

# The Feminization of International Migration and its Effects on the Children Left Behind: Evidence from the Philippines

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**Summary.** — This paper explores the effects of a mother’s migration on her children’s well-being. I use children with migrant fathers as the main control group to separately identify the effects coming from remittances from those resulting from parental absence. Exploiting demand shocks as an exogenous source of variation in the probability that the mother migrates, I find suggestive evidence that children of migrant mothers are more likely to lag behind in school compared to children with migrant fathers. Controlling for remittances does not change this result, supporting the hypothesis that a mother’s absence has a stronger detrimental effect than a father’s.  
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*Key words* — international migration, left behind, education, Asia, the Philippines

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Transnational households, in which a family member works in a foreign country while some or all of her dependents reside in the home country, are becoming increasingly common in many developing countries. Millions of children from all parts of the world are growing up with at least one parent living abroad. For example, Bryant (2005) estimates that 2–3% of Indonesian and Thai children have one parent working abroad. A 2009 UNDP study in Ecuador found that in 2005 36% of migrant mothers and 40% of migrant fathers left their children back home. Save the Children (2006) reports that around 1 million Sri Lankan children are left behind by their mothers, who migrate in search of work. An estimated 170,000 Romanian children have one or both parents working abroad (Bilefsky, 2009) and a similar number is observed in Moldova (UNICEF, 2008). The numbers in the Philippines are even more striking: close to 3,800,000 Filipinos<sup>1</sup> or 10% of the country’s labor force, are working abroad as temporary migrants and are not permitted to move overseas with their families. Most of these temporary migrants are married and many have children, resulting in an estimated 1.5–3 million Filipino children with a parent living abroad.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the parents who leave do so to provide financially for their children and families. In the Philippines, children of migrant parents are not particularly poor prior to their parent’s departure. Most are fed on a daily basis and attend public schools. What parents seek with migration is to be able to afford quality health care, private schools, and better housing (Parrenas, 2005). Yang (2008) finds that remittances increase educational expenditures and the likelihood of starting relatively capital-intensive household enterprises.

However, children’s well-being depends not only on economic resources, but also on parental care. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many children left behind grow up under serious emotional strain. A survey by the Manila’s Scalabrini Migration Center (Batistella & Conaco, 1998) of 700 school-age children shows that compared to their classmates, the children of migrant workers performed particularly poorly in school, and were more likely to express confusion, anger, and apathy. Studies based on thorough interviews of children of migrant parents support these findings (Parrenas, 2005).

Concerns about the magnitude and nature of migration’s negative effects on the children left behind have grown as the gender composition of temporary migrants in the Philippines and other countries has shifted from a majority of males to a majority of females. Whereas in the 1970s women formed about 15% of the Filipino land-based migrant labor force,<sup>3</sup> in 2010 the share was 55%, having reached a maximum of 75% in 2004 (see Figure 1). A similar situation is observed in Sri Lanka, where more than 60% of emigrants are women (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion & Welfare of Sri Lanka, 2008). In 2006, out of 680,000 registered overseas Indonesian migrants, more than 79% were women.<sup>4</sup> In countries where gender roles are still very rigid and the mother’s main role is to raise children and the father’s main role is to be the breadwinner, migration of mothers is perceived as a much larger disruption in a child’s life than is the father’s absence.<sup>5</sup> Children with migrant fathers are cared for by their mothers who can afford to stay at home; for children with migrant mothers, on the other hand, fathers rarely become the primary care givers. Instead, these children are mostly under the care of extended kin, usually aunts and grandmothers.<sup>6</sup>

This paper investigates if and how the migration of mothers affects the well-being of the Filipino children left behind. Constrained by the existing data, I focus on school performance as the main outcome, as measured by the probability of lagging behind. For older children I also look at related outcomes such as college attendance, the probability of working in the labor market, and the probability of reporting housekeeping responsibilities as the primary reason for not looking for a job.

