

PRECARITY AND IMPROVISATION:
CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN FILIPINO LABOUR MIGRATION

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ABSTRACT

Migration is a dominant economic strategy in the Philippines, but migrants often struggle to overcome challenges and achieve the success that they hope for. Although much has been written about the precarity of migrant labour in the global economy, the struggles that migrants go through to access, maintain, and benefit from migrant labour has been less frequently explored. In the Philippines, the government's active role in facilitating labour outmigration means that migration is legitimised but also regulated, where migration is actively encouraged but potential migrants must meet multiple criteria and demands to access overseas opportunities. The purpose of this article is to explore the difficulties that Filipino migrants face when trying to access, maintain and benefit from labour migration. As part of my fieldwork in Mindanao, the Philippines, I conducted life-narrative interviews with Filipinos who had worked overseas. In this article, I explore the migration process for two migrants and their families in the Philippines. The challenges that they have faced demonstrate where the moments of exclusion from the official migration process demand individual, improvised strategies to enter or re-enter the migrant labour structures. I argue that the ease and normality of migrants' detachments from official migrant narratives demonstrate the precarity of Filipino migrants and their often-tenuous hold to the promise of successful labour migration.

Keywords: the Philippines; labour migration; precarity; precarious labour

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, both official and popular understandings of migration portray it as lucrative, accessible, heroic, and desirable (Agbola and Acupan 2010; Barber 2008; Masselink and Lee 2013; Oh 2016; Tyner 2004). Competing narratives highlight the dangers of migration, particularly irregular migration and

women's migration, but reinforce the government's emphasis on legal migration without offering an alternative for those unable to access official programs. At the same time, migration both draws on and contradicts deeply held values about family unity and interdependence. Family members are pushed to sacrifice for the sake of the family by engaging in migration and sending remittances, at the expense of being present with the family. Migrants, migrant mothers in particular, have also been blamed for causing social problems by abandoning their families (Cruz 2012; Yu 2015, 53). These competing narratives demand improvisation to inhabit the migrant identity with its inherent contradictions. Further, the gaps in the migration pathway to success demand improvised strategies to survive and succeed as migrants and providers.

This article is based on the research I conducted in the Philippines from December 2015 to May 2016. I spent five months living in Eastern Mindanao, and part of my fieldwork involved working with former migrants and migrant support agencies (both government and NGO).² This article is based on life-narrative interviews with former migrants Anthony (and his wife Sharon), and Hannah. Here I present their stories as complete narratives in order to give a deeper understanding of the multiple factors which facilitate and constrain migration processes. These stories have been selected as examples of 'successful' migration, and their journeys are also compared to other participants who have been less successful.

MIGRATION NARRATIVES

Migration is central to many cultural narratives about success and the life course in the Philippines, and the plan and desire to travel for work is assumed without needing to be rationalised (Nititham 2011; Ronquillo *et al.* 2011, 263). The government continues to depict migrant labourers as heroes who sacrificially offer their lives and their labour, including emotional labour of absence and endurance, for the sake of the family and the nation (Bautista 2015; BFFI 2017; Bordadora 2011). This political framing has been widely adopted into popular and private use. Indeed, migrants are heroes not only to their own families, but to the Philippines as a nation whose economy relies on the remittances for income and for taxes (Barber 2008; PSA 2017). Overseas employment and sending remittances are not only about economic capital but cultural capital for the migrant as well as their family at home (Nititham 2011; Barber 2013; Bautista 2015). Migration is a celebrated sacrifice, but also duty and marker of Filipino identity and value.

Local mythologies, both official and unofficial, regarding migration and the

appeal of foreign affluence have a significant impact on migration practices. The effects of remittances are often highly visible, particularly in close communities and family groups (Yu 2015, 53). The mythology of prosperous migrant families is powerful and pervasive, and reinforced by informal and official social processes. This narrative is a significant part of the Philippine perspective on the global, centred on the wealth of many overseas countries, and migration as a way to access it; the power of these ‘imagination’ in local society goes far beyond the experiences of people who actually migrate (Bal and Willems 2014, 254). Narratives about Filipinos in the global world, although often hopeful, also suggest a hegemonic power to move people to enact these stories. Successful migration as a form of local cultural status, however, is often contradictory to the position that migrants occupy in their overseas work.

