

# Beyond Push and Pull: The Narratives, Aspirations, and Remittance Practices of OFWs in Hong Kong and Taiwan and their Families

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the labor migration subjective meanings of the experiences of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) in Taiwan and Hong Kong and their families. Like previous studies, it shows that the main driver of labor migration is a better life for both the OFW and their loved ones left behind, citing the sending country's lack of better income opportunities, along with the receiving countries' better pay scales and lower tax schemes. This hews to the dominant literature on migration research, which has examined such reasons as the primary push-and-pull factors. However, modifying this standard model, the study reveals that mediating factors (between the push and the pull) are equally important. On the one hand, facilitative mediating factors refer to the presence of OFWs' relatives in the receiving country, high regard for overseas work, and the education of the OFWs' children. On the other, constraining mediating factors include illness or disability of the worker, economic downturns, and restrictive

labor policies in the receiving country. Finally, the study illustrates some facets of the labor migration experience and its implications on national development policies.

*Keywords: Labor migration, OFWS in Hong Kong and Taiwan, remittance behavior and meanings, transnationalism*

## **Introduction**

A national policy on labor migration has been envisioned to help boost the Philippine economy, and resolve the unemployment crisis (Ellerman 2005). OFW remittances help decrease the country's vulnerability to external shocks, facilitate lesser reliance on foreign savings, provide more currency for debt servicing and import payments, and contribute significantly to the Philippines' Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

With the dearth of a qualified and willing labor force in developed countries, the Philippines and other developing countries have developed policies and programs that promote the migration of their citizens. While receiving countries have greatly benefitted from this cheap labor supply, the literature is ambivalent on the impact of labor migration on overall household economic and psychosocial well-being in sending countries. On the one hand, it has had profound negative effects on the physical, emotional, and psychological state, especially of the children of OFWs (Reyes and UNICEF Manila 2008; Coronel and Unterreiner 2008; Lam and Yeoh 2019; Reyes and UNICEF Manila 2008), as well as family separation (Pernia 2008). OFWs themselves also tend to defer medical consultations until their condition has worsened. Also, remittances cover only the basic needs; an OFW family is not even protected against economic shocks that occur during foreign currency exchange fluctuations. Hence, their households remain poor (Edillon 2008).

On the other hand, other research shows that migration has contributed to the economic and social development of OFW families. Remittances raised disposable household incomes as evidenced by the increased spending for consumer items, health, education, and housing, as

well as allocation for savings (Orbeta 2008; Cabegin 2013). It has also been reported to reduce poverty by two to three million people (Pernia 2008). However, at the national level, labor migration seems to be a deficient strategy to boost economic development and to bring the country out of the middle-income trap (Ellerman 2005; Opiniano quoted in Reyes and UNICEF Manila 2008).

Some studies have looked into the impacts of labor migration on social organization at the familial level and the personal lives of the OFWs themselves (Rahman 2010; Cabegin 2013; Reyes and UNICEF Manila 2008; Coronel and Unterreiner 2008; Aguilar, et al. 2009; Tungohan 2012).

### **The Argument**

This paper modifies the traditional push-and-pull model to account for the motivations and experiences of OFWs in Hong Kong and Taiwan and of their families in their efforts to improve their lives and, to a certain extent, their communities. Alongside the push and pull factors that drive migration, the study looks into facilitating and constraining factors that affect and shape the meanings and practices of OFWs and their families. These include the cycle of labor migration, perceptions of migration, education and migration, physical constraints, economic crisis in host countries, restrictions on migration, and the yearning to return. In addition, the study also examines practices related to perceptions, impact, and attitudes toward the sending of remittances.

### **The Field Sites**

A multi-sited approach was used to gather data. Engaging with OFWs in the host country provided an in-situ vantage point, rather than a retrospective view after the labor migration experience. Hong Kong and Taiwan were selected as the primary study sites mainly because both countries were among the top 10 destinations of OFWs and were close to the Philippines. Data gathering was done from March 2014 to June 2016 as

part of a broader project examining the Philippines and the middle-income country trap (see Acknowledgments below). In 2018 and 2019, follow-up interviews were conducted for updates. FGDs were done with the female OFWs in Hong Kong, while individual interviews were done with the males in Taiwan. To cover the perspective of OFWs in the management level, OFWs from Dubai and Singapore on vacation in the Philippines were also individually interviewed. Informed consent was sought from all research participants. To maintain anonymity, fictitious names were used. Except for the sending and receiving countries, the names of some of the places have also been altered. A detailed profile of the informants can be found below.

