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CHAPTER 11

The dynamics of migration-related stress and coping of female domestic workers from the Philippines: an exploratory study

Abstract

Female domestic workers face many migration-related stressors that affect their mental health, but we know little about the dynamics of stress and coping in different migration phases. This exploratory study aims to assess stress and coping of female migrant domestic workers from the Philippines in different phases of the migration process; prior to migration, in the country of destination and upon return to the Philippines. Data were collected in 2010 using questionnaires (N = 500). Validation of findings took place in a work shop (23 participants) and two focus groups (13 and 8 participants). Stress levels of women were significantly higher abroad than in the Philippines. Stress and coping in the Philippines was mostly related to financial issues, while stress and coping abroad related more to loneliness, working conditions and employers. Findings from this study provide insight in the phase-specific and transnational dimensions of stress and coping.

Introduction

Despite the differences between them, all migrants are confronted with migration-related stressors such as the sense of loss of family, home, and country along with social and economic problems and the challenges of adaptation to the country of destination (Bhugra 2004). The ability to cope with migration-related stress is therefore crucial for migrants in order to protect their wellbeing. However, current approaches often fail to take the temporal and transnational context of stress and coping into account by focusing on either the country of origin or the country of destination (Briones, 2009a). At the same time, migration is increasingly temporary because of economic globalisation and current policies on labour migration in receiving countries (CARAM Asia 2002; Ruhs 2006). In this paper, we address this underexposed issue by focusing on stress and coping in different phases of the temporary migration process of female domestic workers.

Migration-related stress and coping

Stressors can be described as environmental, social, or internal demands which require the individual to readjust his or her usual cognitive or behavioural patterns (Thoits 1995). As stressors accumulate it becomes more difficult for individuals to cope with them and when demands exceed the ability to cope, the probability of negative consequences for the wellbeing of the individual increases (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Migration has been linked by many to scholars to high levels of stress and increased mental health problems, indicating an accumulation of stressors (Bhui et al. 2003; Hovey 2000; Selten et al. 1997; Silove et al. 1997; Torres and Rollock 2004). This signifies the importance of efficient coping strategies. Lazarus & Folkman (1984) describe coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing. Coping efforts may be directed at the demands themselves (problem-focused strategies) or at the emotional reactions which often accompany those demands (emotion-focused strategies). An individual's coping response depends partly on personal characteristics and partly on the situational context (Folkman & Lazarus 1985). Considering the dynamic character of the migration process, migrants are likely to display different coping strategies in different phases of migration. Several studies provide insight in the use of coping strategies among migrants (Cheng and Chang 1999; Chung et al. 1998; Holtz 1998; Khawaja et al. 2008; Ritsner et al. 1997). These studies show that seeking social support, cultural integration and religious practices are coping strategies that are often adopted by migrants. However, most of these studies focus primarily on stressors and coping at one point in time, while few studies take the dynamics and temporary character of migration processes into account.

Temporary migration and domestic work

Temporary migrants are contract workers who remain in a country for a limited and set duration (CARAM Asia 2002). The temporary migration process consists of three phases: pre-migration (when decisions and preparations are made regarding migration), migration (the migrant worker arrives in the host country) and post-migration (where the migrant worker returns to his or her own country). When reintegration is followed by renewed migration (which is common), migration becomes a circular process. Migrant workers are often recruited from the most vulnerable populations in poor countries and labour migration has increasingly become a structural survival strategy for migrants and their families. They often have short term contracts for jobs which are commonly referred to as 3D jobs: dirty, dangerous and degrading. Domestic work is an example of such a job (Wolffers et al. 2003). Female domestic workers are (mostly) adult women who voluntarily migrate from one country to another to find work in the domestic-service sector (D'Souza 2010). In many countries of destination, domestic work is not considered part of formal work and the live-in nature of their work isolates them and makes them especially vulnerable to abusive working conditions and adverse effects on their wellbeing (Ahonen et al. 2010; Holroyd et al. 2001; Lau et al. 2009). This underlines the need for approaches that take these situation-specific stressors and coping strategies into account, while paying attention to the way these change throughout migration processes.

Aim of the study

The aim of our study is to explore stress and coping of female domestic workers from the Philippines in different phases of migration; pre-migration, migration and post-migration. We explicitly approach this issue from migrants' perspectives by actively involving them in different phases of the research process, which contributes to the usefulness of the research for end users and promotes empowerment (Knightbridge et al. 2006). Results from this study provide insights that can be used in (development of) interventions aimed at reducing stress and improving women's coping ability in order to enhance their wellbeing.