Every year, the government’s migrant support agencies hold a national contest to choose between regional winners to represent the face of Philippine migration. The contest is widely publicised, and the contestants’ stories are told in the media. In this way, many successful migrants’ stories are widely shared and held up as ideals. Anthony, his wife Sharon and their family live in Mindanao, and in recent years they won the title of the ‘Ideal Migrant Family’ for their region. Their story is part of the official narrative on migration as a path to success.

For other participants, their migration or attempted migration was less linear and reflects a wider range of outcomes that migrants face. The dominant narrative presents migration as a linear path to success, from preparation, departure, arrival, work, and heroic return. However, in exploring each step of this process, my participants’ stories revealed the multiple ways that people can begin to access migration but experience challenges that interrupt or end their attempts to succeed as migrant labourers.

MIGRATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippine government initially promoted migration as a temporary solution to economic crisis, but it has carried on beyond the original intentions. Since the 1974 Labor Code to develop contract labour migration, government policy makers promoted labour migration as a temporary strategy to alleviate poverty and bring wealth into the country (Agbola and Acupan 2010, 388; Ronquillo *et al.* 2011). Since then, this strategy has been adopted into a so-called ‘culture of migration’, and remittances have reached a level that now sustains the national economy at over 30 billion USD/year and ten per cent of the GDP (Banko Central ng Pilipinas 2018; Oh 2016, 202). Since the 1970s, over eight million migrants have gone through government training programs, and 85–95%

of migrants are recruited directly by government agencies (IOM 2013, 4–5). In recent years, over 2.3 million labour migrants depart from the Philippines annually, a slight majority being women, and the vast majority are temporary labour migrants (PSA 2016, 2018; Tyner 2009; Yu 2015, 47).³ The largest group are labourers and unskilled workers, and the largest single occupation is domestic workers (IOM 2013, 4; PSA 2018). Over ten per cent of Filipinos now reside overseas, and approximately ten per cent of these are irregular migrants (IOM 2013, 55).

The first step in migration is to meet the demands to qualify for legal migration under official programs. There are strict requirements about migration and who may or may not migrate for work under official schemes. Under Philippine law for safeguarding migrants' welfare, potential labour migrants must have a local agent secure an offer of work before they will be permitted to depart (Renshaw 2016; Oh 2016); see Figure 1 for examples of the abundant advertising for migration agents. Agents can complicate the migration process as well as adding costs, but can also offer security – if they comply with the requirements to register with official agencies and secure migrants' insurance. Legal migrants must go through the Overseas Workers' Welfare Association (OWWA) programs, paying for transport and membership, before securing a job offer prior to leaving. Official programs protect migrants' welfare through compulsory health insurance, verification of contracts, and compensation and support in case of deceit, exploitation, contract infringements or abuse. Female domestic workers under age twenty-three, workers over forty-five in most cases, and those without proper medical certification as fit to work or those without an approved job offer through an officially recognised agent, are not permitted to travel for work (Oishi 2017, 37).

Accessing migration depended upon the ability to meet the costs and requirements to begin the process. For many prospective migrants, their journey begins and ends when they find that seeking migration is out of reach. Rosa, another of my participants who was not a migrant, struggled to make ends meet and provide for her children. She articulated the perspective of those who saw migration promoted heavily around them as a path to success but could not access it: 'It's been my ambition to go overseas. Even if I were just a domestic helper there. But how can I, when it is so cumbersome. You will not be able to go there just like that – there are so many requirements.'

Despite the Philippines' protections for official migrants, once overseas, migrants are dependent upon local laws, policies and attitudes to determine their options for work, success, and access to legal protection. This dependency is



Figure 1. Migration agents' advertisements – 'Good life awaits you'

exacerbated by the positioning and marketing of Filipino labour within the global market. Available work options have frequently been based on racialised conceptions of gender, such as domestic work and caregiving for Filipinas, and low-level manual labour for Filipino men (Barber 2008; Bernardo, Daganzo, and Ocampo 2016; Lindio-McGovern 2003; Lopez 2012). Even trained Filipino medical professionals in the Middle East and the Western world have generally been relegated to lower-paid, lower-status roles with little opportunity to advance (Ball 2004; Barber 2008; Choi and Lyons 2012; Ronquillo et al. 2011). My participants who had worked overseas as domestic workers, for example, included several with highly skilled work experiences and university qualifications from the Philippines.

