

## SINGLE-HANDEDLY MOTHERING FROM A DISTANCE: AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT DISTRESSED SOLO PARENT FILIPINA MIGRANT WORKERS

### *CRIAR OS FILHOS SOZINHA À DISTÂNCIA: UMA ANÁLISE APROFUNDADA DA SITUAÇÃO DE TRABALHADORAS MIGRANTES FILIPINAS QUE SÃO MÃES SOLITÁRIAS EM SITUAÇÃO DE DESESPERO*

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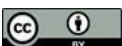
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

#### **Abstract**

This study aimed to navigate on the lived experiences of distressed solo parent Filipina migrant workers using descriptive phenomenological approach. In-depth personal narratives were captured through semi-structured interview sessions from eight purposively selected participants. The Colaizzi method of thematic analysis was utilized to systematically analyze the qualitative data, resulting in the identification of eight emergent themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of the participants. These themes are as follows: (1) The Invisible Weight of Motherhood Abroad, (2) Survival as a Daily Negotiation, (3) Torn Identities, Fragmented Selves, (4) Coping in Silence and Solidarity, (5) Judged for Leaving, Misunderstood for Staying, (6) Fragile Ties, Shifting Bonds, (7) Returning Home, But Not the Same, and (8) Body and Mind at Risk. These thematic findings reflect the complex emotional, psychological, and sociocultural challenges encountered by the participants in their transnational experiences. The study unveils the emotional, psychological, and structural burdens these women endure. It also highlights how transnational motherhood involves constant negotiation of caregiving, economic provision, and personal identity across borders. It urges a reframing of migrant motherhood, recognizing these women not just as workers but as breadwinners, caregivers, and survivors. In light of these findings, the Department of Migrant

#### **Resumo**

*Este estudo teve como objetivo explorar as experiências vividas por trabalhadoras migrantes filipinas, mães solteiras em situação de angústia, utilizando uma abordagem fenomenológica descritiva. Narrativas pessoais aprofundadas foram coletadas por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com oito participantes selecionadas propositalmente. O método de análise temática de Colaizzi foi utilizado para analisar sistematicamente os dados qualitativos, resultando na identificação de oito temas emergentes que sintetizam as experiências vividas pelas participantes. Esses temas são os seguintes: (1) O peso invisível da maternidade no exterior, (2) A sobrevivência como uma negociação diária, (3) Identidades dilaceradas, eus fragmentados, (4) Enfrentamento em silêncio e solidariedade, (5) Julgadas por partir, incompreendidas por ficar, (6) Laços frágeis, vínculos mutáveis, (7) Retornando para casa, mas não a mesma, e (8) Corpo e mente em risco. Essas descobertas temáticas refletem os complexos desafios emocionais, psicológicos e socioculturais enfrentados pelas participantes em suas experiências transnacionais. O estudo revela os fardos emocionais, psicológicos e estruturais que essas mulheres suportam. Ele também destaca como a maternidade transnacional envolve uma negociação constante entre cuidados, provisão econômica e identidade pessoal além das fronteiras. Ele insta a uma*



Workers (DMW) may implement gender-responsive policies and provide holistic support such as pre-departure education, psychosocial services abroad, and recalibrated reintegration programs. Collaboration with other government agencies such as Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), and Local Government Units (LGUs) is crucial. Recognizing and amplifying the voices of solo parent migrant workers is a moral imperative for inclusive and dignified migration governance.

**Keywords:** Solo Parent. Filipina Migrant Workers. Phenomenology.

*reformulação da maternidade migrante, reconhecendo essas mulheres não apenas como trabalhadoras, mas como provedoras, cuidadoras e sobreviventes. À luz dessas conclusões, o Departamento de Trabalhadores Migrantes (DMW) pode implementar políticas sensíveis às questões de gênero e fornecer apoio holístico, como educação pré-partida, serviços psicossociais no exterior e programas de reintegração recalibrados. A colaboração com outras agências governamentais, como a Administração de Bem-Estar dos Trabalhadores no Exterior (OWWA), o Departamento de Trabalho e Emprego (DOLE) e as Unidades do Governo Local (LGUs), é crucial. Reconhecer e amplificar as vozes dos trabalhadores migrantes que são pais solteiros é um imperativo moral para uma governança migratória inclusiva e digna.*

