

Broken Promises: The Case of the Family's Pursuit of a Good Life Abroad as OFWs

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ABSTRACT

Pursuing overseas employment as Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) but facing unforeseen challenges and setbacks reflects a broader migration experiences among Filipino labor migrants. This study examines the failed migration experiences of a Filipino family from Bonfal West, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines situating their narratives within broader patterns of OFW labor migration. Anchored on Push–Pull Migration Theory, social history, and family history perspectives, the study situates migration not merely as an individual economic choice but as a collective family strategy shaped by structural constraints and social expectations. Using an oral history approach and a personal narrative design, data were gathered through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to explore migration motivations, challenges abroad, and post-migration family dynamics. Findings reveal that economic instability and limited local employment opportunities served as primary push factors driving overseas migration. However, deceptive recruitment practices, unsafe and exploitative working conditions, and unmet contractual promises undermined migrants' aspirations abroad. These hardships produced significant emotional, psychological, and economic consequences that extended beyond individual workers and reshaped family relationships and well-being. Despite these adversities, the family demonstrated resilience through shared coping mechanisms rooted in faith, mutual support, and collective endurance. The study underscores the need for strengthened labor protections, transparent recruitment processes, and community-based support mechanisms.

Keywords— accidents, domestic workers, foreign countries, lived experiences, migration

INTRODUCTION

Globally, labor migration reveals a persistent duality of empowerment and exploitation among migrant workers. Understanding why individuals migrate requires examining a combination of demographic characteristics, social networks, and economic conditions that shape mobility decisions. While Europe features prominently in global migration literature, migration within Africa and the Middle East provides critical comparative insights into labor-driven migration systems that parallel the experiences of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). In Southern Africa, Namibia historically functioned as a regional labor magnet during the 1990s and early 2000s, primarily due to perceived economic stability and employment opportunities. Survey findings by Pendleton and Frayne (2002) indicate that migrants were drawn to Namibia largely by expectations of a “better economy” and job availability. Although geographically and culturally distinct from the Philippine context, Namibia's experience illustrates how perceived economic opportunity—rather than guaranteed security—often underpins labor migration decisions. Similarly, Middle Eastern destinations such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) mirror the Philippine experience more closely. These countries have long served as major pull destinations due to sustained labor demand, particularly during oil-driven economic expansion in the 2000s. By 2013, expatriates constituted approximately 56.5% of Saudi Arabia's workforce, reflecting a heavy reliance on migrant labor in construction, services, and infrastructure development (de Bel-Air, 2014). Urban centers such as Riyadh and Jeddah further enhanced this attractiveness, offering employment opportunities unavailable in rural areas (Khraif et al., 2019). These global patterns parallel Philippine labor migration, where strong recruitment narratives, success stories of earlier migrants, and promises of higher wages continue to shape migration aspirations. This comparative framing underscores that the experiences of OFWs—particularly those

who encounter failed migration outcomes—are not isolated incidents but part of a broader global labor system characterized by uneven power relations, labor segmentation, and precarious employment.

The Philippines is widely recognized as a unique national case in global labor migration, often described as possessing a “culture of migration” in which overseas employment has become embedded in the national consciousness as a primary pathway to economic mobility (Asis, 2006). Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are legally defined under Section 7(g) of Republic Act No. 10801 (OWWA Act) as individuals engaged in remunerated activities in states of which they are not citizens. To protect migrant workers, the Philippine government has established multiple legislative and institutional mechanisms. Republic Act No. 8042 (Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995), as amended by Republic Act No. 10022, provides the overarching legal framework for OFW protection. Republic Act No. 10801 institutionalized the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), while Executive Order No. 797 created the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) to regulate overseas recruitment. Additional measures include Republic Act No. 7111, which established the Overseas Workers’ Investment Fund, and Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) Department Order No. 4 (Series of 2001), outlining medical care programs for OFWs and their dependents.