Research with Filipino labour migrants overseas has revealed that degrees of control, abuse, and exploitation are ubiquitous, particularly for unskilled workers (Choi and Lyons 2012; Constable 2003; 2006; Huang and Yeoh 2007; S. McKay 2007; van der Ham et al. 2014). The generally low status of Filipino migrant workers, and frequent lack of legal protections for temporary workers, have contributed to incidences of exploitation, unsafe conditions, unfair or unpaid wages, and abuse (Ball 2004; Bernardo, Daganzo, and Ocampo 2016; Briones 2009a; Guevarra 2006; Oishi 2017; Parreñas 2017; Piper 2004; PSA 2016; van Schendel, Lyons, and Ford 2012). In this article, I explore interruptions to successful migrant journeys. However, other migrants have had their journeys interrupted or ended in more drastic ways. Several of my participants who had travelled overseas for labour migration ended their work by fleeing from their employers' non-payment and abuse, and as irregular migrants became at risk both from the lack of employment and from the state.

PRECARITY

Migrant labour has been identified as perhaps the most precarious within the global workforce. Liu (2015), Lindio-McGovern (2003, 2004) and others have cited Filipino domestic workers, located in invisible and subservient positions, and often situated along macro-level lines of inequality in terms of gender, colour, and nationality, as particularly embodying the pain of global inequality (Ayalon 2009; Constable 2003, 2009). Many researchers have commented on the multiple financial, emotional, social, cultural, physical, and political costs to Filipinos seeking work overseas (Ayalon 2009; Lindio-McGovern 2004; Parreñas 2011, 2017; D. McKay 2007). Researchers have argued that in the global system, migrants and their experiences are pivotal in making sense of 'precarity and the process of precarisation' (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017; Henneby 2014; Jørgensen 2016, 2; Paret and Gleeson 2016; Schierup, Ålund,

and Likić-Brborić 2015; Strauss and McGrath 2017).

Precarity indicates the way that risk is socially created, and that people in society have unequal access to security in multiple aspects of life (Butler 2012; Casas-Cortés 2014; Cooper 2016; During 2015). In particular, the idea of precarious labour has emerged to highlight the unequal experiences of both financial stability and levels of danger that work may entail (Campbell and Price 2016; Jørgensen 2016; Ofreneo 2013; Standing 2011). Butler (2012, 148) pointed out that governments manage society according to an often unspoken but dominant understanding of ‘whose life is grievable and worth protecting’. The disparity between the rights of citizens and migrant labourers highlights this aspect of precarity. At the same time, the neoliberal focus on the individual ‘designates such populations as accountable for their own precarious position, or their accelerated experience of precaritization’ (Butler 2015). In the Philippines this ‘responsibilization’ is evident in the government’s approaches to the risks migrants face (Butler 2014). The focus is primarily on the individual’s duty to pursue legal migration through government programs and insurances, with the implicit message that those who migrate outside of these are deserving of any bad conditions they face as they have chosen these risks. Precarity is appropriate in considering the ways that the Philippines, and specifically Filipino labour, is positioned in the global economy as temporary, often unprotected by law, and subject to disproportionate risks both physically and financially (Guevarra 2010; Piper 2010; Tigno 2014).

The Philippines’ dependence on remittances, widespread poverty, and lack of opportunities mean that migration is often considered the main option for finding work. The Philippines’ employment conditions have become increasingly precarious, where work is highly insecure, variable and low-paid (Bitonio 2008, 26; Edralin 2016; Hutchison 2016, 188; Ofreneo 2013; Sale and Sale 2014, 344). The local labour situation feeds the flow of migrants who do not have access to local jobs, and as the numbers of migrant workers have increased, the domestic labour market growth has declined (Agbola and Acupan 2010, 388). While unemployment remains high, employers have also reported shortages of skilled workers (Barber 2008, 1279). Migration and migrant labour are also sites where power relationships are acutely felt, and labour migrants have often found that they had few rights in their overseas employment (Briones 2009b; Parreñas 2017). Filipinos seeking work have faced the choice between precarious options both at home and abroad as migrant workers.

The continued incidence of irregular migration highlights the improvised strategies migrants pursue in choosing between precarious options. The com-

plete lack of legal status overseas, however, multiplies their precarity and forces individual and improvised strategies in times of unemployment, abuse, or crisis. One of my participants worked successfully for two years as an irregular migrant, before being caught by immigration officials. As an irregular migrant, she stayed another two years in jail before the Philippine government took responsibility for the costs to return her home.