**Palavras-chave:** Pais Solteiros. Trabalhadoras Migrantes Filipinas. Fenomenologia.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Overseas migration serves as a vital avenue in the Philippines. One of the primary reasons of working abroad is to enhance economic well-being and secure a better future for their families. Recent data showed that of the 2.33 million registered overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in 2023, 58 percent were female workers, while the remaining percentage represented male OFWs. The phenomenon of OFWs significantly shapes the Philippine economy, with millions seeking employment abroad to address financial needs (Balita, 2024). Solo parent migrant Filipina workers, in particular, face unique challenges as they balance the responsibilities of motherhood with the demands of foreign employment. These mothers often experience profound emotional and psychological distress due to separation from their children, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of their experiences (Ballaret & Lanada, 2022). Despite the passing of Expanded Solo Parents Welfare Act (RA 11861) in the Philippines in 2022, many solo parents in the country are still not fully aware of the of its provisions (Commission on Human Rights, 2025).

The phenomenon on solo parent Filipina migrant workers directly intersects with some of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), specifically Goal 5 which is on Gender Equality, Goal 8 that pertains to Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Goal 10 focusing on Reduced Inequalities (United Nations, 2015). By highlighting the emotional, social, and economic struggles of solo parent Filipina migrant workers, the study underscores the persistent gendered burdens in labor migration and caregiving as they do dual (maternal/paternal) roles balancing the challenges of being an OFW with sole responsibility for their children. These women often accept precarious overseas employment and face difficulties managing household expenses and accumulate savings to support their families from afar and suddenly compelled to be back to the Philippines for some reasons, exposing them to vulnerabilities that contravene the ideals of equitable work environments and social protection.

Recent literature on OFWs predominantly focuses on economic contributions and general experiences, with less attention given to the specific challenges faced by solo parent Filipinas (Ballaret & Lanada, 2022). While studies acknowledge the financial motivations behind migration, they often overlook the emotional complexities and societal perceptions surrounding the distressed solo-parent Filipina migrant workers who work abroad. This gap in research underscores the importance of exploring how these distressed solo-parent Filipina migrant workers navigate their roles and the impact of their decisions on family dynamics back home.

This study aims to navigate on the lived experiences of solo parent Filipina migrant workers, focusing on the emotional, psychological, and social challenges they encounter. By investigating how these women reconcile their nurturing roles with the necessity of working abroad, the research seeks to provide insights into their coping mechanisms and the broader socio-cultural factors influencing their decisions. Furthermore, the study will explore the long-term effects of their migration on family relationships and children's well-being, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of transnational motherhood.

## **2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

1. What are the lived experiences of solo-parent Filipina Migrant Workers?

2. How do solo-parent Filipina migrant workers make sense of motherhood from a distance?

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In examining the lived experiences of distressed solo parent Filipina migrant workers, three key theories offer critical insight into the complexities of their realities: Transnational Motherhood Theory, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and Role Strain Theory.

The Transnational Motherhood Theory, conceptualized by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas in 2001, explains how mothers continue to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities even while physically separated from their children due to migration. For solo parent Filipina migrant workers, this separation is particularly emotionally taxing as they take on the dual role of being both the sole financial provider and the emotional caregiver from afar. Through the use of remittances, communication technologies, and the delegation of childcare to relatives back home, these mothers reconstruct maternal care across borders, redefining motherhood in non-traditional and deeply sacrificial ways.

Complementing this, the Feminist Standpoint Theory, as discussed by Harding in 2004 and Smith in 1987, centers the knowledge and experiences of marginalized groups, such as migrant women, as essential to understanding broader social structures. From the standpoint of solo parent Filipina migrants, often working in domestic, caregiving, or service sectors in foreign countries, their narratives reveal the gendered and class-based systems that compel them to leave their families in search of economic stability. Their insights shed light on the contradictions within state policies, societal expectations, and the global labor economy that benefit from their labor while failing to protect their emotional and familial well-being. These women navigate not only the labor demands of host countries but also the persistent emotional and social expectations of being a 'good mother' within Filipino cultural norms.

Lastly, Role Strain Theory, introduced by Goode in 1960, illustrates the internal conflict that arises when individuals are expected to fulfill multiple roles that may be incompatible.

Solo parent migrant mothers often experience role strain as they juggle their identity as overseas workers with their responsibilities as mothers.

The demands of long working hours, emotional fatigue, and the absence of physical proximity to their children contribute to feelings of guilt, stress, and helplessness. At the same time, they must maintain emotional closeness with their children, navigate long-distance parenting challenges, and sustain a household from abroad.

This overlapping of roles not only intensifies their psychological and emotional burden but also highlights the structural constraints that limit their ability to fully perform either role.

