

## What Happens to Children of OFWs?

In the Filipino culture, the mother is not merely caretaker, but the light of the home or “ilaw ng tahanan”. Dr. Lourdes Arellano-Carandang’s book, “*Nawala ang Ilaw ng Tahanan*”, deals with the question “what happens when light goes out in the family?” That refers to the phenomenon of mothers leaving the home to work abroad.

Currently, there are three to six million children of OFW parents. And still more women are leaving the country work abroad. Of the two to three thousand workers who leave, seventy percent are women. Eighty-five percent are from the lower-income bracket and in their early twenties. The average age of the children left behind is ten years old.

What happens to these children? When mothers leave home, fathers infrequently step in to fulfil motherly roles. The opposite is the case when the father leaves the home: Mothers will usually do double time. One mother has said, “I learned to fix electric wires and change car tires as much as I learned how to become more firm towards the children.” Studies have shown that male parent can acquire the nurturing skills and attitudes typical of female parents. Often, fathers will ask other female relatives to take over the role of mother.

The money earned by the OFW parent allows a number of children to attend private schools, participate in extracurricular activities, and excel up to a point, usually in the elementary years. But children of migrant mothers, in general, do not do well. In the long run, they lag behind, academically. They are reported as being lonely, angry, unloved, unfeeling, afraid, and worried compared to all groups of children.

OFW children grieve, worry and fantasize about their parents coming home. In time, they become numb to the absence: They become like orphans. Young children cope by playing, while older ones strike up friendships and rationalize the departure of their parents. This does not eradicate the hurt and resentment towards the parents. A survey among the children of OFW caregivers showed that only 25% could say they enjoyed a good relationship with their parents. The words of one child capture this precarious situation: “*I am supposed to love my father because he works hard for the family. But now I do not feel anything for him.*” Another child has said, “*I have learned to accept that I no longer have parents. Yes, they are there, but they do not care about me. I feel abandoned by the people I love.*”

OFW teenagers, particularly females, acquire the inclination to look elsewhere for parental care. Again, the studies show that more of these teens enter into promiscuous relationships or become more vulnerable to abusive relationships with older men. They are also prone to crime, drug dependency, alcoholism, and gender-identity problems. More alarmingly, there are reports of incest between fathers left behind and the older female children.

These unfortunate scenarios are heartbreaking and should serve to drive home the desperate state of Filipino families in which either or both parents go abroad to work. “What happens when the light goes out in the family?”

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