Anthony's family and Hannah's family pursued labour migration as paths toward financial security. Both had positive, legal migration experiences, but their stories also reveal moments of interruption in their migrant journey that are outside of the dominant narrative and the official programs and protections.

ANTHONY AND SHARON'S STORY

Anthony grew up in a family that was 'very poor'. One of ten children, he usually would walk to school without any breakfast. He did well in school, though, and wanted to succeed. As a child, he would do odd jobs in exchange for a few pesos in order to buy his school supplies. His ambition was to finish college, so he could improve his family's situation. Two of Anthony's older sisters married American soldiers who had been stationed in the Philippines, and with a third sister moved to the USA. Their remittances enabled Anthony and the other children to progress through school, and Anthony eventually obtained a degree in nautical sciences. He found work in a shipping company. He worked his way through the ranks, and at age thirty-five became the youngest captain of a boat in the company's history. Anthony and his wife Sharon have six sons. Now grown, some are overseas and some live at home. All have graduated with professional university degrees.

When the children were younger, Sharon found the times when Anthony was at sea very difficult and she managed the large household alone. The whole family would look forward to when Anthony was at home, as during those times he was a supportive father and would play games and sports with the six boys. However, Sharon mentioned that 'it was quite difficult because with six kids who were all in school, we really had a hard time financially with all of the expenses. So every time he went down for vacation (at home), you would have the problem of wondering when he could go back to the vessel because of the financial burden [without any pay while ashore]'. Most recently, Anthony's seafaring contract meant that he was away for twelve to fifteen days at a time, and home for twenty-four to forty-eight hours in between. Since the children were grown, the separation was not as difficult for Sharon. 'It's not like before when during the trip to the Middle East, he would be gone for thirty-five days

[at a time]. And during that time, there was no internet, no communication, only letters. So it was very hard'. Anthony and Sharon's experiences of separation are similar to those of the over 400,000 sea-based Filipino migrants who leave their families for long periods while at sea (PSA 2015).

As with other migrants, government and private organisations explicitly promote Filipino seafarers to the demands of the international industry. The government markets Filipinos as English-speaking obedient workers, a value that is also integrated into Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) training programs where 'obedience is equated with being a patriotic Filipino' (S. McKay 2007; Ruggunan 2011, 195). The conditions of Filipino seafarers' employment are arranged and negotiated by a local 'union' (AMOSUP – Associated Marine Officers and Seamen's Union of the Philippines), which is actually a profit-making business rather than a member-controlled entity (Ruggunan 2011). Through AMOSUP, wages have been set higher than non-union members, but lower than international standards to maintain Filipino competitiveness. Benefits provided for seafarers are generally only valid during active contracts, usually about nine months, and the fee for membership has been \$100 USD (P5064; \$137 NZD) per month while on contract – which contributes to the profits of AMOSUP (Ruggunan 2011, 196, 198). Despite the good wages paid in US dollars, fees and contract durations contribute to the fact that seafarers on average return similar remittances as other OFW's (Overseas Filipino Workers) (PSA 2017, 65).⁴

Anthony had recently been shored without work or pay for two weeks after their new puppy had nipped his finger, as he was not given medical approval until he could be cleared of illness. The energetic little pug had been hopping in and out of my lap while we spoke. As a young indoor dog it was unlikely to have had any diseases, but at the time it had not yet had the requisite immunisations. In Anthony's case, this was a minor setback but meant the loss of two weeks' wages. The work is contract-based, and the only paid medical leave is for injuries sustained on the job (Lamvik 2012; S. McKay 2007). However, this and Hannah's story below indicate the ways that physical precariousness – the normal limitations of human life and potential for illness, injury, or death – is given socially shaped consequences which contribute to conditions of precarity.

Anthony and Sharon did not want their boys to follow her husband to seafaring, although they would have liked to, and all have gone into medical fields, mainly as registered nurses. Supporting six children through medical school was a significant period of strain on the family's finances, the hardest time

they had experienced, but all managed to finish their degrees and most work or plan to work overseas. They described how expensive it was for the children to look for a job overseas; even for highly skilled workers, the costs to access overseas employment were significant, including application fees for agents and government requirements, health certification, and maintaining internationally approved licencing.