### **The Research Participants**

Nine female OFWs still working abroad with ages ranging from 31 to 51, an average age of 36.25 years, participated in the study. Twelve of them were engaged in an FGD, while one was interviewed separately. Almost all of them were working as domestic helpers in Hong Kong; one OFW was a bookkeeper in Dubai. Prior to working abroad, most of the participants had jobs or were involved in some informal income-generating activities while one was a stay-at-home wife. Some had come from previous overseas work. Three of them used to work in factories in Taiwan before transferring to Hong Kong when their contracts ended. One participant was a former domestic helper in Singapore while another was a bookkeeper in the Manila until she lost her job and assumed a job in Dubai. Except for two participants, all of them were not able to finish their tertiary education. The participants all came from various provinces outside Metro Manila and were supporting family members in the Philippines. They were the primary breadwinners of their households.

Six male OFWs with ages ranging from 35 to 55 years, an average age of 39 years, also participated in the study. All of them were individually interviewed. Five of the male participants occupied various technical jobs in factories in the Tao Yuan area of Taiwan. According to them, Taiwanese employers preferred Filipinos because of their familiarity with the English

language. This was also mentioned in the literature as an advantage of OFWs over other nationals (Pei-Chia 2003a). One worked as part of the management of a multinational company in Singapore. Three of them hold professional degrees from tertiary education institutions in the Philippines. Two participants hold accounting degrees. Of the two, one was a licensed accountant while the other was a Computer Science graduate. Two other participants were graduates of electrical and automotive technical courses and one was a high school graduate. Except for one who was born and raised in Manila, the rest of the participants were from provinces outside the metro. Four of them were supporting wives and children in the Philippines, while the other two were single and were supporting their aging parents and siblings. At the time of the interview, four of the male participants were unemployed but were engaged in some informal income-generating activities such as tending a small sari-sari store and breeding farm animals. Of the four, three finished secondary level of education while one finished a vocational course.

Eight remittance recipients were also covered by the study. Four of the participants were the spouses of OFWs, while the other four were relatives, parents, or children. In the households with non-spouse recipients, the wife was the OFW while, the husband was left behind in the Philippines. All households with the husband as the OFW named the wife as the recipient of the remittances.

Lastly, four former OFWs who have returned to the Philippines for good were individually interviewed. All participants worked in the service sector abroad. Two of them were unable to continue their jobs due to illnesses/medical conditions. The others returned upon the end of their contracts.

## **Modifying the Push-and-Pull Model**

### *The Push-and-Pull Model*

Data were organized based on the themes and categories of the migrant worker's experiences following the cycle of the labor migration. These were analyzed using a modified push-and-pull model in migration studies originally developed by Everett S. Lee (1966) and has been used by many other scholars (Kyaing Kyaing Thet n.d.; Schoorl et al. 2000; Dorigo and Tobler n.d.; Kearney 1986).

“Push factors are those life situations that give one reason to be dissatisfied with one's present locale” while “pull factors are those attributes of distant places that make them appear appealing” (Dorigo and Tobler n.d., 1). Examples include lack of job opportunities or insufficient income to support oneself and their families and to provide for their material needs from housing to education. These push-and-pull factors will be discussed below.

### *Mediating Factors*

The push-and-pull model, however, does not reflect the complexities of the labor migration experience. Hence, a modified, more nuanced version has been adapted in this study to consider other factors—mediating and constraining—and capture the nuances and dynamism of the labor migration experience now viewed as circular or cyclic rather than linear. Incorporating such factors, the modified model also accounts for return migration and the migrants' vital social network that, in many ways, shaped their migration decisions (including the decision to migrate anew), the strategies the migrant and their families use to maximize resources and the ways they navigate around the tensions and dilemmas encountered. These factors of course still arguably fall either as push or pull factors, but they have generally been excluded in push-and-pull studies of migration. More recent research on migration has led to the nuancing or perhaps refinement of the push-and-pull model, also integrating transnationalism (Kares 2014), chain migration (family members migrate one after the other), circular

migration (Hugo 2003; Parreñas 2010; Ohno 2012), OFWs behavior, the impact of their social networks, attitudes to migration, and its social impact. Whereas the push-or-pull model assumed migration as a one-time phenomenon, mediating factors show, among other things, that it is also a long-term process that has wide-ranging effects. Also, working abroad has usually been articulated as due to the lack of employment opportunities in the home country, a push factor. However, this was not always the case, since there were others who, while gainfully employed in the Philippines, still opted to pursue a career abroad. In the latter case, OFW work was considered as a better alternative to working in the country because of better wages and taxation policies.

