

Providing From Afar: The Lived Experiences of Filipino Factory Worker-Parents Abroad

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Abstract. A large number of Filipino parents are working overseas, primarily driven by economic necessity, career opportunities, and the desire to provide a better future for their families. This study focused on Filipino Overseas Workers (OFWs) employed as factory workers. It aimed to understand their motivations for working abroad, the challenges they face, how they cope with these challenges, and their plans. The study used a descriptive qualitative research design, which centers on the participants' lived experiences. Additionally, the researchers employed semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both predefined questions and the opportunity for follow-up queries. The research identified four key themes: Opportunity, Cultural and Environmental Differences, Adaptability, and Improving Quality of Life. The motivation to work abroad stems from the opportunity to earn higher wages, strengthen familial ties, and access better career prospects. However, the participants faced challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, work ethics, and extreme weather conditions. Being the primary breadwinners, they learn to adapt to these difficulties by adjusting to the artistic and environmental shifts they encounter. Finally, this research highlights the resilience of OFW parents.

Keywords: Factory workers; Lived experiences; Overseas Filipino workers; Philippines; Psychology.

1.0 Introduction

The phenomenon of migrant workers, particularly Filipino parents working abroad, has had significant implications for the socio-economic landscape. "Globally, there are more than 150 million international migrant workers—individuals who are employed outside of their country of origin" (Hargreaves et al., 2019, p. 1). As the number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) continues to rise, understanding the dynamics of their migration becomes increasingly crucial. Motivated by economic necessity and the desire to secure a better future for their families, many Filipino parents choose to work abroad in pursuit of greater opportunities (De Jesus & Adducul, 2024). However, this pursuit comes with inherent challenges, including strains on relationships and emotional well-being.

The decision of many Filipino parents to work as factory workers abroad is often driven by the need to provide financial support and improved opportunities for their families. Common motivations include earning higher salaries, sending children to school, and seeking greener pastures (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020). According to partial records from the Department of Migrant Workers (2023), the number of OFWs continues to grow annually, reaching approximately 2,525,140 in 2023. Despite employment in this sector, many OFWs face challenges such as

communication difficulties, financial stress, and the need to adapt to new environments. These experiences can lead to emotional distress and the development of various coping mechanisms to manage the demands of industrial work abroad.

While existing literature highlights the lived experiences of Filipino OFW parents, further exploration is needed on how migration affects family dynamics, personal identity, and adaptation strategies within the factory work context. OFWs often encounter systemic injustices and marginalization that stem not only from economic hardships but also from moral demands such as dignity, identity, and respect (Isidro, 2021). Through in-depth qualitative inquiry, this study aims to offer valuable insights to support organizations and the broader community, fostering a more empathetic and informed understanding of Filipino parents working abroad in industrial sectors.

As a result, this study was conducted to examine the multifaceted challenges experienced by Overseas Filipino Worker parents in factory employment and to propose ways to support their well-being and resilience.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study used a Qualitative Descriptive research design to explore the experiences of Filipino parents working abroad in factory settings. This approach was chosen for its emphasis on providing a rich, straightforward description of participants' experiences, motivations, and coping mechanisms, without requiring immersion or deep interpretive analysis. It allowed the researchers to capture authentic, experience-based narratives from participants regarding their lives as OFWs and parents.

2.2 Research Locale

This research focused on Filipino parents employed as factory workers in various Asian countries, including Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. All participants originated from Cebu City, Philippines. The study was conducted from the last quarter of 2023 to the first quarter of 2024, specifically examining the challenges, motivations, coping strategies, and emotional impact of overseas factory work on Filipino parents.

2.3 Research Participants

The researchers used purposive sampling to select three (3) participants who met specific criteria: all were long-term Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents, employed in the overseas factory sector for five to ten (5–10) years, two of whom are male and one female. The small sample size was a methodological limitation due to time constraints and difficulty in arranging interview schedules with the participants, primarily because of their work hours, time differences, and remote interview mode. Given all this, the researchers ensured an in-depth exploration of their individual experiences with high regard for data saturation.