Despite these protections, scholars consistently note gaps between policy intent and lived realities. Tigno (2019) discussed the Philippines’ pioneering efforts in developing protective policies for OFWs, such as legal aid and welfare programs. Yet, despite these policies, Asis (2017) argued that migration and development policies in the country remain disjointed, with economic gains from remittances failing to translate into sustainable development or local employment opportunities. Saguin (2020) revealed the paradox that many OFWs return home financially “broke and broken,” unable to sustain savings despite years of work abroad. The study underscores the insufficiency of reintegration and financial literacy programs, aligning with Asis’ assertion that migration has not yielded long-term socioeconomic resilience. Similarly, Bautista and Tamayo (2020) identified multiple challenges faced by OFWs—ranging from communication difficulties to mental and financial strain—despite existing governmental protections. These recurring hardships suggest that while protective policies exist, their implementation gaps persist at the ground level. Adding to this discourse, Suelan and Balongoy (2025) uncovered the “untold stories” of abuse experienced by OFWs, documenting cases of depression, insanity, and suicidal ideation. Yet, amid these adversities, the OFWs cultivated coping mechanisms—faith, family support, and resilience—which echo the resilience frameworks described in international literature. Collectively, national studies highlight a complex intersection between structural inadequacy and personal endurance, situating OFWs within a system that demands resilience while providing insufficient systemic protection.

The specific local context of Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya—a rural community—adds an important layer to understanding migration dynamics. Like many rural areas in the Philippines, this locality has been shaped by economic and structural constraints, such as limited employment opportunities, underemployment, and uneven development. These conditions align with broader national patterns in which high unemployment, economic insecurity, and lack of local development have served as key “push” factors driving Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) to seek employment abroad (Orbeta & Abrigo, 2009). However, data from the National Statistical Coordination Board and the World Bank (2005) indicate that Bayombong, the provincial capital of Nueva

Vizcaya, recorded a poverty incidence of only 9.17% in 2003—the lowest among municipalities in the Cagayan Valley. While this relatively low poverty rate suggests a degree of local economic resilience, it also masks underlying vulnerabilities. Many households in Nueva Vizcaya continued to rely on irregular, low-paying, or seasonal sources of income, particularly in agriculture and informal work. Consequently, persistent rural underemployment and the lack of stable, well-paid local jobs likely pushed residents to pursue overseas employment as a strategy for economic security and upward mobility.

In recent years, the Philippine Statistics Authority Regional Statistical Services Office II (2025) reveal evolving but persistent structural constraints of the socioeconomic context of Bayombong. In 2023, poverty incidence in Nueva Vizcaya was recorded at 7.3% among families and 11.5% among individuals, continuing a downward trend but still indicating significant economic vulnerability at the household level. Meanwhile, national poverty incidence was 15.5% in 2023, reflecting broader socioeconomic challenges faced across the Philippines. Despite strong employment indicators—such as a 2024 employment rate of 98.3% in Nueva Vizcaya and national employment rates near 96%—underemployment remains persistent, with double-digit percentages of workers seeking additional hours or better work conditions. Moreover, the province’s economy grew by 4.4% in 2024,

suggesting some local development but insufficient job diversification or wage growth to fully sustain livelihoods. Recent labor force participation rates of approximately 64–65% nationally further illustrate the complex dynamics shaping labor opportunities amid persistent underemployment and moderate unemployment levels. These indicators suggest that while basic poverty and employment metrics have improved, structural socioeconomic pressures remain salient drivers of labor migration decisions among families in Bayombong and similar rural communities.

In this context, this study was carried out on November to December 2025. The present study sought to determine the experiences encountered by a family in Bonfal West, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines in their pursuit of overseas employment. By examining their story, this study illuminates the complex interplay between economic pressures, social expectations, and familial relationships that offer critical insights into the human, social, and economic implications of failed migration. The study further aims to analyze how these experiences influenced family dynamics, financial stability, and overall well-being upon their return to the Philippines. This study specifically focuses on their narrative as it provides a detailed account of the human, social, and economic implications of failed migration dreams.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework rests on major theories that explain the structural and motivational forces behind migration, the lived experiences of individuals, and the reshaping of family memory and identity. The following theoretical frameworks include: [1] Push-Pull Migration Theory, [2] Social History, and [3] Family History.

Push-Pull Migration Theory

Push-Pull Migration Theory explains the forces that compel individuals to leave their home country and the attractions that draw them abroad. This theory is foundational in migration studies and is widely attributed to Everett S. Lee (1966), who argued that migration is shaped by a combination of positive and negative factors in both origin and destination countries. *Push factors* are unfavorable conditions at the place of origin that create dissatisfaction and pressure individuals to migrate. Push factors are the negative conditions or circumstances in the place of origin that motivate individuals to leave their home area. *Pull factors*, on the other hand, are the attractive conditions or perceived advantages in the destination area that encourage migrants to move there. Pull factors are the favorable attributes of a destination that draw migrants by offering perceived benefits compared to the place of origin. Guided by this framework, the migration experiences examined in this research are understood through three interrelated forms of migration: economic migration, family-driven migration, and temporary migration.