### *Transnationalism*

The modified model also lends itself more easily to the concept of transnationalism which involves migrant activities:

...activities that take place on a recurrent basis across national borders and that require a regular and significant commitment of time by participants... These activities are not limited to economic enterprises but include political, cultural and religious activities as well. (Portes 1999, 464)

In looking at transnationalism, this study also focuses on the remittance behavior of OFWs and their recipient households. It shows that there are instances, especially for those who have been abroad for extended periods of time, that OFWs engage not only with their families but also with their communities as well. Community engagements that emerged from this study include contributions during town fiestas and relief operations post disaster. This parallels the fact that migration governance in the Philippines shifted focus from policies and remittances to linking labor migration to broader development goals (Asis 2017). Figure 1 below shows the modified push and pull model of labor migration developed by the authors.

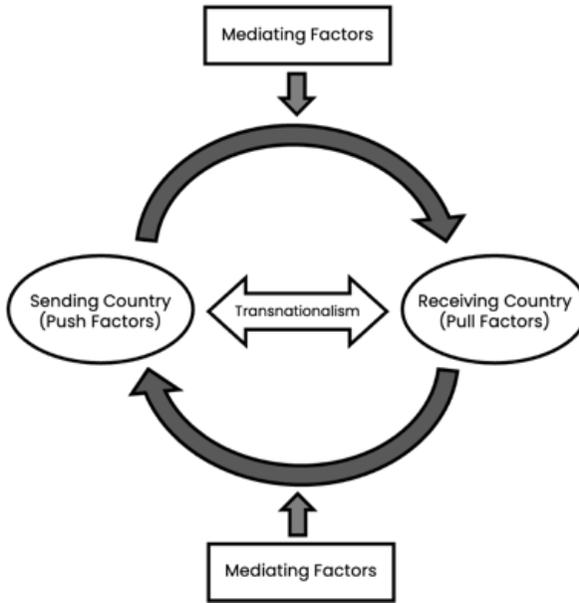


Figure 1: Modified push and pull model of labor migration

### *Remittance Narratives*

Also, part of nuancing the push-and-pull model, the study also examines the practices, behaviors, and attitudes of OFWs and the recipients of the remittances they send, all of which affect the experiences of and motivations for migration, including the decisions of other family members to migrate as well.

### **Push and Pull Factors**

#### *Difficult but Necessary*

“It is difficult to become an OFW.” This was articulated by the interviewees. Apparently, the separation from their loved ones and the uncertainty of new environments and cultures in the receiving country

led to apprehension among them. Yet in the same breath, they said, “It is necessary for us to leave for the benefit of our loved ones.” Such difficulties experienced by the OFWs were narrated in the context of suffering and sacrifices (Piosos 2019).

According to the participants, they decided to work abroad because they were not content with their jobs in the country. For them, the gains of working abroad were worth the pains of separation from their families and loved ones. That, economic opportunities abroad were the primary reason for leaving is consistent with other findings (Wickramasekera n.d.). This is the case especially for those who had not gone to college, and for whom a good-paying job in the country had been elusive. Moreover, the pay in the service sector was insufficient to sustain their families for whom they aspired to be able to provide and ensure a “*maayos na buhay*” (a better life) for. This was true not only for those who had spouses and children, but also for those who were single and had to support parents and siblings.

Mario, one of the male OFWs, decided to leave when he was laid off from work in the Philippines. He went to Taiwan and had been there for almost two decades now. Feeling that he would be too old to seek for a job in the Philippines if he returned, he says that if someone in Taiwan was willing to hire him, he would stay there.