Together, these three theories provide a comprehensive framework to understand how solo parent Filipina migrant workers construct, negotiate, and often struggle within their transnational roles as mothers, workers, and women.

## **4 METHOD**

### **4.1 Research design**

This study employed a qualitative research design, grounded in Husserlian descriptive phenomenology, and guided by Colaizzi's (1978) method of thematic analysis. The descriptive phenomenological approach was used to explore and understand the lived experiences of distressed solo parent Filipina migrant workers, particularly the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of their dual roles as mothers and overseas workers, and the complex process of reintegration upon returning home. Colaizzi's method emphasizes a structured and rigorous process of analysis that begins with participants' own words and stories, enabling researchers to remain close to the essence of their lived experiences.

Following Colaizzi's seven-step process, the analysis involved extracting significant statements from the participants' narratives, formulating meanings, clustering these meanings into themes, and validating the findings with participants to ensure credibility and authenticity (Colaizzi, 1978; Sanders, 2003; Shosha, 2012). This approach was particularly well-suited for capturing the depth, nuance, and contextual richness of participants' experiences, allowing for the emergence of authentic, thematically organized insights grounded in the realities of solo parenting and labor migration.

## 4.2 Sample

Participants were purposively selected according to specific inclusion criteria to ensure the study targeted the appropriate population. The table below shows the demographic characteristics of the participants showing their civil status, number of children, country of work, occupation, years abroad, and educational attainment. Pseudonyms were used

**Table 1**

*Demographic Profile of Solo Parent Filipina Migrant Workers*

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Civil Status</i>	<i>Number of Children</i>	<i>Country of Work</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Years Abroad</i>	<i>Educational Attainment</i>
Jane	35	Separated	2	Saudi Arabia	Domestic Worker	5	High School Graduate
Angel	41	Widow	1	Hong Kong	Caregiver	8	College Level
Maria	28	Single	1	United Arab Emirates	Sales Assistant	3	College Graduate
Risa	47	Separated	3	Singapore	Domestic Worker	6	High School Graduate
Lovely	32	Single	1	Kuwait	Domestic Worker	4	Vocational Graduate
Ana	39	Separated	2	Italy	Household Worker	10	College Graduate
Flor	46	Widow	4	Canada	Caregiver	12	College Graduate
Delia	31	Single	1	Qatar	Hotel Housekeeping Staff	4	College Level

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling from various provinces in Western Visayas, focusing on individuals who had returned to the Philippines after working abroad and who had experienced the challenges of solo parenting. A total of eight solo parent Filipina migrant workers were selected based on predefined inclusion criteria that ensured relevance to the study's focus. These criteria included having raised children while working abroad and undergoing reintegration upon return. This sampling strategy ensured a rich and relevant dataset for in-depth phenomenological analysis.

### **4.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

Certain inclusion criteria were applied to ascertain that the study targeted the appropriate population. Participants included in this study had to be solo parents, meaning they were the sole caregivers and main providers for their children. In addition, they were able to have migrated abroad for work, with at least six months of overseas work experience in caregiving, domestic work, or other sectors usually associated with migrant women. Participants were compelled to have returned to the Philippines within the last five years and reside in the Western Visayas region. They had to be identified as distressed, as recognized by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), due to challenges such as economic difficulties, legal issues, medical problems, or psychosocial stress. Most importantly, participants had to voluntarily agree to participate, provide informed consent, and be available for interviews or other required data collection methods.

### **4.4 Data gathering procedure**

Data were collected through in-depth interviews utilizing a semi-structured interview guide specifically designed to elicit detailed narratives from solo parent Filipina migrant workers. This method allowed for flexibility in probing key themes while ensuring consistency across interviews. Interviews were conducted at times and locations deemed convenient and safe for each participant, in order to foster a comfortable and respectful environment that would promote openness and psychological ease. This approach was particularly important given the emotionally sensitive nature of the participants' experiences.

Prior to data collection, a formal letter of permission was submitted to the OWWA Regional Office VI to secure approval for the study and to facilitate coordination in identifying and supporting eligible participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality. Participants signed consent forms prior to the commencement

of each interview. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and used in transcripts and reporting.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, providing sufficient time for participants to share their experiences in depth while minimizing the risk of fatigue. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of data transcription and subsequent analysis. In addition to recordings, the researcher maintained detailed field notes to document non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and reflective insights that could enrich the interpretation of participants' narratives.