Anthony and his family have also encountered trials in their lives. At one point, their newly renovated house burned down and had to be rebuilt from scratch. Sharon and one of her sons have survived cancer diagnoses; the son's illness was eventually proved not to be cancer, while Sharon had endured rounds of chemotherapy before recovering. This experience had given her perspective, and she continued to celebrate the anniversaries of her health being cleared. 'In my life, I'm already satisfied and contented with what I have now', she affirmed. I asked Sharon what success meant for her. 'For me, success is that we have sent the children to school, they have graduated, and they have their own jobs to support them. So, it's easy for us as parents to see them and know that they are successful, and it's a blessing for us parents'. Sharon and Anthony's children had become self-sufficient financially, but Sharon acknowledged the difficulty with Anthony's work where he would only be paid when at sea; financial pressures from his extended family, medical expenses, and schooling costs did not necessarily correspond to his contract periods.

Although Anthony's migrant work is more secure than many other forms, he and his family experience multiple points of improvisation. They must maintain his ability to work and access the next contract, build family life and relationships around his schedule and despite long absences, and order their finances around his contract periods and the gaps in between.

HANNAH'S STORY

Even when I met Hannah, in her late forties and having weathered a difficult life, she was a beautiful woman with stunning, deep-set brown eyes. Her voice was pleasant but gravelly, and the stress she was currently under showed on her face and in the tears that often welled in her eyes.

Hannah had grown up in a poor rural area. 'In my place in the province, it was difficult. We were so poor because my father was a farmer, my mother was a farmer. So, nothing, we didn't have anything'. Her family mainly prepared and sold *copra* [dried coconut meat] to be able to buy rice for the six children. Hannah, as the oldest, particularly felt the hardship as well as the responsibility

to her family. After working in the city to support her family for some years, Hannah went on to marry Ramon.

Hannah described that sometimes their marriage had been difficult as they brought up their three children. As the children grew, the costs to see them through high school and university began to increase. Labour migration began to appear as a possible option. Hannah took up training as a caregiver in a year-long program that included two months' work experience caring for a bed-ridden patient. She and Ramon were both filled with apprehension about Hannah going overseas and the conflict in their marriage increased. Hannah worried that they might split up, and about what would happen to the children, though this tension made her decision easier: 'That's why I (finally) went abroad, but I was taking a heartache with me'.

Hannah described the loneliness and pain she felt while overseas. She was unable to attend church to worship with other Filipinos, or any Christians in the Middle Eastern location. She missed her family and worried about her children. She described how 'even when I was working, I would be crying... Sometimes, I would have a dream, and I would cry because of the pain in my heart'. She thought that the cost of being overseas and giving her children a better chance and an education might be her husband leaving her and starting another life. However, the separation revealed how they had missed each other.

Researchers have identified Filipino women's migration as often characterised by emotional suffering as part of the duty to family (Alipio 2014; Briones 2009b; Parreñas 2007). Migration does not displace the role of mothers as caring, but this role demands that migration be undertaken painfully rather than with freedom and empowerment (Alipio 2014; Bautista 2015; Magat 2007). Migration by women has the potential to begin restructuring family relationships with more egalitarian roles. The media's vilifying of migrant mothers (and not migrant fathers), the ongoing framing of migration as heroic sacrifice, and entrenched family relationships undermine this potential. Researchers have found that in general, Filipino men do not take up the caring nor household tasks while mothers are away, which fall to daughters and other female relatives (Briones 2009b; Lam and Yeoh 2016; Parreñas 2013). Hannah's daughters, similarly, took over the domestic tasks during her absences. Further, if children do experience problems, this is generally not attributed to the father and other family members' lack of care, but to the mother who is not present. As a result, women send bigger shares of their OFW wages home, leaving less for their own well-being and survival, and also endure social blame for being away from their families (Lam and Yeoh 2016; Parreñas 2007, 2013; PSA 2016).

In her overseas domestic work, Hannah was with the same family for the entire time she was abroad, over two years. Other participants, in contrast, described strategies of changing employers frequently in attempts to secure higher wages and better working conditions. Hannah described the family as kind, and they would often ask Hannah about her life and her family back in the Philippines. 'I would respect them and they would respect me also', she affirmed. However, there were some difficult moments, when Hannah's employers would give her sharp orders or complain when things were not clean enough for them. 'She would really exhaust me'. Even though the relationship was mainly amicable, there were moments when Hannah was confused by her employer's actions and acutely aware of her position in the home. 'She would give me a scary look, really glare at me. I didn't understand why, or what she was thinking. Why is my employer doing that to me? I finally realised, I think she was jealous of me and worried about her husband'.