Nelia had worked as a factory worker in Taiwan before moving to Hong Kong to be a domestic helper. She narrated that she could not renew her contract because of strict government regulations. Because she did not finish college, the only job she could get in Hong Kong was domestic work. Similarly, Jane, a friend of Nelia, also worked in Singapore as a domestic helper. When her contract ended, she also sought a similar job in Hong Kong. Laura, on the other hand, was a maid in the Philippines before becoming a domestic worker in Hong Kong. According to her, although working conditions were similar, the pay she received in the Philippines was much smaller than her pay abroad. For Nelia, Jane, and Laura, their salaries had been the major source of income of their households in the Philippines. With their financial support, they were able to send not only their children

to school, but also those of their siblings. They were also able to provide for the medical needs and to proudly build a house for their aging parents.

For these participants, no other opportunities in the Philippines could have given them the same amount of remuneration as their jobs abroad did. At the time of the interview, they had no plans of returning to the Philippines anytime soon. When asked if they would return to the Philippines if they encountered problems with their employer, they responded that they would prefer to stay abroad and instead transfer to another employer.

### *Labor Migration as a Better Alternative*

Greg had already been working in a multinational company in the Philippines before deciding to work in Singapore. According to him, while the pay in the country was good, he went abroad because he would earn double of his salary for the same job. Not coming from an affluent family, he would like to provide for the needs of his mother, who never worked since she got married and his sister that was still in school. Now in his mid-thirties, he was confident that he could manage higher positions in other countries. Young and daring, he got his first job abroad when he was in his mid-twenties. In the nine years he had been working in Singapore, he had since switched companies three times. Twice he was offered jobs in the Philippines with a similar salary range and had really been tempted to return. According to him, even if the offer was a bit lower, it was fine because he was also missing the comforts of home. A major deterrent to his return, however, were the huge taxes he would be paying in the Philippines. Taxes in Singapore are only a third of what he would have to pay at home. Greg says that while he was still young and single, he might as well take advantage and only return home when he is about to retire or when he is ready to settle down and have a family.

Lisa has been working in Dubai for almost ten years now. Prior to this, she was a bookkeeper in Manila until she was laid off, when the business suffered losses. For some time, she tended a *sari-sari* store in her home so she would have some income. After two years, her husband who worked in a

mechanical shop unfortunately lost his job. Having four children who were all still in school, she spent a lot of time worrying about their finances until the opportunity to work in Dubai came. In fact, she had also applied for similar positions in other firms in the Philippines and was already accepted. She chose to move to Dubai because for the same task, the pay was much higher than what she was offered in Manila. In June 2009, Lisa worked on her employment papers for working abroad along with her sister.

### **Facilitating Mediating Factors**

#### *The cycle of labor migration: Presence of OFW relatives*

Commonly, several members of a family are engaged in overseas work. OFW parents encourage their children and eventually their grandchildren to also seek employment abroad. Initially, this was done to learn and develop skills, eventually save money and return to either set up a business at home or to find better employment. However, labor migration was no longer viewed as a temporary measure. In some instances, OFWs plan to stay abroad until they are ready to retire. It was common for them to encourage their relatives to follow family members abroad to alleviate homesickness and boost household income tremendously. Eventually, the OFWs opt to apply for permanent residence abroad. It is in this context that Ellerman (2005) viewed labor migration as a trap because overseas workers no longer return to become productive citizens in their own countries. However, even if the entire family is abroad, the remittances could continue, with the remaining members of the extended family as recipients. The evident rise in the standard of living of OFW families manifested through consumer goods, the renovated homes, and the visible investments in education of the children were all sufficient to push neighbors into labor migration as well. In fact, OFWs oftentimes recruit and recommend not just their relatives but also their neighbors to their employers, thus continuing the cycle of labor migration. In this study, Mario and the other OFWs, Lisa, Rico, and Linda, were not the only OFWs in their families.

Mario's daughter also sought a job abroad after graduating with a degree in Nursing. She worked as a caregiver in one of the institutions for the elderly in Ireland. Mario had hoped that his two other daughters would eventually consider working abroad so that he could already retire in the Philippines.

Before working in Taiwan, Rico was a single tricycle driver in the Philippines living with both his parents and the younger of his two siblings. They were supported by his sister, an entertainer in Japan. It was through her encouragement and financial support that he was able to find work abroad. At first, only his sister provided the capital for the *sari-sari* store his mother tended. Now, with his overseas work, Rico also sends money for his mother's small business.