To ensure the rigor and adequacy of data collection, the study adopted the data saturation model proposed by Yang et al. (2022). This model offered a systematic framework for determining the point at which additional data no longer yielded new insights or themes relevant to the research questions, thereby confirming the sufficiency and depth of the collected data.

#### **4.5 Research instruments**

A two-part data collection tool aimed to explore the "lived realities" of distressed solo parent Filipina migrant workers is the primary research instruments in this study. In order to allow the researchers to delve deeper into emerging issues and areas of interest that arose spontaneously during the interviews, the semi-structured presentation of the interview guide provided flexibility. This approach was designed to capture the rich, nuanced narratives of solo parent Filipina migrant workers, offering a comprehensive understanding of their reintegration experiences, coping mechanisms, and the complex realities they faced in balancing motherhood and migration.

A demographic questionnaire is the first part, which gathered essential background information such as age, gender, country of deployment, length of stay abroad, type of employment, reason for repatriation, and the current living situation. This data provided background for the participants' lived experiences and facilitated identify patterns that influenced their reintegration process.

A semi-structured interview guide comprised the second part of the instrument. This part allowed for an in-depth exploration of the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of the distressed solo parent Filipina migrant workers' experiences. It included

open-ended questions that focused on key areas such as their migration journey and the decision to work abroad, as well as the working conditions they faced while overseas. It also explored the circumstances surrounding their return to the Philippines, with particular attention to their psychological and emotional well-being after repatriation. The guide addressed the challenges encountered during reintegration, such as economic difficulties, adjustments to family dynamics, and re-entry into their communities. It also examined the coping strategies these women employed to manage their distress and fulfill their maternal roles, despite the challenges of being physically separated from their children. Lastly, the interview guide explored the sources of support available to participants, including family, community networks, and social services.

#### **4.6 Data analyses**

Data analysis in this study followed Colaizzi's (1978) method of descriptive phenomenological analysis, a systematic approach designed to uncover the essential structure of lived experiences. This method was particularly appropriate for examining the emotional, psychological, and social realities of solo parent Filipina migrant workers, as it preserved the richness and depth of participants' personal narratives while ensuring analytical rigor. The process began with repeated and immersive readings of all interview transcripts to acquire a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative. In the second step, significant statements specifically those directly related to the phenomenon of being a distressed solo parent migrant worker which were identified and extracted. These statements formed the foundation for further analysis.

Next, the researchers formulated meanings from these significant statements. Care was taken to remain faithful to the participants' intended meanings while abstracting the underlying psychological and emotional content of their narratives. These formulated meanings were then clustered into themes, reflecting common patterns and essential experiences shared across interviews. This thematic clustering allowed for the identification of core experiential categories, such as emotional distress, maternal separation, reintegration struggles, and coping strategies.

Following this, an exhaustive description of the phenomenon was constructed. This narrative synthesis integrated all thematic clusters into a comprehensive and

coherent portrayal of the lived experiences of the participants. The next step involved refining this exhaustive description into a concise statement of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, capturing the essence of what it means to be a distressed solo parent Filipina migrant worker returning home. To ensure credibility and validity, the final step involved triangulation. Participants were invited to review the findings and verify whether the thematic interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. This process not only confirmed the trustworthiness of the results but also honored the participants' voices by including them in the validation of the study's conclusions.

By rigorously applying Colaizzi's phenomenological method, the study generated a rich, context-sensitive, and thematically grounded understanding of the complex realities faced by solo parent Filipina migrant workers. This approach ensured that the findings remained deeply rooted in the participants own lived experiences.

## **5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study involving solo parent Filipina migrant workers. A formal request was submitted to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) Regional Office VI to obtain permission for conducting interviews with participants. Prior to participation, each solo parent migrant worker was provided with an informed consent form, ensuring they fully understood the purpose, procedures, and potential risks of the study. Special attention was given to ensuring that the participants, who shared sensitive and deeply personal experiences, felt comfortable and well-informed about their involvement. Confidentiality and privacy were prioritized throughout the study. All identifying information was securely stored and kept anonymous, with measures in place to protect the identities and personal details of the participants. For example, pseudonyms were used in all written reports and publications. Any data shared with OWWA or other stakeholders were stripped of identifiers to ensure participants' privacy. These precautions were vital in creating a safe and respectful environment for the solo parent migrant workers, allowing them to share their personal and emotional experiences freely, without fear of judgment or repercussions.