Economic Migration - Consistent with Lee's concept of push factors, the study views migration primarily as an economic strategy. Migration, therefore, was driven by the expectation of improving household income and achieving economic security.

Family-Driven Migration - Aligned with Lee's emphasis on personal and social factors, this study recognizes migration as a family-driven decision rather than an individual choice. Decisions to migrate were shaped by family needs, obligations, and collective aspirations for upward mobility. In this framework, migration functioned as a shared family strategy to cope with economic vulnerability.

Temporary vs. Permanent Migration - Following Lee's distinction between different migration outcomes, this study situates the respondents' experiences within temporary labor migration. The intention of migrating abroad was not permanent settlement but short- to medium-term employment, with the expectation of eventual return to the Philippines. However, the study also acknowledges that migration trajectories may shift due to intervening obstacles—such as contract termination, labor abuse, or failed employment—which influence whether migration remains temporary or ends prematurely.

Overall, guided by Lee's (1966) push–pull framework, this study conceptualizes migration as a dynamic process shaped by economic pressures, family decision-making, and temporary labor arrangements, rather than a onetime or purely voluntary act.

Social History

Social history focuses on the lived experiences of ordinary people and how these reflect broader economic, cultural, and global forces. It challenges traditional history that prioritizes elites and instead foregrounds voices often excluded from official narratives. Smith (2003) calls for a deeper engagement with emotions, everyday life, and cultural meanings. In addition, Golledge (2019) further argues that social history helps illuminate how individual stories intersect with larger social processes, such as migration, labor exploitation, and global inequality. Grounded in the perspective of social history, this study highlights how the migration dreams of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are embedded in broader societal patterns rather than isolated personal choices.

Family History

Family history research underscores that migration experiences are not confined to individual life courses but are embedded in shared family memories that are constructed, transmitted, and continually revised across generations. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) concept of collective memory, this study recognizes that recollections of migration are socially framed, shaped by family relationships, community expectations, and shared identities rather than by isolated personal experiences. Karl Mannheim's (1952) generational theory further explains how these memories are interpreted differently across generations, as each cohort situates past events within its own historical and social context. As Barnwell (2015) notes, family narratives are dynamic; they evolve as social values and circumstances change, influencing which experiences are emphasized, silenced, or reinterpreted over time. A critical dimension of this process is family decision-making, as migration emerges from collective negotiations over who migrates, why the decision is made, and how risks are assessed based on economic necessity, social pressure, kinship obligations, and promises from recruitment networks.

Conceptual and Analytical Framework

The conceptual framework aims to explicate the variables of the research and the interconnectedness of the variables pertaining to the illustrated objectives of the study. Experiences of the siblings on their failed OFW dream include: [1] socio-economic factors, [2] unexpected challenges, feelings of anxiety, detachment, and decision-making process, and [3] family relationships before, during, and after migration.

Socio-Economic Factors. Socio-economic factors refer to the economic and social conditions that influence individuals' or families' decisions, opportunities, and life chances, including income, employment, education, and access to resources (Todaro & Smith, 2015). In this study, the socio-economic factors are seen as the economic conditions and social circumstances that pushed the family to pursue overseas employment, including unemployment or underemployment, low household income, debt, lack of local job opportunities, and expectations of financial mobility.

Unexpected Challenges, Feelings of Anxiety, Detachment, and Decision-Making Process. Unexpected challenges refer to unanticipated difficulties encountered during migration, while anxiety and detachment describe emotional responses such as fear, stress, loneliness, and social isolation arising from adverse migration experiences (Bhugra, 2004). Decision-making is understood as a socially embedded process shaped by family dynamics and structural constraints (Lee, 1966). In this study, the narratives of the respondents describes their experiences abroad that contradicted initial expectations, including contract violations, abuse, withheld documents, homelessness, overwork, emotional distress, and forced return.

Family Relationships. Family relationships refer to patterns of interaction, emotional bonds, roles, and responsibilities among family members, which are continuously shaped by shared experiences and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992). In this study, family relationships are applied as changes in emotional bonds, roles, expectations, and communication within the family before, during, and after migration, as narrated by the participants.

OFW Migration Experience. OFW migration refers to the temporary or long-term movement of Filipino workers abroad for employment, often shaped by global labor demand and national labor-export policies (Asis, 2006).

OFW migration experience is applied as the entire migration trajectory of the respondents, including recruitment, departure, employment abroad, encounters with labor conditions, coping strategies, and return or reintegration.