Linda used to work in Hong Kong alone. She would religiously send a portion of her earnings home to her husband, parents, and siblings as well as to her nieces and nephews for their education as she had no children of her own. According to her, "Without the remittances I sent, they would not have been able to finish their schooling." Her employer gave her sensitive tasks and gained their trust and confidence because of the quality of her work. Eventually, she convinced her employers to hire her husband as a family driver. She felt blessed that both were earning well there.

### *Perceptions of Labor Migration*

Going abroad was an adventure for the 26-year-old Rico. Aside from the financial gain, he pursued working abroad to experience the life of an OFW. He was single and the youngest so while he felt responsible for his mother, he did not feel that he should be primarily responsible for her care.

Conversely, Greg is single and the family breadwinner. His mother, having friends who have OFW children, strongly encouraged him to find opportunities abroad. She witnessed how her friends' lives had improved materially. They were able to renovate their houses had the latest gadgets, and their relatives got to go to good schools. Because of these, she believed that working abroad was better than working in the Philippines.

Soon after their marriage, Mario's wife quit her job in Taiwan having agreed that it would be better for their family if she stayed in the Philippines to take care of their children. Both of their children were girls, so they felt it was important for at least one of them to be around to raise them properly. In this sense, labor migration also reflects gender norms and cultural values that dominate the country of origin. The transnational family arrangement preferred by Mario and his wife portray men as the breadwinner and women as the home manager. Aside from this, maternal neglect seemed to be a major concern of OFWs. Mario and his wife felt that even if there were other family members who could take care of their children, the presence of a parent, especially the mother, would make a big difference in maintaining a functional family. Such concerns have been articulated in literature on Filipino transnational families (Parreñas 2002).

### *Education and Labor Migration*

Labor migration has also shaped the youth's education and career choices. The demand for health professionals abroad spurred a massive interest in courses in the medical field such as nursing and other allied medical professions. OFW parents would also encourage their children to take these courses hoping that their children would follow their footsteps.

Mario encouraged his own daughter to take up nursing so that she could work as a health professional abroad. He also hoped that his daughter would eventually acquire foreign citizenship so that she could bring other members of their family there.

Because she had no children of her own, Linda encouraged her nieces and nephews to take courses that would help them find employment abroad. Some of them took up nursing or care giver courses in La Union possibly because they could not say no to their benefactor. Linda was proud that some of them had successfully secured contracts abroad and were already sending remittances to their parents. However, not all of them were successful, she lamented. Some of her nieces and nephews ended up with jobs in their province and were not earning as much.

Nonoy was one of the OFWs who had returned to his hometown in Batangas. He recounts that while his family had benefitted from his OFW experience, one thing he did not feel good about it was that not everyone in his barangay had the same status. Although several of his neighbors and relatives living in the same barangay also became OFWs, not all of them were as successful as he was. To avoid envy, he refrained from talking to his neighbors about properties and other goods he acquired. He also encouraged his relatives and friends to be OFWs themselves to improve their lives as he did.

### **Constraining Mediating Factors**

#### *Physical Constraints*

Mario used to be an OFW, but an accident led him to have a permanent disability forcing him to return to the Philippines and his wife to go abroad to work. Because of this, Mario felt sad, also compounded by his disability. He felt that he should be the one working abroad and not his wife. He also felt emasculated now that he was totally dependent on his wife's remittances. He had discussed his dilemma with his wife and had requested her to try and find ways for him to return to overseas work so she could come home for good.

#### *Economic Crisis in the Receiving Country*

Lisa had been working in Dubai for many years. In April 2016, however, the family enterprise she was working in closed because of unfavorable business climate. She was told that she will be recalled once business picks up. She then returned to the Philippines. Three weeks into her "forced vacation" from Dubai, she received a call from her employer informing her that their business was once again operating and that she could get her job back if she was still interested. Lisa did not waste time booking a plane ticket back to Dubai. She returned to the Philippines in 2018.

In Taiwan, Roger felt dismayed after being laid off when the factory he was working in shut down. Having lost the opportunity, he lingered in Taiwan for a while hoping that he would get another job but had not been lucky. He now had planned to return to the Philippines to look for another overseas job. According to him, “time is wasted, I am not earning.”