By prioritizing ethical standards, the study aimed to build trust with participants and facilitate an open dialogue about the challenges they faced as solo parents navigating

the complexities of migration. The ethical framework ensured that the study not only protected participants but also respected their dignity and personal narratives, encouraging honesty and transparency in the sharing of their experiences.

## 6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 2**

*Results and discussion*

<b>Major Themes</b>	<b>Narratives</b>	<b>Interpretive Meaning</b>
<b>1. The Invisible Weight of Motherhood Abroad</b>	<p><i>"Biskan wala ko sa ila adlaw-adlaw, ang kabug-aton sang responsibilidad nagapabilin sa akon dughan."</i> "Even though I'm not with them daily, the weight of responsibility remains heavy in my heart."</p> <p><i>"Ginasakripisyo ko ang akon kaugalingon para sa kabuhi sang akon mga bata."</i></p> <p>"I sacrifice myself for the life of my children."</p> <p><i>"Ang pagbiya ko sa balay, indi lang isa ka desisyon kundi isa ka kabug-aton nga wala nakikita."</i></p> <p>"Leaving home is not just a decision but an unseen burden."</p>	Migrant solo mothers carry deep emotional wounds, often masked by strength, intensified by distance.
<b>2. Survival as a Daily Negotiation</b>	<p><i>"Kada adlaw, naga-istorya ako sa akon kaugalingon nga kaya ko ini."</i> "Every day, I tell myself that I can do this."</p> <p><i>"Ang trabaho diri indi lang para sa kwarta kundi para sa pagpadayon sang pamilya."</i></p> <p>"The work here is not just for money but for the family's survival."</p> <p><i>"Kinahanglan ko magpakatatag bisan may kalipay kag kasakit."</i></p> <p>"I need to be strong despite the joys and pains."</p>	Economic pressure compels mothers to endure exploitative conditions, prioritizing family over self.
<b>3. Torn Identities, Fragmented Selves</b>	<p><i>"Daw wala ako sa lugar diri kag wala man ako sa lugar didto sa Pilipinas."</i></p> <p>"I feel I belong neither here nor back home in the Philippines."</p> <p><i>"Ginabahin ang akon kalag sa duha ka lugar."</i></p> <p>"My soul is split between two places."</p>	Migrants experience an identity fracture, constantly navigating between caregiving and labor roles.

	<p><i>"Isa ako ka OFW, pero isa man ako ka nanay nga nagahandom sang presensya sa pamilya."</i></p> <p>"I am an OFW, but also a mother who longs to be present with her family."</p>	
<b>4. Coping in Silence and Solidarity</b>	<p><i>"Indi ko gusto magpamalibad sa mga problema, ginahalinan ko lang sang hilum."</i></p> <p>"I don't want to complain about problems; I just keep silent."</p> <p><i>"Ang pag-istorya sa iban nga mga OFW nagahatag sang paglaum kag pamatyag nga indi ako nagaisahanon."</i></p> <p>"Talking to other OFWs gives me hope and the feeling that I'm not alone."</p> <p><i>"Sa likod sang akong kahilum, may kusog nga naga-atubang sang tanan."</i></p> <p>"Behind my silence, there is strength facing everything."</p>	Resilience is built through shared stories, spiritual rituals, and community among fellow migrant women.
<b>5. Judged for Leaving, Misunderstood for Staying</b>	<p><i>"Ginasaway ako nga naghaling ko, pero indi nila makita ang sakripisyo ko."</i></p> <p>"I am criticized for leaving, but they don't see my sacrifices."</p> <p><i>"Kun ara ako diri, daw indi ako nanay; kun ara ako didto, daw indi ako nagasuporta."</i></p> <p>"If I am here, they say I'm not a mother; if I am there, they say I don't support them."</p> <p><i>"Ginapamatian ko lang ang mga pulong, pero indi ako naga-untat sa pagpangabudlay."</i></p> <p>"I just listen to the words, but I don't stop working hard."</p>	Society often vilifies migrant solo mothers, failing to see the love and necessity behind their decisions.
<b>6. Fragile Ties, Shifting Bonds</b>	<p><i>"Daw nagalutaw ang amon relasyon tungod sa kalayo."</i></p> <p>"Our relationship feels like it's drifting because of the distance."</p> <p><i>"May mga adlaw nga daw indi na kami pareho sang una."</i></p> <p>"There are days when we no longer feel the same as before."</p> <p><i>"Nagakambyo ang amon pag-intindihanay kag komunikasyon."</i></p>	Emotional bonds suffer under prolonged separation, creating identity crises in maternal roles.