Timeline-Based Narrative Approach. A timeline-based narrative approach is a qualitative method that reconstructs lived experiences chronologically to understand how meanings and consequences unfold over time (Riessman, 2008). This approach is implemented by organizing respondents’ narratives into three chronological phases: pre-migration, during migration, and post-migration. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to present experiences as stories shaped by time, memory, and context. According to Riessman (2008), narratives reveal how individuals make meaning out of events, while Polkinghorne (1995) emphasizes the use of chronological structure to connect personal experiences to broader social and historical forces. Using a timeline-based narrative approach, the study systematically documents the respondents’ experiences before, during, and after migration, allowing the researcher to trace the progression of expectations, challenges, and exploitation. By mapping these experiences chronologically, the approach links personal stories to broader structural forces in labor migration and highlights patterns of cause and effect, continuity, and change—transforming the account from simple description into a coherent social history narrative.

Research Paradigm

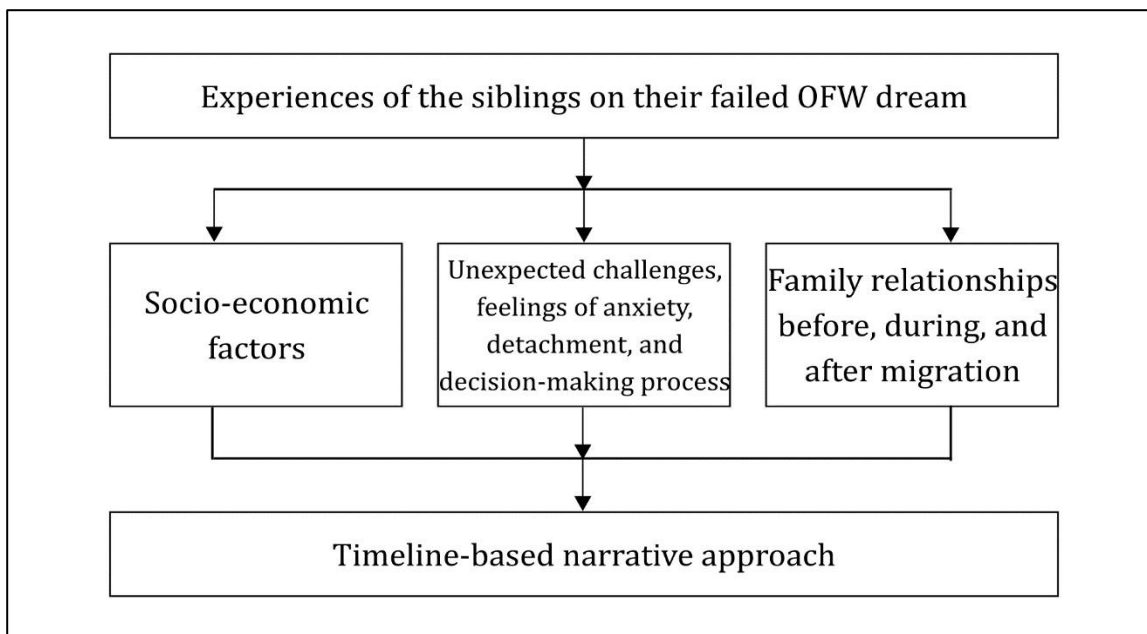


Figure 1 shows the research paradigm. As shown, the experiences of the siblings regarding their failed migration journey were systematically explored. These experiences are categorized into three major dimensions: [1] socio-economic factors that motivated their desire to work overseas, [2] unexpected challenge, feelings of anxiety, detachment, and decision-making process, and [3] shifting family relationships that were strained, reshaped, or strengthened throughout their attempts to pursue overseas employment. By shedding light on these interconnected experiences, the research aims to construct a coherent narrative of their journey and ultimately contribute to developing deeper insights into the realities of failed OFW aspirations, particularly how these personal stories reflect broader systemic issues in labor migration.

Research Objectives

This study aims to determine the narrative experiences encountered by the family on the complex realities behind the OFW dream. Specifically, it aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the socio-economic factors that pushed the family to pursue overseas employment.
2. To uncover the unexpected challenges they faced abroad that contradicted their initial expectations, feelings of anxiety, detachment, and their decision-making process.
3. To examine how the experience affected their family relationships and overall well-being upon returning home.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in narrative inquiry and oral history to explore and describe the lived narratives of the respondents regarding their experiences as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Guided by a historical method, this study sought to situate personal experiences within their temporal and social contexts, emphasizing how past events shaped family decisions, migration trajectories, and outcomes over time. Data were collected through oral history, using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The study adopted a personal narrative design, enabling an in-depth examination of individual and collective family experiences as remembered and interpreted by the participants.