### *Restrictive labor migration policies in the receiving country*

OFW contracts are valid only for a few years. The protocol was OFWs were required to process and pay fees to renew their contracts should they wish to continue working abroad. In Taiwan, for instance, contracts are renewed every three years for a total of 12 consecutive years at the employers' disposition. After the 12th year, OFWs are no longer qualified to work and must return to the sending country. For the workers, 12 years was not enough; they had planned to work overseas for as long as they could thus some OFWs looked for ways to deal with this restriction. One of the participants revealed that he had already been working in Taiwan for more than 12 years. His employer was so satisfied with his work that they asked that his contract be extended beyond the 12-year maximum employment term. He also mentioned other OFWs who had their stays extended despite immigration laws.

Aside from fees for the processing of contracts, brokers' fees that OFWs had to pay in Taiwan were also found to be restrictive. This is the case for Henry. He felt that this was an unnecessary burden for him especially since the fees reach more than 1,000 New Taiwan dollars. He felt that the hard-earned money could have been used for necessities in the Philippines.

### *Yearning to Return*

Still in their economically productive years, all the OFWs who have returned reminisced about the “good old days” when they were able to send money to their loved ones in the Philippines. All of them felt that their families greatly benefitted from their overseas work. Notably, all participant

OFWs, including those who were still abroad, were aware of the temporary nature of their work. While all of them had wanted to return to the Philippines, usually because of old age, everyone also expressed their desire to continue being an OFW for as long as they were physically and mentally capable. Some OFWs then had moved from one employer to another as soon as their contracts ended. For all except one, being an OFW was more of a career than a temporary undertaking because they would not be able to earn the same amount of money in the Philippines. It was better to work away from home because of the higher income they earned overseas. Others were compelled to return as a result of some misfortune or ill luck.

Mang Tony returned to the Philippines after suffering from an illness during his brief stint abroad. He was left limp on one leg so he could not go back to work. As the family breadwinner for most of his life, he felt defeated and sorry for himself for being jobless. He also felt embarrassed to ask help from his family for his needs such as medications. Likewise, Alyna returned from her stint as a nanny in Hong Kong because she suffered from epileptic attacks. She felt ill-fated because she contracted an illness that prevented her from continuing to work abroad.

Only Rico had articulated plans of a short stint abroad. He had just started with his contract in Taiwan and had only been there for a few months. According to him, he left just to have an OFW experience. At the time of the interview, he seemed to have firm plans of returning after his three-year contract.

### *Migration and Family Relations*

Problems in family relations as a result of the absence of the parent due to labor migration has emerged as one of the significant constraining mediating factors. In this context, OFWs and their families try and weigh the advantages and consequences of labor migration as an economic strategy. From this study, it is revealed that adjustments in households are made to allow the OFW to stay abroad first while simultaneously resolving family issues at home. The decision of the OFW to return is viewed as a last

resort if all other strategies fail. As for the participants, they felt it important for the spouse left behind to not be employed to attend to their children's needs and basically, to compensate for the OFW's absence. Because OFWs were the sole breadwinners, families commonly depended on remittances for their household needs.

### **Remittance Narratives**

#### *Pera Padala: Love sent back home*

All OFWs interviewed mentioned that their earnings had significantly contributed to their household income in the Philippines. Some families relied entirely on the remittances, but others augmented them with wages from other family members who were gainfully employed. Usually, the income of the OFW was much more substantial than those earned in the Philippines. Moreover, particularly for female migrants, their incomes supported not only their own children but also their parents and even the families of their relatives.

According to all the workers, remittances symbolized their love for their family. It was the product of their labor and sacrifices abroad. Such altruism has been articulated elsewhere (Abella 2008). Most of the time, the OFWs trust that the recipients would put this to good use for the benefit all family members. While they did not demand detailed accounting, they did expect to see tangible fruits of their labor when they come home. They were careful not to question the recipients regarding the disbursement of remittances to avoid ill feelings. They would, however, strategize or prepare a budget so that not all their income were sent. Mario particularly affirmed the wisdom of this practice, so not all his hard-earned money were spent. This way, he would have spare cash, perhaps for his own needs, for others who approached him for help, or for his own expenses when he visited home. He does not expect to receive any money from his wife while he was home.

Married male OFWs gave their remittances to their wives while female migrants gave them to their mothers or teenaged children. These women had expressed their fear that if the money were handed over to their husbands, it would not be used for household expenses. Single OFWs sent remittances to their parents.