	"Our understanding and communication keep changing."	
<b>7. Returning Home, But Not the Same</b>	<p><i>"Pag-abot ko sa balay, daw indi na ako pareho sang una."</i></p> <p>"When I returned home, I was no longer the same as before."</p> <p><i>"May mga bag-o nga problema nga wala ko naatubang samtang ara ako sa abroad."</i></p> <p>"There are new problems I didn't face while I was abroad."</p> <p><i>"Gusto ko magbag-o pero daw indi magpati ang iban sa akon."</i></p> <p>"I want to change but others don't seem to believe me."</p>	Coming back doesn't mean restoration, Filipina migrant solo mothers face new emotional and social displacements upon return.
<b>8. Body and Mind at Risk</b>	<p><i>"Ginpangabudlayan ko ang lawas ko para sa pamilya, pero may bayad ang tanan."</i></p> <p>"I worked my body hard for my family, but everything has a cost."</p> <p><i>"May mga adlaw nga daw indi na kaya sang ulo ko ang problema."</i></p> <p>"There are days when my mind can no longer handle the problems."</p> <p><i>"Nagapangatubang ako sang depresyon kag kahadlok sa kalayo sang pamilya."</i></p> <p>"I face depression and fear because of the distance from my family."</p>	Health deteriorates due to chronic overwork, emotional suppression, and lack of medical/psychosocial care.

### 6.1 The invisible weight of motherhood abroad

Participants articulated a pervasive emotional burden as they mothered from afar - an "invisible weight" that remained constant despite physical distance from their children. This emotional strain manifested as chronic guilt, sadness, and a persistent longing to fulfill maternal duties, which migration had rendered complex and emotionally fragmented. Their narratives reflected the internal conflict between economic necessity and maternal instinct, a dilemma that compelled them to work overseas while carrying

the psychological costs of separation. This experience of transnational motherhood aligns with Parreñas et al. (2021), who documented how Filipino migrant mothers often experience profound emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and a sense of parental inadequacy, stemming from their inability to physically care for their children on a daily basis. The maternal role, traditionally defined through proximity and caregiving, becomes abstract and emotionally taxing when filtered through the realities of labor migration.

Furthermore, the emotional burden carried by these mothers is shaped not only by the physical absence but also by socio-cultural expectations in the Philippines, where motherhood is deeply tied to sacrifice and caregiving presence. As they fulfill the economic role of provider, these solo parent migrant workers are caught in a cycle of self-reproach and emotional fatigue, exacerbated by societal perceptions that equate physical absence with maternal neglect. Research by Hochschild (2000) and Yeates (2016) highlights how transnational mothers in global care chains navigate competing roles and expectations, often internalizing blame for family disruptions despite their economic contributions. This emotional toll is further intensified by the limited emotional outlets available to migrant workers, many of whom silently endure their distress in foreign settings where mental health services are often inaccessible or stigmatized (Straiton et al., 2017). Thus, the emotional burden of transnational motherhood is not merely a byproduct of separation but a deeply embedded psychosocial phenomenon shaped by gender, labor, and cultural constructs.

## **6.2 Survival as a daily negotiation**

Solo parent Filipina migrant workers navigate their daily lives through continuous emotional and economic negotiation, shaped by the competing demands of their multiple roles. As primary breadwinners, they shoulder the economic responsibility of supporting their families back home while simultaneously confronting the emotional toll of physical separation from their children. This dual burden is often intensified by the absence of co-parental support, forcing these women to fulfill both maternal and paternal roles from a distance. Their labor migration is typically rooted in economic necessity, yet it requires a psychological compromise: enduring the pain of separation in exchange for financial

stability. This tension between the role of provider and nurturer which generates internal conflict and emotional exhaustion. It also reveals how the migration process, particularly for solo parents, is not just a logistical undertaking but a deeply affective journey characterized by ongoing self-negotiation, emotional regulation, and survival-oriented decision-making.

This lived experience is consistent with findings from Straiton et al. (2017), who highlight that Filipina immigrants, particularly those in precarious labor situations, often rely on personal resilience and informal social networks to cope with distress. Rather than accessing formal mental health services which are frequently inaccessible due to financial, linguistic, or cultural barriers these women depend on peer solidarity, prayer, and inner strength to endure the psychosocial impacts of migration. The invisibility of their emotional labor is further compounded by systemic factors, such as limited worker protections and stigmatized mental health discourse, which constrain their ability to seek institutional support. The normalization of silent suffering among migrant women reflects broader gendered dynamics in global labor migration, where women's emotional labor is undervalued even as their remittances sustain national economies. Thus, survival for solo parent migrant workers is not merely about enduring physical labor, but about emotionally negotiating the complex intersections of family, identity, and transnational life.