Research Locale

This study was conducted at Bonfal West in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Hpilippines. The research locale for this study is Bonfal West as it is the residence of the family and serves as the primary setting of their lived experiences relevant to the research.

Research Respondents and Sampling Technique Instrument

The study involved four participants selected through purposive sampling. These included three siblings from Bonfal West, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya who personally worked overseas as OFWs, and their mother, who played a central role in migration decision-making and experienced the emotional and economic consequences of their migration. The participants were chosen because they directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation and could provide rich, first-hand narratives relevant to failed migration experiences. In addition, the respondents were immediate family members of the researcher, which enabled access to detailed, candid accounts while ensuring that participation remained voluntary and ethically grounded.

This study focused solely on the experiences of the siblings and their mother, thereby limiting its scope to their motivations for migration, the hardships they encountered abroad, and their post-migration adjustments. While this focus allowed for a clear and in-depth understanding of their unique family journey, it also meant that the findings may not be generalized to other OFW families or communities. Moreover, as the study relied on oral history and personal recollections, it is subject to inherent limitations of memory. These include selective recall, wherein participants may unintentionally emphasize certain events while omitting others; emotional filtering, where experiences are remembered and narrated through emotional responses shaped by time; and retrospective interpretation, in which past events are reinterpreted based on present understanding and circumstances. While the reliance on a single-family case limits generalizability, this study does not aim to produce statistically representative findings. Instead, it seeks analytical generalization, using an in-depth family narrative to illuminate broader structural issues in labor migration. These limitations were acknowledged throughout the research process and were addressed through careful probing during interviews, reflexive analysis, and contextualization of narratives within broader historical and social frameworks.

Research Instrument

Data were gathered through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted in November 2025. Each participant was interviewed once only in a single face-to-face session lasting approximately 30 minutes, allowing the respondents to narrate their experiences while ensuring consistency and ethical sensitivity throughout the data collection process. The interview guide was content-validated prior to data gathering by the researcher's instructor. The interview was organized into three sets of questions designed to capture the full range of the respondents' experiences as OFWs. The first part covered the socio-economic factors and personal motivations that pushed the siblings to seek employment abroad; the second part focused on the unexpected challenges, hardships, or forms of exploitation they encountered while working overseas; and the third part discussed the effects of their OFW experience upon returning home, particularly in relation to their family relationships and overall well-being.

Data Gathering Procedure

The research instrument was reviewed and validated by the researcher's instructor to ensure alignment with the study objectives and relevance to the siblings' experiences as OFWs. This process ensured that the interview questions were clear, appropriate, and adequate. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents, who were family members and voluntarily agreed to participate after being informed of the study's purpose and procedures. The semi-structured interviews were conducted once only in a single face-to-face session at an agreed time and place, with audio recording used only after consent and with ethical standards observed throughout the data collection.

Treatment of Data

This study employed a narrative inquiry design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of the siblings as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). As a qualitative approach, narrative inquiry allows the researcher to examine experience as it is lived and told, making it particularly suited for studies that seek to understand motivations, hardships, and transformations within the lives of individuals. To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was employed where possible by supporting the narrated experiences with available local records and relevant government or court documents related to labor migration and overseas employment. The primary sources of data for this study were personal recollections and family narratives shared by the respondents during the oral history interviews. These memory-based accounts served as the core empirical material for reconstructing the family's migration experiences. While these sources provided rich and firsthand insights, the study also acknowledged the subjective nature and limitations of memory, including the possibility of selective recall and retrospective interpretation. Data analysis followed a thematic narrative analysis. Transcripts were read repeatedly to identify recurring themes related to socio-economic push factors, unexpected challenges, emotional responses, decision-making processes, and changes in family relationships. Themes were organized chronologically (pre-migration, during migration, post-migration) to preserve narrative coherence and to align with the timeline-based narrative approach. Reflexive analysis was employed to mitigate researcher bias, particularly given the researcher's familial relationship with the respondents.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical standards to ensure the protection, dignity, and well-being of all participants. Prior to data collection, the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the research were clearly explained to the respondents. Their participation was obtained voluntarily, and each participant was required to read and sign an informed consent form indicating their understanding of the study, their rights as participants, and their agreement to participate under the conditions of confidentiality and ethical research practice.