I use two control groups: children with both parents living at home and children with migrant fathers. The first control group is a more natural one, as it is likely the case that for many households the relevant counterfactual for the mother

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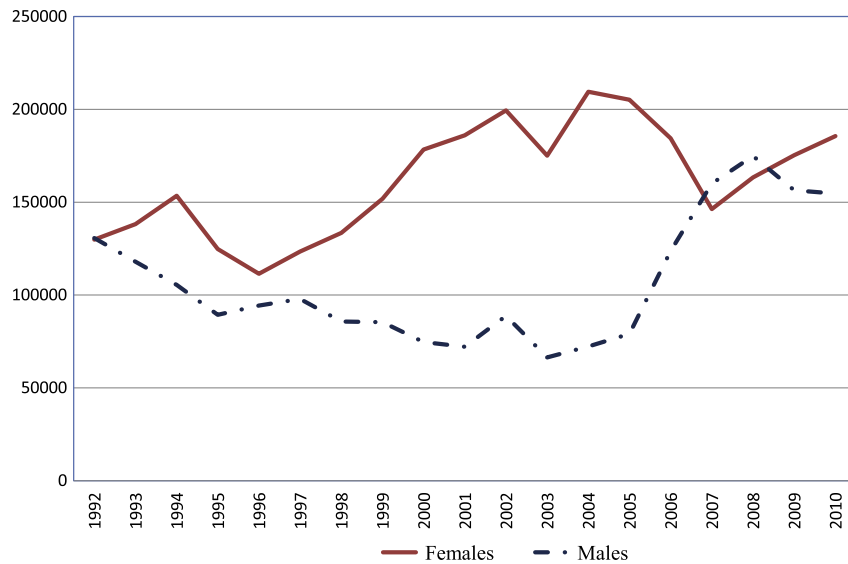


Figure 1. New hires of land-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) by gender.

migrating is sending no members abroad, rather than sending the father. However, I focus mostly on the results using as the control group children with migrant fathers for two reasons. First, available data on remittances (there is no information on household income) allows the identification of effects coming from higher income as opposed to those resulting from lower parental time investments. Second, my proposed instruments strongly predict mother migration in a model that restricts the sample to children with migrant parents but not in a model that includes all children. As will be seen, both approaches reach similar conclusions.

A major challenge in trying to evaluate the causal impact of migration is that female migrants are not randomly allocated across households or regions. Families with migrant mothers are likely to have particular (unobserved) characteristics that distinguish them from households with migrant fathers and from non-migrant households. Hence, by simply comparing the household outcomes of families with migrant mothers to households with migrant fathers, one cannot be sure that the observed differences between these types of households are solely a consequence of the mother having migrated.

Two empirical strategies are used to address this issue. The first is used to compare the children of migrant mothers versus the children of migrant fathers and exploits demand shocks as a random source of variation that affects the probability that the mother instead of the father decides to work abroad. Migration flows from the Philippines are gender-specific and highly channelized between local areas and foreign destinations, a phenomenon mostly explained by the importance of social networks (Scalabrini Migration Center, 2005). Therefore, economic shocks and changes in immigration laws in destination countries should affect the propensity of female migration versus male migration differently based on local area. I use confidential administrative data from the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) to determine the top destination countries for female and male migrants by province. I then use the province's destination distribution of female migrants to construct two sets of instruments. The first set includes the province-level share of female migrants going to each of the top five destinations interacted with year fixed effects and aims at capturing all potential shocks to destination countries. The second

instrument is the expected salary for a female migrant constructed using her province's distribution of destination countries and data on migrant wages by occupation and destination. Variation in wages in the present context is mostly driven by demand side shocks and/or bilateral agreements and is therefore unlikely to be correlated with province specific shocks (McKenzie, Theorahides, & Yang, *in press*). The first-stage results suggest that these demand shocks are good predictors of the gender of the migrating parent.

Unfortunately, this source of variation does not help explain why some families decide to send a parent abroad and some do not. Therefore, I cannot use this empirical strategy for the comparison of migrant versus non-migrant households. What I do in this case is to use a very simple model of education production to predict the types of selection I might observe in the data, and take them into account when I interpret the OLS results.

I use two main datasets for the analysis: the 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2007 Philippines Census and the Survey of Overseas Filipinos (SOF) from 1993 to 2000. The first dataset has many more observations, but the second one includes detailed information on the migration experience of parents. Both OLS and IV estimations using Census data suggest that relative to the children of migrant fathers, the children of migrant mothers are significantly more likely to lag behind in school. I then use the SOF to explore the role of economic resources (migrant mothers in the Philippines send fewer remittances than migrant fathers) versus parental time inputs in explaining my finding. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that a large majority of migrant parents have at least a high school degree, I find that controlling for remittances and income does not reduce the gap between children with migrant mothers and migrant fathers. This result suggests that parental care plays a major role in determining children's educational outcomes.<sup>7</sup> I do find, however, that remittances explain a significant fraction of the lower college attendance rate of children with migrant mothers.

The effects vary significantly by gender: I find a much larger and statistically significant negative effect on the educational outcomes of boys, regardless of age. The result is robust to the dataset and specification, in particular, to including household fixed effects when using Census data. Given that the

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