Migrant labour has often also implied the sacrifice of certain types of agency and identity. Researchers have noted that in domestic and sexualised labour, women in Italy, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan have had to conform to certain ideas of the 'third-world woman', friendly, submissive, grateful, pliable, and non-threatening (Constable 2003; Hilsdon 2007; Huang and Yeoh 2007; Magat 2007; Parreñas 2009). They found that part of the labour was maintaining this 'pretence' of inferiority, particularly for women who were educated or well off in the Philippines (Constable 2003, 141; Magat 2007, 610). Despite Hannah's amicable relationship with her employers, her position demanded not only physical but relational work in diffusing her employer's anger and jealousy by submitting to her demands.

Hannah returned home to the Philippines after two years in the Middle East when her contract ended. Unlike seafarers who often have recurring contracts, land-based migrant contracts are often limited and tied to visas. Continuing in migrant labour would then depend on fulfilling the requirements again to access new contracts and visas, or to continue working as an irregular migrant. Hannah was happy to have a break from overseas work and be with her family. She worked in the Philippines part-time, as caregiving jobs came available, while planning to return overseas. A friend in a different Middle Eastern nation suggested that Hannah look for work there and join her, as they could support each other. Hannah applied to an agency, and soon received a call about a job opportunity. She travelled to Manila to complete the documentation and briefing from the agency before going overseas. However, after paying to travel and live for three months in Manila in processing, Hannah was not able to take the opportunity. After three months of waiting, Hannah finally learned that

the agency would have charged her ₱310,000 (\$8720 NZD) for the placement, which she did not have. In fact, Hannah was down to her last ₱15 (\$0.50 NZD). Hannah took it as a sign that it was not the right time and returned to Davao. Had she proceeded with the migration, Hannah would have been heavily beholden to the migration agency through debt. The unique role of agents in the Philippines mean that this is a common situation for migrants. Parreñas (2011), for example, found that migrants trapped in exploitative work in Japan were not controlled by their employers, but by the contracts and debts to the Filipino migration agents.

Hannah found caregiving work back at home, ranging from short to long-term contracts. However, she began to have a problem with her health, which worsened to the point that it affected her ability to work. At this point, Hannah's former employers contacted her, asking her to return. Hannah was eager to resume this position and began to go through the application process. Part of the documentation for overseas work is a medical exam for certification of health, which Hannah could not pass. The employer was understanding, but Hannah mourned the suspension of this relationship, hoping that 'maybe someday I can return and work for her again. So for now, I just stay home'.

The limitations of Hannah's health and the subsequent financial strain meant that by this point the family was struggling to survive. Her husband worked part-time as a taxi-driver, but Hannah had been the primary breadwinner, working part-time as she found work. 'Sometimes, I can feel how hard it is with work. My work is not stable, but [at least] I am able to help my husband. Sometimes it's really difficult, but I can endure it still. I have had many experiences of hardship but some comfort also.' Hannah's two children in high school were forced to drop out as Hannah had been unable to pay their fees, and the oldest had to delay starting tertiary study. The rapid change in her family's circumstances reveals the insecurity that Filipinos can also often face in the domestic economy.

Hannah's church community had been seeking support to help get the necessary medical treatment; it was a relatively common and simple procedure, but prohibitively expensive for Hannah and her family. Government health insurance is available, but even this requires enrolling and paying certain premiums. Hannah had not had this in place. The children will depend on their education to secure employment in the future; their potential in turn will support their parents' retirement years. Hannah's health struggles began a downward spiral that would create a cycle of poverty unless the family could quickly find a way through that would allow Hannah to resume work. Hannah was doing her

best to maintain hope, but she was deeply concerned about her children and their futures. ‘God will not give trials that you will not be able to endure’, she affirmed. In this endurance, Hannah’s family performs improvisation to get through this space without a set script or strategy. Despite her experience as a ‘successful migrant’, the costs of accessing migration and health issues had become insurmountable barriers to re-entering the migration narrative.