2.4 Research Instrument

This study utilized a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide composed of five (5) open-ended questions aimed at exploring the participants' motivations, challenges, and coping strategies. The questions were developed based on a review of related literature and then underwent an initial review with the research adviser to ensure alignment with the research problem. Also, the questions were screened to warrant a bias-free and neutral tone. Next, the sets of questions were submitted to the institution's research officer and its ethics committee for approval. Follow-up questions were included to facilitate deeper exploration during interviews, based on the participant's response. Interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes and were conducted online. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the data collection process.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

The study followed a systematic data collection process under the supervision of the institution's research office. First, approval was secured from the research office, including validation of the interview guide. Eligible participants were identified and invited for a pre-interview screening to confirm qualifications and manage time zones. Informed consent was obtained through an online declaration form. Interviews were conducted via a video conferencing application and recorded. The recordings were downloaded, organized using pseudonyms, and transcribed verbatim with time-stamped speaker intervals. The ethics committee then reviewed these for accuracy. A coding framework was developed and applied through a three-order coding process to disassemble, categorize, and reassemble the data. Emergent patterns and themes were identified to address the study's research questions.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to all ethical guidelines of the institution's research office and its manual. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, benefits, and risks through a digital consent form. Voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent were emphasized throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts. After data collection, video recordings were deleted under the supervision of the research office. The study also adhered to all institutional protocols regarding the originality and plagiarism-free nature of the work. Upon completion, the results will be disseminated through institutional research presentations, academic publications, and copies will be shared with participants and other researchers upon request. Finally, a hardbound copy is deposited in the institution's learning resource center and the research office archives.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore, describe, and interpret the lived experiences of OFW Parents as Factory Workers Abroad. Working as an OFW can prove to be very challenging, as it presents multiple challenges, one of which is the cultural differences encountered while working in a different country. These challenges call for strategies to mitigate their effects.

Through the examination of these master themes and their respective subthemes, a foundation was established for explaining the lived experiences of OFW Parents as Factory Workers Abroad, with key highlights from the interviews representing each theme. The four (4) master themes are: (1) Motivation and Reason to Work Abroad, (2) Challenges Faced Whilst Working Abroad, (3) Coping Mechanisms and Strategies, and (4) Plans for the Future. Furthermore, each master theme has sub-themes to elaborate further, which are: Opportunity, Improving Way of Life, Difference in Culture and Environment, Adaptability, Resilience, and Ambition.

3.1 Theme 1: Motivation and Reason to Work Abroad

Many overseas Filipino parents choose to work abroad because of the opportunities it offers, not just in terms of higher salaries, but also through family connections and easier entry into industries abroad. For some, it was not even about applying through the usual overseas work channels but simply the chance that opened through bloodlines or personal networks. This sense of opportunity to build something better for themselves and their loved ones became the driving force behind their decision to leave home and endure the sacrifices that come with working in a foreign land.

Beyond financial gain, these parents are driven by a deep desire to enhance the quality of life for their families back home. It is no longer just about providing basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing today; it is about ensuring their children have access to better education, reliable communication, transportation, and the stability that allows them to thrive. These parents carry the weight of knowing they cannot always be present to guide their children every day. Still, they hold onto the hope that the life they are building abroad offers their families a second option, providing a more secure and stable future compared to what they might have back in the Philippines.

Opportunity

The most frequent reason for parents to work abroad was the wide variety of opportunities that working abroad presented. Some decided due to the salary difference, and most went due to family ties and easy access to the industry.