Methods

Study approach

The findings presented are part of an exploratory study on mental health of women migrant domestic workers from the Philippines (ACHIEVE & VUMC –MHCC 2011). The study combined quantitative and qualitative methods, and followed a participatory action approach (Wolffers et al. 2002). Former female migrant workers were involved in different phases of the research process. In this paper we present findings from this larger study, specifically focusing on stress and coping of female domestic workers. These

concepts were investigated through a questionnaire and validated in a workshop and two focus groups.

Study area and population

The research took place at four different sites in the Philippines: La Union and National Capital Region (NCR) in Luzon, Davao City in Mindanao and Cebu City in the Visayas. These sites were selected to represent different populations from the three main island groups of the Philippines (Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao).

The study population included adult female individuals (18 to 60 years old) who finished at least one contract as a domestic worker abroad. Since there are no harmonized national and local statistics on the number of female individuals working overseas as domestic workers, we used non-probability sampling. The identification of respondents was done purposively, based on the information provided by gatekeepers in the research sites and snowball sampling. In our sample we aimed for diversity in age categories, types of domestic work and countries of destination. A total of 500 women were included in the study: 100 from La Union, 200 from NCR, 100 from Davao and 100 from Cebu.

Questionnaire

Mental health of women migrant domestic workers from the Philippines was explored using a questionnaire which was administered orally through structured interviews. In this paper we focus on the parts of the questionnaire which address stress levels, causes of stress and coping in the pre-migration phase, the migration phase and post-migration phase. Items included open questions as well as closed questions. To determine stress levels, participants were asked to rate their (perceived) average stress level abroad on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating the lowest stress level and 5 the highest stress level. A similar 10-point Likert scale was used for participants to rate their perceived overall coping ability abroad. For other closed questions, answers were rated on a dichotomous (yes or no) scale. Administration of the questionnaire took approximately one hour.

The questionnaire was constructed in English by the research team and translated into Tagalog (national language in the Philippines). Data were collected by (former) female migrant workers, who received a three-day training on the questionnaire and interview techniques. During the training the women piloted the questionnaire and adaptations were made according to their input. Data were collected from January 2010 to April 2010. The collected data were translated into English and entered in SPSS for analysis by the research team. Responses to open questions were counted and similar answers were grouped together. For closed questions descriptive statistics were presented and t-tests were used to assess the relation between these variables and stress.

Workshop and focus groups

Preliminary findings were validated in a validation workshop and two focus groups. The validation workshop aimed to verify the findings among different stakeholders involved with female migrant workers, including representatives from governmental organizations (7), representatives from non-governmental organizations (13) and field interviewers (3). In addition, two focus groups were held with female migrant workers in order to ensure their perspective in the validation process. The two focus groups were held in different regions; one in La Union (13 participants) and one in National Capital Region (NCR) (8 participants). Participants were selected by convenience sampling through the field researchers of the two research sites. During the validation workshops and focus groups the findings from the questionnaire were presented, followed by a discussion. The discussion was structured along the questionnaire findings, but gave participants opportunity to bring in new issues. The output of the validation workshop verified and confirmed the results and provided reflections on the findings and suggestions for additional analysis. The sessions were held in July and August of 2010 and were facilitated by members of the research team.

Ethical issues

At the beginning of each questionnaire interview, focus group and workshop, researchers explained the purpose of the study and emphasized that data would be processed anonymously. Informed consent was obtained through consulting and involving women in the workshops and the research process, where they also decided on the acceptability of the research. The authors followed the guidelines for ethical principles and practices for community based participatory research as described by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement and the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action of the Durham University (2012). The study was approved by the European Commission-United Nations Joint Migration and Development Initiative.

Results

Profile of female domestic workers

Of the 500 women included in the study, 39.4% were 18-30 years old and 60.6% of the women were 31-60 years old. Approximately half of the women was married (51.2%), one-third was single (32.2%), and others were separated (4.0%), widowed (3.8%) or had a live-in boyfriend or girlfriend (8.6%). For 9.6% of the women, the highest level of education completed was primary school, while the majority finished secondary school (67.6%) and some completed tertiary education (22.8%). The majority of the women were Catholic (76.6%). Other women stated to be Born again Christian (6.6%), Muslim

(6.4%), Protestant (3.4%), Iglesia ni Cristo or did not indicate a religion (4.0%). The number of children ranged from 0-7, with an average of 2 children.

Most of the participants had completed one or two contracts as a migrant domestic worker (66.8%) and some finished three to four contracts (18.0%). A smaller percentage had completed five or more contracts (11%). Some women did not finish any contract (4.2%). The usual length of a contract is two years. During their last contract the majority of the respondents stayed in countries in Asia and the Middle East. The most frequently mentioned countries of destination are Hong Kong (19.6%), Saudi Arabia (13.2%), United Arab Emirates (12.2%), Singapore (11.2%), and Kuwait (9.0%).