IMPROVISATION AND PRECARITY

There are several gaps in the migration narrative, experienced as barriers and hardships that migrants are forced to deal with through improvised, individual strategies. The limitations of individual strategies in addressing these widely experienced moments suggest that these points of vulnerability expose some of the mechanisms which maintain the precarity of migrant labour, by individualising these moments and levels of risk, and blaming people for their own precarity. The risks that my participants faced with varying degrees of success indicate the precarity of migrant workers which contradicts the image of migration as secure, successful, and accessible.

The government continues its dependence on migration and remittances, supports training programs for overseas work such as nursing and seafaring, and legitimates and codifies the desire for better paid work through migration (Oh 2016, 200). For those outside of the official programs, this is a contradictory pressure both to migrate and to not migrate – or, to not migrate legally. Despite the multiple legal and practical measures to support migration, the Philippines government has been hesitant to admit the degree to which the economy is dependent on this strategy (Agbola and Acupan 2010, 388). Similarly, the government has also denied the link between widespread migration and abuses against migrants such as human trafficking. Success stories are reported and celebrated, OFW’s lauded as heroes. On the other side, the extreme cases of abuse and human trafficking arouse outrage and sympathy. However, there is little effort to connect the two, or to tell some of the more ordinary stories, of workers who have lost their jobs, been unable to repay their debts, or experienced everyday harassment and discrimination as Filipinos abroad (Ayalon 2009; Lindio-McGovern 2003; Parreñas 2017).

The overt message of the Ideal Migrant Family media campaign was that the Ideal Migrants are those who should be imitated. Sharon and Anthony’s story does illustrate the potential for migration to contribute to a family’s success. However, many factors which enable and constrain migrants in achieving success are beyond personal control. Emulating Sharon and Anthony, for example,

would be very expensive, and out of reach for many Filipinos; both had overseas support which enabled them to get their educations and stable jobs. Presenting an ideal which is fundamentally out of reach for many Filipinos, even those like Hannah who could undertake labour migration, reiterates the exclusion and inequality of the poor. Without access to legal migration pathways, the poorest are forced to bear the risks of poverty and the precarity of the local labour market, or taking the riskiest migration strategies where migrants' precarity is multiplied. In the light of normative pressures toward migration, improvised migration strategies outside of official channels reveal the precarity of those excluded.

Improvisation is visible in the complex and strategic ways that people navigate precarious conditions and options. To maintain employment, migrants must often improvise performing the migrant worker persona, through OWWA training and in jobs. For domestic workers, this has frequently implied embodying a subservient, submissive image, despite the education and status they may have had at home. In migration, identity and roles are often conflicting: overseas, migrants often navigate low status as a domestic worker or overseas migrant, while at home they are considered a hero on a national and family level with gratitude and honour (Briones 2009b; Magat 2007; Parreñas 2010). Researchers with Filipinos working abroad found that many of their participants overtly recognised slave-like or abusive conditions but chose to stay and did not want to return to the Philippines (Ayalon 2009; Bernardo, Daganzo, and Ocampo 2016; Choi and Lyons 2012; Hilsdon 2007; Lopez 2012; Ruggunan 2011). Endurance of constrained conditions and precarious social status are improvised strategies to reduce the precarity of migrant labour and maintain employment.

Migrants have often found that their lives are precarious not only in the conditions of their work but in their isolation outside of social security. Several participants who had negative overseas work experiences reported not having days off or freedom to leave the place of employment. Migration further demands relational improvisation in the complicated care relationships migrants have with their families. This includes maintaining distant relationships through technology, letters, and gifts, and building new kin networks, often with other Filipino migrants. Many have reported within these communities an improvised sense of home through food, language, church, and mutual care (Briones 2009b; Jean Encinas-Franco 2015; Liu 2015). In the location Hannah worked, however, she did not have access to attending church or spending time with other Filipinos, a loss that she felt deeply. Filipino migrants have expressed pain from wanting to be with their families, but bearing this as they would not be able to provide for them financially in the Philippines (Lindio-McGovern

2004, 221; Lam and Yeoh 2016; D. McKay 2007). Improvised family and kin relationships, and improvised emotional strategies for endurance, indicate the social precarity migrants experience in the isolation that is implied and demanded by the practice of migration.