"Actually, I did not apply abroad; it was an opportunity given to us working here in Japan. It is not like the typical OFW process, like applying to an agency, and all other processes to work outside the Philippines." (Par 1)

"By bloodline of my spouse, opportunity, allowing us to work here in Japan, that is why we are here" (Par 1)

"It is more of the opportunity to work here abroad than in the Philippines... it is because of...the salary difference" (Par 2)

A frequent theme or reason for working overseas is the wide variety of opportunities available abroad. This encourages workers, especially OFWs, to take up a job overseas, in which, in the context of the participants, they decided to work abroad, as it was due to the salary differences, the opportunity, and the family ties concerning getting the job. Sorita et al. (2023) emphasized that many Filipinos tend to prefer working outside the country due

to the superior opportunities and earnings offered abroad, which are far more attractive than those available in the Philippines.

Improving Way of Life

They ventured overseas to support their families back home and improve the quality of life for both themselves and their families.

"Of course, to provide a stable life, before it is just to provide food, shelter, clothing, right now it is different. We really have many needs: number one, wifi. You can provide your child with wifi, especially if you are working abroad. The house, of course, ubiquitous, and now, education, it is not the same as before that most students are free, now that they go to school, it is preferred to select private institutions for the child to have good education, especially if OFW parents, they cannot always guide and assist every day...if ever we cannot provide, at least we have a second option for our children to go here because it is more stable here compared to the Philippines." (Par 1)

A prominent theme among the participants who wanted to work abroad was the desire to provide a comfortable life and support their families back home. Many Overseas Filipino Workers choose to work abroad to support their families and improve their overall quality of life. In the past, providing basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing was the primary goal. However, the needs of families have evolved significantly. Today, OFWs strive to provide more than just the essentials; they aim to offer their children access to technology, such as Wi-Fi for communication, transportation for mobility, and quality education. They view working abroad as a means to provide a more stable life and a secure future for their family back in the Philippines. According to Albert et al. (2023), the various effects of labor migration on OFWs and their families include both economic benefits and social costs, such as changes in family dynamics, child outcomes in terms of labor, health, and education, within the diaspora.

The Master Theme 1, Motivation and Reason to Work Abroad, highlights that the wide range of opportunities available outside the Philippines primarily drives the decision of many overseas Filipino parents to work abroad. These opportunities often come in the form of significantly higher salaries, easier entry into foreign industries, and access to employment through family connections or personal networks. While financial gain is a significant motivator, many parents are equally driven by a more profound commitment to securing a better and more stable future for their families, ensuring access to quality education, reliable communication, and improved living conditions. George et al. (2019) emphasize the role of salary differentials in shaping migration decisions, particularly among professionals seeking better compensation abroad. At the same time, Pelongo et al. (2023) emphasized the emotional sacrifices and complex realities faced by overseas Filipino mothers, highlighting the coping strategies they adopt to manage the challenges of transnational parenting. Together, these insights underscore how both economic and familial opportunities are central to the motivations behind working overseas.

3.2 Theme 2: Challenges Faced Whilst Working Abroad

Working abroad brings not just opportunity, but also many personal challenges for overseas Filipino parents. One of the biggest hurdles they face is the stark cultural difference, especially when it comes to language. Many parents struggle to communicate fluently with their colleagues, often relying on gestures or basic words to get by. This can lead to misunderstandings, feelings of isolation, and even workplace conflicts. They are constantly reminded that they are in someone else's country and must adjust, sometimes without enough support or guidance.

The harsh environment and unfamiliar weather, particularly the freezing winters in places like Japan, add another layer of difficulty. Back home in the Philippines, they were accustomed only to rain or sun, but now they must brave negative temperatures while continuing their work. The strict and fast-paced work culture abroad, where every minute counts and there is little room for casual interaction, is a sharp contrast to the more relaxed and social working style they are accustomed to at home. These challenges weigh heavily on them, but they persevere, driven by the desire to provide a better future for their families.

Difference in Culture and Environment

The difference in culture and environment significantly influenced the experience of OFW Parents, as the cultural gap led to language barriers, resulting in misunderstandings. The environment and weather, especially winter, also affected their experience, as the weather differences are significantly different from those in the Philippines and where they work.