Participants were assured that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by using pseudonyms or fake names for the involved persons, withholding identifying information, and securely storing all data, including audio recordings and transcripts.

The researcher exercised sensitivity when discussing potentially distressing and traumatic experiences related to overseas employment, ensuring that interviews were conducted with respect and empathy. All data gathered were used solely for academic purposes, and the interpretation of findings remained faithful to the participants' narratives, upholding their rights, privacy, and personal integrity throughout the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The researcher is a close relative of the respondents, which may present a potential conflict of interest. To uphold professionalism, objectivity, and ethical integrity in the conduct of this research, the researcher consciously distanced himself from influencing the responses and interpretation of the data. Measures were taken to minimize bias, including the use of semi-structured interview guides, strict adherence to informed consent procedures, anonymization of respondents through pseudonyms, and reflective self-awareness throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Management of Vulnerability

Given the possibility that recalling difficult or traumatic events could cause emotional strain, the researcher conducted the interviews in a calm, respectful, and non-threatening environment, ensuring that respondents felt safe, comfortable, and in control of their narratives. No incentives, monetary or otherwise, were offered, as these might have unduly influenced their decision to participate. Care was taken to avoid any form of coercion and no authority figures were involved in recruitment or interview processes.

Informed Consent

An informed consent form was waived to the respondents who voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. Prior to the data gathering procedure, they were fully informed of the purpose, scope, and processes involved before the interview. Also, the researcher verified that respondents had the right to withdraw at any point without any negative consequences. This process ensured that the siblings were fully aware of their rights, the confidentiality measures in place, and the scope of the study before choosing to share their experiences. The entire consent procedure reflected the researchers' commitment to ethical, transparent, and respectful engagement with the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Section 1. Pre-Migration Phase (To identify the socio-economic factors that pushed the family to pursue overseas employment.)

The findings reveal that the family's decision to pursue overseas employment was primarily shaped by chronic poverty, unstable income, and structural unemployment. Following the death of the family patriarch in 1992, Elena, the mother of the three siblings, became the sole breadwinner, relying on low-paid and precarious work as a manicurist. Despite supplementary livelihood efforts—such as selling school supplies and producing virgin coconut oil—the household remained economically vulnerable. These conditions exemplify structural precarity, wherein limited and insecure employment options constrain economic mobility.

The sibling's early labor experiences further illustrate this uncertainty. Ramon and Rafael engaged in menial and informal work, including domestic labor and gathering snails for sale, reflecting chronic underemployment prevalent in the Philippine labor market. Even after completing college degrees, the siblings faced prolonged joblessness or low wages, highlighting the persistent mismatch between educational attainment and available employment opportunities.

These economic pressures intersected with strong family obligations, resulting in collective decision-making regarding migration. The family's choice to sell land to finance overseas employment underscores the practice of asset liquidation and migration-induced indebtedness, reinforcing migration as a perceived survival strategy rather than an individual aspiration. Aspirations to uplift life coexisted with mounting risks, as financial and emotional investments intensified expectations of success.

Research consistently identifies poverty as the primary push factor for Filipino migration (Asis, 2017). Rodriguez (2010) argues that the Philippine government's labor export policy, which has made remittances a cornerstone of the national economy, institutionalizes this dynamic by treating migration as a development strategy rather than addressing domestic job creation. The family's collective decision to pursue migration was not merely a personal choice but a response to structural conditions that offer limited alternatives for economic mobility.

The pre-migration phase demonstrates how intertwined economic hardship, wage disparities, and familial responsibility compelled the family to view overseas employment as the most viable pathway to stability.

However, these same conditions heightened their vulnerability, as limited safeguards and depleted resources positioned the family precariously at the outset of the migration process, foreshadowing the adverse outcomes that followed.

Section 2. Migration Phase (To uncover the unexpected challenges they faced abroad that contradicted their initial expectations, feelings of anxiety, detachment, and their decision-making process)

The migration phase revealed a sharp disjuncture between the family's expectations of overseas employment and the realities they encountered abroad. While migration was pursued as a rational response to structural unemployment and low wages in the Philippines, the findings demonstrate that these attempts were shaped—and ultimately undermined—by systemic vulnerabilities embedded in the Philippine labor export regime. Government-supported labor export policies normalized migration as a development strategy, yet failed to provide adequate protection against illegal recruitment, deceptive placement practices, and labor exploitation.