The health issues that prevented Anthony and Hannah from accessing migration, at least temporarily, indicate a gap in the migration path that migrants must overcome on their own to access migration. Researchers have highlighted how labour migrants, particularly those from poorer countries, are disproportionately at risk for multiple negative outcomes including ill health, continued poverty, physical violence, exploitation and human trafficking (Gamlin 2016; Huffman et al. 2012; Qureshi 2013; Schmidt and Buechler 2017; Vogt 2013). This perspective reveals how certain characteristics and social positions correlate to greater degrees of precarity, risk, and protections, depending greatly upon 'the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions' (Butler 2012, 148).

The narrative of success and stability, contrasted with the unstable, precarious reality, demands a state of permanent improvisation as migrants attempt to overcome the gaps and barriers and access migration. These strategies include travel, building relationships, upskilling, using regular and irregular pathways, performing a role of the third-world worker, and continually seeking places to step upwards, toward the elusive image of the successful migrant they wish to embody. Improvised, informal strategies 'serve as a way of experiencing precarity' in systems and structures meant to provide stability but marked by gaps and inequalities in access and provisions (Sangaramoorthy 2018, 496).

CONCLUSIONS

Even in positive migration experiences, migrants must frequently improvise to overcome hardships and maintain their positions as migrant workers. The migration system in the Philippines has many such gaps, and improvisation is required to overcome this overall precarity and these specific moments of exclusion. Underpayment, abuse, and exploitation are common risks that migrant workers face, as well as the potential for sickness or injury to interrupt their employment. Migrants, and potential migrants, rely on continual improvisation in the frequent moments outside of the ideal migration narrative.

Researchers have argued that globalisation and global economic strategies have not had the desired effect of improving the Philippines' economy, but on the contrary, have harmed local industry, agriculture, and traditional liveli-

hoods, maintained high rates of unemployment, and increased local inequality (Kwiatkowski 2005, 306–7; Lindio-McGovern 2007, 29; Piquero-Ballescás 2009, 85). Migration to unskilled work is presented by the Philippine government as an investment into the family and the nation's future. However, despite the intentions of migration as a temporary measure, the reliance on migration is an ingrained part of the structure of inequality where the Philippines is positioned unequally in the global economy (Barber 2004; Tigno 2014; Tyner 2009). Barber (2004, 213) questioned the premise of migration which is built upon fundamentally unequal and exploitative international relationships and has never become a sustainable path to local economic development. In this way, the migration narrative has only a tenuous relationship to the imagined successful outcomes, both individually and corporately.

The experiences of Filipino labour migrants demonstrate how the 'responsibilisation' logic of the Philippines political economy is manifested in actual experience. The individualised responsibility to access or re-access codified labour migration pathways demonstrates both the precarity of individual migrants as they attempt to overcome obstacles to access this path, and the precarity of Filipino migrants more generally in terms of the incomplete and partial security that even legal and official migration programs offer. The individual, improvised strategies migrants use to fill these gaps demonstrate strategy and ingenuity, but also reveal that these gaps exist within the migration social structures. The entwined moments of improvisation and precarity in multiple aspects of the Filipino labour migrant experience reveal their both individually and collectively precarious position in the global economy.

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NOTES

- 1 Amie Lennox is a recent PhD graduate in social anthropology from Massey University, New Zealand. Her research explores the relationships between individual experiences of exploitation and wider social structures in the context of the Philippines. Her focus is on ethnography and life-narrative methodologies, and she has specifically explored the multiple forms of human trafficking in Mindanao, the Philippines.

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- 2 As an 'outsider' researcher, I recognise both strengths and weaknesses of this perspective. I frequently asked my participants for their explanations and understandings of their experiences, and sought insights into wider society from a wide variety of local sources. However, I also found that as an outsider, people were helpful in explaining things that would otherwise be 'taken for granted' and not elaborated on, allowing deeper insight into otherwise mundane aspects of life.
- 3 A significant majority of land-based migrants are women, while most seafarers are men. Filipinos are 'up to 20% of the global labour market for seafarers', based on a combination of factors including Union advocacy, English speaking skills, and taking lower wages than other international seafarers and their Unions (Ruggunan 2011, 206). Filipinos are commonly employed in the Middle East, Europe, and other parts of Asia as low-skilled manual labourers (PSA 2015).
- 4 In 2014, 21.9% of OFW's were seafarers, and they returned 22.9% of remittances; high levels of union participation, however, mean that seafarers are also more likely to remit funds that are recorded and taxed officially through the POEA (PSA 2017, 65; Ruggunan 2011, 195).

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