The OFWS used several platforms to send the money. In Taiwan, a fellow Filipino owned the favored and trusted remittance agency which had long been in the business and was conveniently located within the Filipino OFW enclave near the factory they worked in. For these workers, trust was an essential factor in selecting the platform or the bearer of their hard-earned remittances. It was also common to send money through other OFWs returning home, or as follow-up interviews revealed, through mobile phone-based apps such as Alipay and WeChat. However, the downside of this practice was that people back home could ask for money off-schedule.

In Hong Kong, Filipino OFWs patronized the remittance centers in Worldwide Plaza in the city center where they also purchased Filipino goods they missed from home. Visiting the building on a Sunday, it felt like the Philippines. The place gets quite congested, and the only sounds heard were conversations in Tagalog or any other Filipino language. The aroma from the food stalls was also very Filipino. It was amazing how a “little Manila” was created in that small space. In the same area, several women OFWs could be seen packing and unpacking *balikbayan* boxes on the sidewalk for shipping to the Philippines. Every square inch of these boxes—sometimes labelled with the name of a loved one it was intended for—filled with goods and merchandise. These were viewed as “love packages” that serve as compensation for the absence of the OFW. These activities have been examined in related literature (Parreñas 2002). Interestingly, female OFWs in Hong Kong would send boxes of goods back to the Philippines, but male OFWs in Taiwan explained that even if they send a few items home, they preferred sending cash unless there was a request for a particular item. These gendered styles in remittance sending—reflective of gendered transnational parenting styles—has been discussed in other literature (Carling et al. 2012).

Kin who were involved in the caregiving of parents and children of the OFWs were other recipients of cash and other forms of remittances. Some of the OFWs pointed out that the money they sent to kinfolk may have been greater than the wages of hired caregivers. However, they have some priceless peace of mind knowing that their loved ones are in the hands of trusted kinfolk who care for them not because of money but because of genuine love and affection. This was also experienced by the OFWs in Taiwan (Pei-Chia 2003b).

### *Amount Sent*

In 2015, the World Bank projected that remittances sent by OFWs would reach USD 29.7 billion (Torres 2015). This figure, however, reflected only recorded remittances. A vast number of remittances remain unrecorded because they are sent through informal channels by both documented and undocumented migrant workers (Yang 2004; Hugo 2003).

Except for one, all OFWs interviewed explained that they send money to the Philippines monthly. The amount ranges from 30 percent to more than 100 percent of their monthly salary. According to them, they sometimes needed more money than they could send every month, so they borrowed from other OFWs. Circumstances that warranted such larger remittances were the celebration of a graduation, birthday of a relative, or town fiesta, or a disaster that damaged their homes. The OFWs revealed that these occurrences disrupted their budgets, but they had to help.

Mario no longer sends remittances on a regular basis. His OFW daughter started sending money, so he was no longer pressured to remit regularly. Also, aware that Taiwanese rules stipulate only a limited time for overseas workers, he was now saving for his retirement. Just the same, he would still send money home on certain occasions and when needed. According to him, it was normal for OFWs to eagerly send almost all their income home at the start of the contract. The longer they stayed as an OFW, the less they would regularly remit. Besides, it was important not to send everything so that he would have his own money when he went home for vacations.

### *How Remittances were Used*

Remittances have been used for a variety of reasons, including the purchase of items such as electronic gadgets (Yang 2004); the education of the children; and microenterprise activities within the household of migrant workers. In some cases, these enterprises appeared to fulfill some other need such as passing the time rather than engaging in a serious business endeavor. There have been cases, though, where the OFWs returned, ventured into small business enterprises, and thrived (Asis, Baggio, and Roma 2010). Tigno (2011) described how migrant families in CALABARZON have actively engaged in these activities such as mat and basket weaving and machine shops.

Primarily, remittances were used for household expenses such as food and medical necessities. Quite interestingly, while non-spouse recipients all claimed that the remittances were enough, recipient-spouses felt that the remittances sent by their husbands were insufficient to cover their everyday expenses. According to them, they would still occasionally resort to borrowing from relatives. Also, savings were little because recipients would normally spend first and save only whatever was left behind. Notably, all participants confirmed that they did have some savings for future emergencies.