"Ah, the most challenging is the language barrier. Second, there is the weather. Winter is harsh...The Philippines does not experience one. We face the rainy season and the heat there. Here, winter is particularly harsh, with temperatures reaching negative degrees. And also, the working culture. As a working person, the work in the Philippines is different. It is like chill only. You can talk to your colleague. In Japan, every minute must be worked on. The Filipino work style is not allowed here in Japan." (Par 1)

"Our language is totally different than what you will encounter here, of course, since we are in their country, we have to adjust" (Par 2)

"It is really the working culture, it is because the Japanese are very organized in their time. When they talk, I can barely understand them at work; at times, we resort to sign language. However, so far, it is fine, it is just that there are really things I do not understand when it comes to their way of working." (Par 3)

The cultural and environmental differences present while working abroad have significantly shaped the experiences of these OFW parents. Language barriers often led to misunderstandings and communication difficulties, especially when coworkers spoke in dialects or used expressions unfamiliar to them. The difference in weather, particularly winter, as compared to the Philippines' tropical climate, also posed challenges to their adjustment. Additionally, the work culture abroad, such as in Japan, was described as highly organized and fast-paced, requiring constant focus and leaving little room for casual interaction, which is a vast difference from the more relaxed and social working environment in the Philippines. These factors combined to create significant obstacles that OFW parents had to navigate in their daily lives overseas. According to Gul and Gokce (2020), for workers living in another country, social factors such as language, traditions, norms, and communication styles of that country may lead to adaptation problems.

The Master Theme 2, Challenges Faced Whilst Working Abroad, highlights the significant challenges overseas Filipino parents face while working abroad, particularly due to cultural and environmental differences. Language barriers often lead to misunderstandings, communication difficulties, and feelings of isolation in the workplace, as many struggle to understand colleagues who speak different dialects or use unfamiliar expressions. The harsh climate, especially the cold winters in countries like Japan, presents a stark contrast to the warm, tropical weather to which they are accustomed in the Philippines, making daily life physically challenging. Additionally, the fast-paced and highly organized work culture abroad differs significantly from the more relaxed and social work environment back home, requiring these parents to adapt to new expectations constantly. These combined factors create emotional and practical difficulties that require resilience and adjustment. As noted by Doki et al. (2018), "for foreign-born workers, living and working in the host country is more stressful than for native workers," underscoring the added pressures migrant parents face as they navigate their roles in unfamiliar settings while striving to provide for their families.

3.3 Theme 3: Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Overseas Filipino parents cope with the demands of working abroad by adapting to their circumstances. As breadwinners, they possess a mindset that is open-minded, flexible, and willing to learn. They put in the effort to study the local language, understand the culture, and adjust to unfamiliar foods and customs. For them, being in a foreign country means embracing change with confidence and responsibility, knowing that these adjustments are part of their commitment not only to survive but also to thrive in their roles abroad. Their resilience shines through in how they face every challenge head-on. With their families depending on them, they draw strength from the love and responsibility they carry, facing difficulties with a positive spirit. No matter how tough the situation or how far they are from home, they hold onto the Filipino attitude of perseverance, believing that no challenge is too great when it comes to providing for their children. Looking ahead, these parents continue to hold dreams and plans for a better future, fueled by the sacrifices they make today.

Adaptability

The respondents, being all breadwinners for their families, maintained a flexible attitude and adapted to various situations.

"You just need to be open-minded and must be willing to learn, first to learn their languages, and also learn to adapt at the same time since you are in their place, and then just be flexible, be yourself, be confident, and also be true to yourself." (Par

2)

"The language barrier... we try our best for us to understand, we will self-study so we can understand their language...and then with their culture in food, we really need to adapt to the type of food they give to us... and we should be responsible." (Par 3)

