

A case study revealing lessened masculinity for “left-behind” husbands of overseas Filipina workers

By Phillip Greshamⁱ

“There’s really a paranoid feeling, because I feel insecure.” Virgilio adjusted himself on the couch while pondering his next words. His gaze fell on a photograph of the newly married couple hanging on the wall to my right. Despite his wife having taken care of the housekeeping when she was home, and despite having hiring a niece as a “domestic helper” to take care of the day-to-day chores, he chooses to dust his few family photos himself with the utmost care. *“I really hate the distance. I prefer to be divorcing my wife, it’s not a good thing. It sounds like shit.”*ⁱⁱ

Virgilio, 42, is one of many “left-behind” Filipino men whose wives have become overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in order to better provide for their family’s livelihood. It has become much more common for Filipinas to work abroad in recent decades, but while the gender gap is approaching parity,^[1] the positions filled still closely match “traditional” gender roles. Men take up jobs asserting dominance, strength, and intelligence; it is not uncommon to see Filipinos on a brief shore leave in seaports worldwide, nor to see them chauffeuring luxury vehicles, or scoping a ranging at a construction site. Women fill positions in domestic work (as “helpers” or nannies), in the service industry, and as nurses, as these are traditionally seen as women’s responsibilities; “Filipina” has become synonymous with “maid” in Hong Kong

and with “nanny” in some affluent Canadian suburbs.^[2]

The worldwide increase in female participation in the overseas labor market in the past 40 years to the current 48.6%, generally known as the feminization of migration, can be attributed to increasing reportage of women taking up positions as single women and, when married, independent of their husbands.^[3] Married Filipinas constitute almost 45% of all OFWs, suggesting that the social pressures to remain “at home” with their families have lessened when compared to the financial gain of working abroad.^[4] Remittances sent back to the Philippines too are steadily increasing and projected at over \$20B per annum,^[5] and from my conversations with respondents from Cebu City, it is estimated that between 35% and 73% of OFW earnings are remitted.ⁱⁱ Women in general and Filipinas in particular also tend to remit more and in greater regularity than men,^[3, 6] earning greater power for decisions regarding the home and children.^[7] Although increases in female social currency are usually seen as positive by feminists, these coincide in the Philippines with a lessening of feelings of masculinity by men, which, as distinct by domineering *machismo*, should not be taken as a signal of gender equality.ⁱⁱⁱ

Virgilio’s wife works in Ireland at a hotel, and although he is in contact with her almost every day, the physical distance is obviously also manifesting itself emotionally. His pain due to their separation is compounded by the stigmatization he receives from the community—locally, nationally, and internationally—for not having migrated himself. Tradition decrees that men,

especially husbands, hold the burden as provider of the family,^[8] while women take care of the house and children.^[9] Since overseas positions often double or triple a family's income, it is widely seen as unmanly to have one's wife fulfill primary income responsibilities, and even more so to take over her childcare duties himself. Men are considered incapable of providing the "maternal love" children need^[10] and it is commonly claimed in the feminist Philippinist literature that men avoid these duties, choosing instead to quit their job (if they held one), spend their wives' earnings unproductively, and hire women to do the child-rearing instead.^[11] These "observations", however, rely upon an affirmation of traditional gender roles—clashing soundly against the democratic ideals of a globalized world—and upon decade-old studies predating the advent and subsequent explosion of internet- and telephony-based technologies which facilitate international communication between displaced members of the family; they have no empirical basis, including that of my own research.^[12] The nonmigrating men I spoke to continued their role as provider on top of taking up childcare responsibilities after their wives' departures: Virgilio works as a schoolteacher during the day, and after driving himself and his children home, cooks, launders, and helps with their homework in the evening. He defends his choice to both work and take care of the children:

I don't want to have no work while my wife is working abroad, it's too unfair for her, and it's too unfair for my masculinity. I feel like I'm just a wife during that time: I will tend to my children, I will bring them to school, so that's the work of a housewife. It's not me, it's not my type.

Virgilio's desire to match his wife's sacrifice summarily disproves the feminist theory of "men as problem."^[13]

The government holds its own attacks on "left-behind" fathers through what I have termed the New Heroes national script. The significance of international migration to the Philippine economy is reflected in the stock number of OFWs, their remittances, and—most revealingly—in the number of agencies monitoring and regulating those flows. Some are explicit to their nature (e.g., the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration), while others are merely cross-governmental data-collecting services, such as the National Statistics Office and the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas. Beyond the creation of administrative and statistics-collecting bodies, the Philippine Presidency has actively encouraged economic migration. Under President Marcos (1965–1986), Filipino citizens living overseas were labeled as *balikbayans* "by joining the Tagalog words *balik*, to return, with *bayan*, meaning town and, at least from the late nineteenth century on, nation."^[14, 15] Later, Presidents Aquino (1986–1992) and Macapagal-Arroyo (2001–2010) reiterated migrants' prestige by declaring them the *bagong bayani* or "the heroes and heroines of the nation."^[16, 17] The President also personally hands out the Model OFW Family of the Year Award, which recognizes "a financially successful migrant family whose members maintain close family ties despite separation."^[18] These lauds are merely propaganda meant to boost morale (and thus productivity) of OFWs, despite several suffering high-profile tragedies revealing the government's true image of "temporary

migrant populations as commodities that can be exported.”^[19]

While the national script may be gender-neutral, it exists in a plane that espouses “traditional values”: Nuclear families with husband-as-provider and wife-as-nurturer are respected above alternative household configurations, and the winner of the Model Family award is routinely a male OFW. A paradox is revealed when one considers the greater availability of income abroad from an educated wife vis-à-vis the pressure on her to remain at home as nurturer of the children. Should she be castigated for leaving her family behind, or commended for her sacrifice of working abroad?

When the mirrored paradox focuses on the husband, more often than not he is subjected to the traditional norms and chastised for putting his wife into harm’s way. Virgilio has been forced to carefully and conspicuously time his arrivals and departures in order to avoid accusations of infidelity; his neighbors’ “eyes will become big if I am home late” and he will become the “talk of the town”. The perpetual performance of a model husband is clearly taking a toll on his stress levels, and he hopes that his family’s application for residence in Ireland will be approved soon. Until then, Virgilio, like thousands of OFWs’ husbands across the Philippines, must deal with an unfair public condemnation of having not migrated themselves, victims of a social system that places greater value on “tradition” than on the democratic and gender-equal prospects of an individual.

Notes

- ⁱ Contact: philgresham@gmail.com
- ⁱⁱ Virgilio’s name has been altered to protect his identity.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ms. Marieke Smit joined me in this research and conducted interviews with female respondents with husbands and male family members abroad. Since much of the OFW’s life abroad can be secretive, and since it is considered rude to ask for direct income numbers, we preferred our respondents answer with a percentage.
- ^{iv} For further reading, I recommend Alicia Pingol’s tome on Filipino masculinities [8], as well as my thesis [12], where I propose a model of the continuum of Filipino masculinities.

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