This non-traditional form of parenthood aligns to Parreñas' Transnational Motherhood Theory (2001). It shows how distressed solo-parent Filipina migrant workers juggle both maternal and paternal roles across borders despite being physically away. This set up reshapes parenthood, where caregiving is redefined from being physically present to emotional and financial support despite them having to struggle with the transnational life on a daily basis.

### **6.3 Torn identities, fragmented selves**

Participants vividly depicted their experiences as living between worlds, where identity felt perpetually fragmented and disjointed, a phenomenon characteristic of transnational motherhood. Their sense of self was neither fully rooted in their homeland nor entirely assimilated in the host country, creating a persistent emotional dissonance.

This aligns with the concept of the global care chain, which theorizes how the labor of caregiving is transferred across national and emotional borders, commodifying women's nurturing capacities and placing them in positions of emotional displacement (Hochschild, 2000). The structural demands of transnational labor often compel migrant women to reassign their roles as a mother, a worker, and a provider, across geographic spaces, resulting in a ruptured identity landscape that is difficult to reconcile.

The consequences of such fragmented identity are profound and multilayered. Yeates (2016) further articulates that women migrant workers from developing countries endure not only economic hardship but also a deep emotional fragmentation as they attempt to maintain familial bonds from afar while adapting to new social environments. In this light, the solo parent Filipina migrant workers in this study experience identity as a fluid, unstable construct wherein one continually renegotiated and seldom consolidated. The resultant internal tension underscores the psychosocial vulnerability inherent in transnational caregiving labor, emphasizing that return migration or reunification does not automatically restore a coherent identity; rather, it may initiate yet another phase of psychological adjustment and identity restructuring.

As Feminist Standpoint theory argues that women like other marginalized groups, possess unique perspectives shaped by their lived experiences (Harding, 2004). The standpoint of distressed solo-parent Filipina migrant workers reveals how gender, migration, and social expectations interplay in their unique struggles in parenthood at a distance, facing social stigma, and enduring gendered labor conditions abroad. Hence, this research centers on their voices of survival and resilience, as their lived experiences be challenging the discourse on the structural inequalities in global migration as well as discussions on the ideal motherhood as presence-bound. Policies must be informed by this standpoint to address the unique needs of the OFW solo parents, which sometimes are resulted by systematic barriers.

#### **6.4 Coping in silence and solidarity**

Participants' narratives revealed a predominant reliance on silent endurance and grassroots solidarity as powerful strategies for coping and notably, an avoidance of formal mental health services. This pattern is consistent with findings by Straiton, Ledesma, and

Donnelly (2017), who documented how Filipina immigrants, confronted by economic pressures and emotional distress, draw on inner resilience and extend informal support networks which are often centered around faith, community, and shared cultural values rather than seeking professional psychological assistance. The stigma associated with mental health, combined with barriers like cost, language, and accessibility, reinforces the preference for culturally congruent support within one's own social circle.

This informal resilience framework fosters both psychological survival and communal cohesion. Religious practice, shared narratives, and conversational solidarity among peers serve as adaptive mechanisms that sustain emotional wellbeing in absence of institutional structures. Importantly, these coping strategies are not passive and they represent active emotional labor, performed collectively and silently, as women uphold both their own and their families' psychosocial stability. Such dynamics highlight an urgent need for context-sensitive mental health interventions that integrate community-based, culturally appropriate modalities, recognizing that silence in this context is not resignation but resilience born of necessity.

### **6.5 Judged for leaving, misunderstood for staying**

Participants expressed that they often face criticism and misunderstanding regardless of their circumstances which is a dynamic that intensifies emotional burden. When they migrate, they are labeled as abandoning their families; when they remain at home, they are criticized for not doing enough. This aligns with Parreñas et al. (2021), who found through a scoping review that transnational mothers frequently internalize guilt and navigate societal judgment related to their migration choices. These emotional conflicts are not only personal but embedded in broader societal expectations of maternal sacrifice and presence, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy even when women make such difficult decisions for economic survival.

In many Filipino communities where motherhood is equated with physical presence and care, these judgmental narratives trigger deep psychosocial stress. Migrant mothers shoulder the nearly impossible task of reconciling their role as providers with societal norms of caregiving. This duality fosters a perpetual tension between duty and identity, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and emotional distress. Over time, the

weight of external judgment can erode self-worth and amplify internal conflict, illustrating the need for more compassionate and context-sensitive support systems that recognize the complexity of transnational motherhood.