Another prominent theme of OFWs is their adaptability to their environment. The respondents, all serving as breadwinners for their families, demonstrated a strong sense of adaptability in navigating life and work abroad. The participants emphasized the importance of being open-minded, flexible, and willing to learn, particularly in overcoming language barriers and adjusting to unfamiliar cultural practices. Many took the initiative to self-study the local language to improve communication and adapt to new food, customs, and work environments. Their ability to adjust not only reflected a sense of responsibility but also demonstrated resilience in the face of these challenges, all in an effort to provide for their families back home. As stated by Simanjuntak and Fitriana (2020), "A positive self-concept fosters resilience, courage, and creativity, enabling individuals to confront challenges effectively and seize opportunities for success." The respondents' adaptability and positive outlook, driven by their familial responsibilities, serve as essential factors in overcoming the challenges they encounter abroad. The strong emphasis on family support reflects a broader cultural value within Filipino society, highlighting the importance of familial bonds in navigating life's difficulties.

Resilience

The respondents, as breadwinners, maintained a positive and resilient attitude toward various challenges.

"Once you become a family man, there is nothing that seems to be challenging or fearsome; you just face everything because you already have kids to provide for. So, even if what type of challenges come, wherever you are on this Earth, we become fighters—that is a Filipino. It is the Filipino attitude. We really adjust, and we never back down from any challenge." (Par 1)

Another prominent theme discovered was the Resilience shown by OFW Parents, who, despite confronting formidable challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences, exhibited commendable resilience in navigating their circumstances. As primary providers, they maintained a strong and positive attitude, embracing difficulties with courage and determination. Their motivation to meet the needs of their children empowered them to confront hardships without hesitation, regardless of distance or difficulty. This sense of perseverance reflects a deeply rooted Filipino trait, characterized by unwavering determination and endurance for the sake of loved ones. According to Chee (2020), Resilience is a concept in world politics that emerged as a way to respond to the impossibility of guaranteeing security in an era of complexity. Without a central authority to provide security, risk is devolved to the individual. Those who cannot secure themselves are enjoined to adapt to the unknown constantly.

The Master Theme 3, Coping Mechanisms and Strategies, highlights how overseas Filipino parents cope with the challenges of working abroad through adaptability and resilience. As breadwinners, they adopt an open-minded and flexible attitude, actively learning the local language, customs, and adapting to unfamiliar foods and work environments. This willingness to embrace change reflects their strong sense of responsibility and determination to thrive in the face of difficulties. Their resilience is fueled by love for their families and a deep commitment to provide for their children, enabling them to face challenges with courage and a positive mindset. This perseverance, rooted in Filipino cultural values, helps them overcome obstacles far from home. As Simanjuntak and Fitriana (2020) note, a positive self-concept fosters resilience and creativity, while Chee (2020) emphasizes that in uncertain environments, individuals must continually adapt to survive and succeed. Fostering a sense of responsibility as the sole breadwinners to provide for their families back home, toughing it out every day with adaptability and resilience.

3.4 Theme 4: Plans for the Future

For many overseas Filipino parents, their hard work abroad is not just about meeting daily needs but about building a secure and prosperous future when they return home. Their dreams center on retirement in the Philippines, where they hope to enjoy the fruits of their sacrifices. Some focus on saving enough to buy or build their own home, a place they can finally call their own after years of working away. Others plan to use their savings and pensions, including benefits like Japan's retirement insurance, to start small businesses and create a stable and comfortable lifestyle for their families back home.

Their ambition is deeply tied to the hope of returning home with pride, knowing they have provided for their children and set up a future beyond their working years abroad. They endure the challenges and hardships of life overseas because they carry the dream of one day retiring in their homeland, surrounded by loved ones, in a home or business they built through years of perseverance and dedication. For these parents, every sacrifice is a step closer to fulfilling that long-awaited goal of a better life back in the Philippines.

Ambition

These OFW parents focused on having a prosperous retirement upon returning to the Philippines. Among their aspirations, some envision settling in the Philippines with a home of their own. In contrast, others aspire to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle and start a business upon their return to the Philippines.