Across multiple destinations—Namibia, Malaysia, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia—the siblings experienced recurring patterns of irregular deployment, document confiscation, withheld information, and unmet job promises. Ramon's relatively stable employment in Namibia initially reinforced the belief that migration could yield economic mobility, but subsequent financial betrayal upon return revealed the fragility of migrant gains. Rhea's Asia-to-Asia migration exposed how illegal recruitment operates through deception, manipulation of trust, and control over migrants' mobility, resulting in anxiety, surveillance, and undocumented status. Her repeated attempts highlight how failed migration does not end upon return but extends into prolonged indebtedness and renewed vulnerability.

Rafael's experience in Abu Dhabi further illustrates how formal documentation does not guarantee protection. Despite compliance with recruitment requirements, he encountered homelessness, food insecurity, passport confiscation, and the inability to work due to visa misclassification and contextual constraints such as Ramadan. His survival depended largely on informal Filipino support networks which highlights the absence of effective institutional safeguards.

Rhea's later experience in Dubai revealed the extreme power asymmetries faced by migrant domestic workers. Psychological abuse, excessive workload, isolation, and threats within a private household exemplified how exploitation can manifest rapidly and intensely. Her eventual escape—facilitated through fabricated emergency claims—demonstrates both the desperation and strategic agency migrants employ to reclaim autonomy under coercive conditions.

Collectively, these migration experiences generated severe financial losses, long-term indebtedness, and emotional trauma for both migrants and family members left behind. The family's narratives align with existing literature on illegal recruitment, migration indebtedness, and the commodification of migrant labor, where workers are treated as disposable economic units rather than rights-bearing individuals. Emotional distress, anxiety, hunger, and fear characterized everyday life abroad, while family members at home experienced helplessness, sleeplessness, and sustained psychological strain.

Guided by Push–Pull Migration Theory (Lee, 1966), the findings demonstrate how economic pressures, family obligations, and perceived opportunities abroad collectively shaped migration decisions. Push factors such as underemployment, low wages, and limited career prospects intersected with pull factors including higher wages, recruitment promises, and success narratives. However, the study reveals that these pull factors often rested on fragile expectations that collapsed under exploitative labor conditions.

Throughout the migration process, emotional labor played a crucial role, as family members supported one another in processing trauma, rebuilding trust, and sustaining familial cohesion in the aftermath of adversity. The concept of multidirectional care (Parreñas, 2005) provides a useful framework for understanding how the family reorganized responsibilities and relationships around migration. This multidirectional care reflects broader patterns in Filipino transnational families, where migration is a family project rather than an individual endeavor (de Dios, 2016).

Overall, the findings show that the migration phase transformed hope into uncertainty. Rather than functioning as a pathway out of poverty, migration entrenched economic insecurity and exposed the family to exploitation and legal powerlessness. The family's experience illustrates how migration, when mediated by weak regulation and illegal recruitment, becomes a mechanism that deepens vulnerability rather than alleviating it. These

outcomes reinforce the need to view migration not as an individual failure or success, but as a structurally conditioned process shaped by policy, labor markets, and unequal power relations.

Section 3. Post-Migration Phase (To examine how the experience affected their financial stability, family relationships, and overall well-being upon returning home)

The post-migration phase revealed severe reintegration challenges among the family following failed migration. All three siblings came home between 2005 and 2007 with no savings and increased debt. Financial losses included unpaid loans, emergency repatriation costs, and Ramon's loss of nearly ₱350,000 through fraud. Also, Rafael and Rhea sought justice against their illegal recruiter which resulted in a prolonged legal process (2007–2016), marked by repeated delays, logistical barriers, and emotional strain. Although, Rafael and Rhea's recruiter was eventually convicted on separate charges, the family's case was resolved through an inadequate settlement of ₱35,000—far below their total losses.

In the absence of institutional reintegration support, the family relied on informal livelihood strategies such as small-scale vending, tricycle driving, and collective household labor. Emotional recovery was shaped by experiences of stigma, verbal abuse, and discrimination, alongside coping mechanisms grounded in family solidarity, personal resilience, and religious faith. Over time, family members reframed migration failure by prioritizing togetherness, endurance, and stability over material success.

Across all family members, migration was reinterpreted as a harsh chapter that taught endurance, vigilance, and gratitude for the stability of home. This reinterpretation aligns with Opiniano's (2002) findings that many returning migrants develop critical perspectives on migration, recognizing both its potential benefits and its profound risks. But according to Uy-Tioco (2007), despite profound hardships, the family demonstrated remarkable resilience—a quality that research identifies as critical to successful reintegration. In the aftermath of adversity, family solidarity emerged as a vital coping mechanism, with collective efforts focused on rebuilding livelihoods and providing mutual emotional support.

