.

Randy said *“Mas ok kung dalawa kaming magtutulungan sa pag aalaga ng anak. Ok na ang tatay ang nag aalaga sa mga bata, pero mas ok kung kaming dalawa ang nagtutulungan.”* (It is fine if the two of us help each other with the children. It is fine for the father to take good care of his children, but it is better if both of us are involved.)

Noticing the two contradicting statements, Randy underscored that it is acceptable for the father to continue taking care of the children. Yet, he stated that it would be better if the two of them helped each other raise their children. Obviously, Randy wants to become objective but finds it hard to move away from the cultural expectations of the fathers.

That the Mother is Still the Best Care Provider

Randy gave a very remarkable statement about his perception of the role of a mother.

“Natutunan ko ang gawaing ina sa bahay at maging ina para sa aking mga anak. Napakahirap kapag ikaw na ama ay naging ina sa dahilan na malayo ang kanilang ina, kailangan mo talaga gawin ang lahat para mapayuhan ang mga anak mo sa tamang landas at hindi malulong sa masamang gawain.” (I learn the task of the mother in the household and become mother to my children. It is difficult as a father to become a mother because their mother is far away, that you have to do everything including the role of guiding the children in becoming a good person and not to go astray.)

Explicit in Randy’s statement is that the house chores are jobs reserved for the mothers. He even called it as *“gawaing ina”* or a task of a mother. The phrase *“maging ina para sa anak”* is another remarkable statement. It has a literal translation of “be the mother for the children.” It means in taking care of the children, you are like a good mother.

Roel believes that he is taking care of his children well. With the help of his relatives, everything in the family sails smoothly. And, once his wife returns, there is no need to revert to the previous setup. However, he still believes no one can replace a mother in nurturing the children. He said, “Our son needs the care of his

mother, although my son is used to me... I will not deprive my wife to bond with my son." For Roel, his wife can give the care that he cannot give to his children.

Here, Roel and Randy explicitly verbalize the traditional expectations that mothers are best in providing care for their children while fathers are the breadwinners. While the situation taught these fathers that roles in the family should not be fixed according to gender, they keep going back to what they learned and what the culture expects from them.

That the Experience taught them the Importance of Flexibility in Parenting

In what they learned from their own family experience, Mike said, "*Sa pamilya, kailangang mag adjust.*" It means that sometimes we need to adjust according to the challenge. He further said "*Dapat lang lakasan ang loob,*" or have a strong faith. Manuel affirmed Mike answer saying "*Pero ganoon talaga, pag may pangarap ka, kailangan magsakripisyo.*" (That is, if you have ambition, you must sacrifice.) Left-behind fathers all stated that when wives left, they embraced many changes, adjustments, and sacrifices. They are willing to accept all those things because of their dreams and goals for their families. However, reading between the lines, left-behind fathers embrace the role of providing care for their children because they have no other option but to do it. If another female relative can take the vacated role of the mother, the left-behind father will freely relinquish it to others. On the positive side, the situation has led to changes in the paternal roles, from the family's protector and provider to nurturer and giving care.

Gilbert's biggest challenge was to win the love of his three children, who grew up in the care of his wife. When his wife left, and he had to care for his kids, he realized how distanced their affection from him. It was because he used to focus on work and not involve himself in co-parenting their offspring. But the good thing is that when his wife leaves, and he has to take care of his children alone, his kids are becoming closer now to him.

Gilbert narrated, "*Ngayon nakakasundo ko na ang aking dalawang anak, yung panganay at bunso. Yung autism kong anak hanggang ngayon on process pa rin ang pakikitungo ko sa kanya dahil nga ang kinalakihan nila ay ang mama niya.*" (I am starting to establish a good relationship with my first and third children. My child, who has autism, is still in the process because he is close to his mom, who used to care for him).

Gilbert's experience allowed him to become a good father. The vacated role of his wife forced him to connect to his child and establish a harmonious father-child relationship.

CONCLUSION

The growing feminization of Filipino overseas workers has led to many Filipino families without mothers. In many studies, families with one or two parents who migrated have led to many problems. For some, children left became problematic and went astray. However, it also has benefits, like the family's economic stability. The migration of Filipino mothers became an opportunity for left-behind fathers to be involved in their families and learn the roles traditionally assigned to mothers. Before their wives migrate to find a greener pasture, left-behind fathers firmly believe that the father's primary role and responsibility for his family is to provide for each member's material and financial needs. However, when their wives leave to work abroad after they have experienced solo parenting and after assuming the roles traditionally assigned to the mothers, their perception remains the same. Hence, this study is consistent with the studies of many Filipino authors. It is deeply ingrained in the Philippine culture that fathers are the providers while mothers are the nurturers in the family. Left-behind fathers narrated that, at first, they were apprehensive about taking the roles vacated by their wives. Eventually, they could learn the task of providing emotional and physical care to their children and wholeheartedly assumed the roles of both the father and the mother in their households. Filipino fathers were able to accept the tasks of both the family's provider and nurturer to achieve their dream economic and financial stability and to ensure their children's future. This is consistent with the theory of planned behavior, which states that fathers can take an active role in their families if they intend to be involved. Filipinos are resilient. They can adapt and are ready to embrace sacrifices to attain their dreams. Although difficult, fathers clasp the roles of both the father and the mother in the household because they want to provide their children with a comfortable life. While some fathers felt embarrassed, the situation has taught them to rise above the situation and instead focus on the more important thing: their children. Reverse gender roles are not an issue for

Filipino fathers. They are willing to do everything for their families. Filipinos transcend cultural and gender roles if the situation necessitates, especially if the family's future is at stake. Regarding the issue of returning to the previous family setup when their wives return home, fathers stated that there is no need because they are already accustomed to the new setup. The fathers' experience of becoming left-behind fathers allowed them to learn that they must also involve themselves in co-parenting their children – that fathers shall not only focus on providing material needs but also on nurturing their children. Fathers are certain they will continue caring for their children even after their wives return. However, they clarified that they would not stop their wives from involving themselves in caring for their children. Hence, the left-behind fathers realize that both the father and the mother are co-parents and partners in raising their children. The left-behind fathers' experience of parenting their children alone has led them to realize the importance of fathers' involvement in their children's upbringing, including the household. The roles vacated by the absentee mother became the adverse occasion for the fathers becoming involved in their children's affairs. However, the father's involvement in the family shall not be limited when the mother is away. Involvement means whether the mother is available or in a faraway land, the father is doing the tasks of the parents - provider, protector, and nurturer. Parenting the child is a task for both the father and the mother. They are, in fact, partners in co-parenting their offspring.

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