More than that, all participant OFWs would substantially contribute to the reconstruction of their homes. In Batangas province, a few hours away from Manila, where participants who had returned were interviewed, having a house made of concrete and financed by an OFW family member was a source of pride. In fact, it was embarrassing for them not to have contributed to the renovation of their house; it was considered stingy or an indication they had not done well abroad.

A renovated house was also proof that the remittances were put to good use; it encouraged the OFW to keep working hard and send more money. One informant said that in one city, a passerby could easily distinguish which homes had OFWs. Usually, the homes of these families were made of

concrete and had imported tiles at the facade, had gates made of wrought iron, and had a porch at the entrance. On the other hand, non-OFW homes were usually made of light materials. OFW enclaves have also developed. Today, for instance, there is a “Little Spain” and a “Little Italy” in Batangas where houses were influenced by Spanish and Italian architecture (Asis, Baggio, and Roma 2010).

Some of the recipients would also invest in small businesses. Greg’s mother put up a small piggery in an agricultural lot using her son’s earnings. If the business succeeded, his mother would finally achieve financial independence. From his last visit, he observed that it was not doing well. Fearing he would hurt her feelings, he avoids discussing these losses with her, he would continue supporting his mother’s business, hoping that someday it would thrive.

Rico had also been financing his mother’s shop. But because his mother was aging, the shop was “*bukas-sara*” (open-close), that is, it was not regularly open for business. He does not know if the shop was earning, but he continues to send her money for her store for he believes it was his obligation as her son. Moreover, he said that the business kept his mother busy fearing that her health would deteriorate otherwise.

All the recipients disclosed that they invested the remittances. Like the mothers of Greg and Rico, others also went into microenterprises such as a piggery, poultry farms, and cell phone load business. Others upgraded their homes, purchased vehicles, pieces of jewelry, and properties. Jewelry was considered a good investment; it could be easily pawned during emergencies. They (and the OFWs) also put much premium on their children’s education, and even those of their relatives such as younger siblings, nieces, and nephews. Two recipients hoped that good education would land her children good-paying jobs and help them improve their lives.

Mario’s wife, particularly, was not content with taking care of the household. Thus, she also engaged in the sale of products like cosmetics and lingerie, small-kitchen gadgets, among others, using part of Mario’s

remittance as starting capital. This was her way of contributing to the household, acknowledging that it was important that she had income of her own. This way, she would not feel guilty whenever she would shop for herself. Knowing that she was economically productive was important to maintain her self-esteem and worth.

Remittances also contributed to the development of communities. Lina, an OFW in Hong Kong, narrated of how a group of Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong sent cash and goods to their hometown as relief for their *kababayan* (fellow citizen) devastated by typhoon Haiyan in 2013. According to her, OFWs in Hong Kong would normally congregate by regional affiliation. However, when a group's own hometown is badly hit, the resolve to help was particularly strong. She reveals that, usually, the ones who had been OFWs longer are the ones who contribute to community recovery programs.

The consumption behavior of OFWs and their families were also viewed in various perspectives. Some felt entitled to "reap the fruits" of their hard work. They believed that they deserved to treat themselves and their families to recreational activities such as shopping. This behavior may be seen as contributory to the development of the manufacturing and retail sectors. Other OFWs felt the need to save and invest more. The propensity of some of the families to engage in small business enterprises could be considered as contributory to generating employment for other members of the community. In this study, however, the businesses they had set up were micro enterprises and were more sporadic than sustained. There were also others who were not inclined nor have the confidence to pursue business ventures. Training in marketing and financial management was needed. They should also be informed of other investment options that suit their tastes and temperaments.

On the one hand, remittances have improved the living standards of several of the OFWs. Families were able to provide for their basic needs, health, and education of their children. Some of them were also able to help their other relatives. On the other hand, there were also OFW families who

claimed their lives have not significantly changed and that the remittances sent were just enough for their basic needs. In this regard, development was seen as uneven.

### **Conclusion**

This paper presented facilitating and constraining factors that shape the experiences, attitudes, and practices of Overseas Filipino Workers in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In so doing, the paper has modified the traditional push-and-pull model of migration studies to capture the dynamics and many complexities of the migration experience, both of the migrants themselves in the host country and of their families back home in the Philippines. The present study has not fully debunked the push-and-pull model, since the mediating factors discussed here still arguably fall therein, but it does show the many other nuances attendant in the meanings, attitudes, and practices of OFWs.

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