The findings highlight how return migration, particularly following failed or irregular migration, often results in compounded financial vulnerability and limited access to effective legal remedies. Consistent with prior studies, the prolonged legal process and inadequate compensation illustrate structural weaknesses in migrant protection and justice mechanisms. The family's reliance on informal economic activities reflects broader patterns among return migrants who face limited access to formal employment and insufficient reintegration programs that emphasize entrepreneurship without addressing systemic constraints. Resilience frameworks further illuminate how the siblings drew on faith, family support, and shared meaning-making to endure hardship. This resilience emerged in spite of institutional inadequacies, reinforcing critiques of policy implementation gaps.

Beyond economic recovery, the study underscores the importance of family solidarity, resilience, and faith as critical coping mechanisms in post-migration adjustment. The redistribution of economic and caregiving roles within the household strengthened familial bonds and facilitated survival despite persistent hardship. Overall, the family's experience challenges dominant narratives of overseas migration as a guaranteed path to prosperity and instead exposes the human costs of labor export policies, illegal recruitment, and weak reintegration support systems. The findings call for more comprehensive migration governance reforms that prioritize migrant protection, accountability for recruiters, and holistic reintegration assistance.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that while migrant workers do not experience hardship uniformly, the recurring patterns evident in the siblings' narratives reveal how the pursuit of the OFW dream is deeply shaped—and often undermined—by structural socio-economic conditions. Across all accounts, economic instability and limited local employment opportunities emerged as primary push factors that compelled the siblings to seek overseas work, even in the face of uncertainty and risk. This shared motivation directly supports the conclusion that migration was not a matter of individual choice alone but a response to persistent economic constraints.

A second recurring theme involved the gap between recruitment promises and lived realities abroad. The findings consistently pointed to experiences of deceptive recruitment practices, including falsified visas, misleading job

descriptions, and unfulfilled contractual obligations. Once overseas, the siblings encountered unsafe and exploitative working conditions, such as withheld passports, excessive workloads, homelessness, and emotional or verbal abuse. These patterns across multiple cases substantiate the conclusion that the hardships they faced were systemic rather than isolated incidents.

The study further found that migration experiences had significant spillover effects on family relationships and well-being. Rafael's prolonged hunger and displacement in Abu Dhabi generated intense fear and emotional distress for their mother, while Rhea's repeated exploitation and Ramon's financial losses contributed to ongoing emotional strain and economic instability within the household. These shared outcomes reinforce the conclusion that overseas labor migration reshapes family life in ways that extend far beyond the individual worker.

Taken together, the convergence of these findings indicates that the siblings' failed migration dream was not simply the result of personal misfortune. Instead, it reflects broader structural vulnerabilities embedded in overseas employment systems, including weak labor protections, fraudulent recruitment networks, and unsafe working environments. These patterned experiences across the family underscore the urgent need for stronger migrant worker protections, transparent recruitment processes, and sustained support mechanisms for families who continue to view migration as a fragile pathway toward economic mobility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are crafted:

1. It is recommended that future studies on overseas employment and migration adopt research designs that systematically examine the availability and effectiveness of local livelihood programs, including small business support, skills training, and employment facilitation initiatives.
2. It is strongly recommended that local government units (LGUs) institutionalize comprehensive predeparture orientation policies at the local level. These policies should extend beyond procedural compliance by mandating the integration of real-life migration narratives, contract literacy, and education on recognizing indicators of abusive recruitment and employment practices. Furthermore, LGUs, in coordination with relevant national agencies, should require the use of clear, verified, and enforceable employment contracts for all migrant workers to enhance protection against deception, exploitation, and labor abuse.
3. Community-based dialogues, school-based learning modules, and family seminars are recommended to help foster critical understanding of migration realities, labor rights, and safe migration practices, particularly among youth and vulnerable households.
4. To deepen understanding of OFW migration experiences, future research may consider the following directions:
 - a. Future studies may compare the experiences of multiple OFW families across different regions or destination countries to identify similarities and differences in push-pull factors, recruitment practices, and labor conditions;
 - b. Further research is recommended on the experiences of children and families left behind by OFWs, focusing on emotional well-being, changing family roles, and long-term social impacts; and
 - c. Researchers may also explore how individual migration narratives intersect with broader issues such as unemployment, global labor demand, and systemic recruitment practices, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of labor migration dynamics.

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