### **6.6 Fragile ties, shifting bonds**

Several participants emphasized that prolonged separation from family disrupts the emotional fabric of relationships, rendering familial bonds fragile and shifting. Participants described that being away altered the dynamics of parent-child and spousal relationships, often creating emotional distance that proved hard to bridge upon reunification. Reintegration studies among OFW families, such as Cinco and Silvestre (2018), reveal that extended absences lead to tensions and altered family roles, illustrating how reintegration is not automatic but requires emotional readjustment and role negotiation.

Return migration introduces its own set of relational challenges, restoring emotional closeness may take time, patience, and sustained effort, underlining that migration's impact extends beyond physical separation to include long-term shifts in family systems and relational trust.

### **6.7 Returning home, but not the same**

Participants mentioned that their return migration does not simply represent a return to the previous circumstances. Participants described homecoming as emotionally disorienting, familiar landscapes felt unfamiliar, and their own sense of identity had become estranged. Research on Filipino nurse returnees captured this phenomenon, revealing that returning individuals often feel socially disconnected and cognitively disoriented, as if they no longer fully belong in either the host or home country (Cortez et al., 2016).

This dislocation derives from profound personal transformation: work abroad often instills new perspectives, skills, and expectations that clash with local norms. The transition back to home life can feel regressive or constraining. Without supportive reintegration programs and societal acknowledgment of these personal shifts, returnees

may grapple with alienation and uncertainty, which can hinder both personal adjustment and social reintegration.

### **6.8 Body and mind at risk**

Several participants revealed that their overall wellbeing is at risk. The bodily and psychological health of solo parent migrant workers is frequently compromised due to the combined stressors of labor migration and caregiving responsibilities. Participants reported physical exhaustion from long hours and emotionally draining work; others face persistent anxiety and depressive symptoms. Empirical data on mental health among Filipina migrant workers confirms that separation, loneliness, and workplace stress significantly heighten the risk of mental health disorders (OFW Jobs, 2025).

Moreover, access to healthcare particularly mental health services is highly constrained. Many OFWs resort to self-care or informal support due to barriers such as stigma, cost, and limited availability of culturally sensitive services (OFW Jobs, 2025). This structural insufficiency prolongs suffering and leaves many coping in silence. The compounded impact of physical and psychological risk elevates the urgency for systemic, holistic interventions that are accessible and culturally attuned to the needs of returnee caregivers.

The psychological and emotional costs of juggling multiple and conflicting roles expectations of distressed solo-parent Filipina migrant workers causing them different kinds of stress is best explained by the Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960). These mothers simultaneously carry the role of being the breadwinner, nurturer, and caregiver-from-a-distance, which leads to role overload and emotional strain. The silent coping of these mothers and emotional distress caused by the role conflict and role ambiguity is something to be given attention.

## **7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study lays bare the often-invisible emotional, psychological, and structural burdens carried by distressed solo parent Filipina migrant workers who mother from afar. Their stories reflect not just personal sacrifice but systemic neglect where caregiving,

economic provision, and identity are constantly negotiated across borders. The persistent emotional toll of physical separation from their children, compounded by financial pressure, social stigma, and fractured maternal bonds, underscores the urgent need to reframe how we view and support transnational motherhood. These women are not merely workers, they are also mothers, breadwinners, and survivors navigating hostile labor landscapes with quiet resilience.

Provisions of policies like the Expanded Solo Parents Welfare Act (RA 11861) must be equally accessed by distressed solo-parent Filipina migrant workers. Further, policies on support systems, counselling services, welfare mechanisms, and reintegration programs shall be strengthened.

The Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), in charge of the welfare of the Filipino Migrant Workers, must take a more proactive and compassionate support role. It is imperative to develop comprehensive, gender-responsive programs that specifically address the needs of solo parent migrant workers from enhanced pre-departure orientation and psychosocial support abroad, to trauma-informed reintegration services at home. Collaboration with OWWA, DOLE, and local government units should be strengthened to ensure seamless delivery of welfare, legal, and livelihood support. Most importantly, policies must recognize solo parent migrant workers as a distinct and vulnerable demographic, deserving of targeted protection, representation, and dignity. Elevating their voices in policymaking is not just an act of service, it is a moral imperative for a nation that prides itself on the strength of its migrant workforce.

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**Authors' Contribution**

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

**Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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