“For retirement, one must prepare in the Philippines, but the advantage here in Japan is that retirement insurance is mandatory. So, if ever you retire and wish to go back to your home country, it is the Japanese government that will provide you with a pension.” (Par 1)

“Actually, my goal is, I really, really like to build my own house like a property...Honestly, I sold my property because there are placement fees to pay. So, my goal is to, you know, have my own property, so when I return to the Philippines, I have like something I can call mine” (Par 2)

“For retirement, I will, of course, have to go back to my country, the Philippines. I really want to retire and spend my old age in the Philippines, of course. We have been planning to buy a property in the Philippines, and we have decided to stay in our country.” (Par 2)

“It is better to save here, work, and then save, because I do not want to grow old here, because it is tiring. So, we will work, then once we have enough saved, we will go home to the Philippines and retire there...to have a house in the Philippines, and then to have a business, that is really the big dream.” (Par 3)

The OFW Parents had ambitions of living a comfortable life back in the Philippines, where they aimed to have a prosperous future and a secure retirement, so they could return to their home country—aspiring to build or buy their own homes, seeing property ownership as a symbol of stability and success after years of hard work abroad. According to Banta and Pratt (2021), the Philippine government has recently placed greater focus on reintegration programs aimed at returning Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), recognizing them both as a national resource and as a group facing reintegration challenges that need to be addressed. The participants also aspired to start their own businesses to secure a steady income during retirement. Their time overseas is viewed as a strategic opportunity to save and invest, with parents emphasizing the importance of financial preparation and maximizing benefits, such as retirement pensions. Ultimately, their ambition is focused on creating a secure, comfortable life for themselves and their families back home.

The Master Theme 4, Plans for the Future, reveals that many overseas Filipino parents view their work abroad as a means to build a secure and prosperous future upon returning home. Their ambitions center on retiring comfortably in the Philippines, with goals such as owning a home or starting a small business to ensure financial stability. They prioritize saving and maximizing benefits, such as Japan’s retirement insurance, to support their plans. These parents endure hardships overseas, motivated by the hope of returning with pride, having provided for their families and established a stable life beyond their working years. As noted by Banta and Pratt (2021), reintegration programs are becoming increasingly important in helping OFWs transition back home, acknowledging both their contributions and the challenges they face. Overall, their sacrifices are driven by the desire to achieve long-term security and comfort for themselves and their loved ones in their homeland.

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, Filipino parents working abroad as factory workers embody both courage and sacrifice. They leave behind the familiarity of home to embrace hardship in foreign lands, all in the hope of securing a better life for their children. Despite the emotional distance, cultural barriers, and exhausting conditions, they press forward fueled by love, duty, and dreams of a more stable future. Their stories are not just about migration; they are about resilience, dignity, and the strength of the Filipino spirit. Additionally, this study contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the lived experiences of OFW parents in the factory sector, which are voices that are often unheard. It uncovers the complex emotional and practical realities they face, offering a deeper

understanding of how economic migration affects not just individuals but families and communities. Moreover, the findings have significant implications for practice and policy. They can guide the development of more responsive OFW support programs, inform migration policies that protect workers' well-being, and shape pre-departure and reintegration efforts tailored to the unique challenges faced by parents. Educators, counselors, and community leaders may also draw from these insights to better support children left behind and promote healthy family dynamics. Finally, future research may explore the long-term psychological impact of parental migration on children, the differences between male and female OFW experiences in other blue-collar sectors, and how returning OFWs reintegrate into their families and communities.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

Niño Gabriel N. Sabay - supervising, editing, writing, data analysis, encoding, data gathering, Daniel Joseph N. Villares - writing, data gathering, Miles Cedrick M. Abatayo - editing, writing, encoding, data analysis, Rei Andrei L. Gica - editing, data gathering, Kenneth P. Tenchavez - editing, data analysis, Luis Elijah D. Cavada - editing, transcribing, Matt Rafael C. Munaña - editing, transcribing, Almer L. Tayactac, title, editing, proofreading, and revisions of the manuscript.

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7.0 Conflict of Interest

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