The majority of the respondents lived with their employers (94.8%). The number of working hours per day varied considerable between participants. About a quarter of the participants (24.4%) worked between one and eight hours a day, while many others worked between nine and sixteen hours a day (46.2%), or more than sixteen hours a day (29.4%). More than half of the participants (58.6%) said that they were entitled to regular days off during their last contract, of whom the majority (70.5%) actually had regular days off.

Stress levels

The mean level of stress was 2.97 (SD \pm 0.06) pre-migration, 3.27 (SD \pm 0.06) during migration and 2.62 (SD \pm 0.06) post-migration. Average stress levels abroad were significantly higher than stress levels prior to migration ($p < 0.001$, t-test) and stress levels after migration ($p < 0.001$, t-test). In addition, stress levels prior to migration were higher than stress levels after migration ($p < 0.001$, t-test). Women who had high levels of stress before migration, also experienced more stress during migration ($p < 0.001$, chi-square) and upon return ($p < 0.001$, chi-square). In addition, women who were single had significantly lower stress levels before migration and after migration (but not during migration) than women who had a partner ($p < 0.05$, t-test) or were separated or widowed ($p < 0.05$, t-test). In addition, women with children had significantly more stress before migration ($p < 0.05$, t-test) as well as after migration ($p < 0.001$, t-test) than women without children.

Causes of stress

The findings show that participants experienced different problems and concerns in different phases of migration. The respondents' answers to open questions about causes of stress indicate that financial and income related concerns are dominant prior to migration and upon return to the Philippines, as they respectively accounted for 52.8% and 43.9% of the total number of responses. Prior to migration many respondents specifically mentioned stress because of the lack of financial resources to support the application process (30.5% of total number of responses). In the post-migration phase the responses

mostly referred to a lack of money/income (30.3%). During the migration-phase psychosocial issues were most prevalent; they accounted for respectively 30.1% of the total number of responses. Loneliness and homesickness (24.8%) and difficulties in adjusting to a different culture/country (5.3%) were the main causes of stress. Working conditions also were an important source of stress (11.2 % of total number of responses). This refers to strict employers (4.0%), a lack of rest (3.8%) and a lack of food (3.4%). Psychosocial causes of stress were also mentioned for the pre-migration phase and the post-migration phase, although less frequently than during migration. Worries about leaving one's family and children (8.0%) was the most important psychosocial cause of stress pre-migration involved, while the relationship with ones husband (3.5%) was particularly stressful post-migration.

Causes of stress during migration

The questionnaire inquired about specific causes of stress during migration; women indicated the extent to which certain events, objects or people formed a source of stress for them. Results show that money was the most important source of stress during migration; 71.8% of respondents identified this as a major source of stress. Also, working conditions and employers were identified as major causes of stress by respectively 57.8% and 47.3% of respondents. Many other causes of stress related to family matters; women were particularly concerned about children (55.0% of respondents) and their family's health (42.0% of respondents). Notably, about half of the respondents indicated their personal safety (50.6% of respondents) was a major concern while they were abroad. In addition, the results provide insight in the specific stressors relating to working conditions and personal safety; women reported several types of restrictions and abuse in their workplace. The most frequent forms of abuse and restriction are prohibitions regarding: talking to neighbours (43.4%), making calls to friends (33.8%), wearing specific types of clothes (28.8%), joining gatherings/ outings (27.8%) and interacting with the male employer (27.8%). Women who experienced restrictions or abuse had significantly higher stress levels, which was most apparent for stress levels relating to: being locked inside the employer's house ($p < 0.001$, t-test), being physically hurt by one's employer ($p < 0.001$, t-test), being prohibited from eating ($p < 0.001$, t-test) and being cursed and verbally threatened by their employer ($p < 0.001$, t-test).

Coping with stress

The participants were asked (through open questions) how they coped with the issues and concerns they mentioned. Prior to migration, coping strategies mainly involved strategies to generate money/income; women mostly dealt with issues by borrowing money (34.5% of responses). Going abroad (6.7% of responses) and looking for additional sources of income in the Philippines (6.5% of responses) were also considered to be a way of coping with problems. The respondents' ways of coping with problems were considerably different involving psychological strategies and social support: by keeping busy with work

(10.4%), talking to their family (8.6%) and enduring/persevering (8.1%). Upon their return to the Philippines, coping strategies were (like before migration) mostly directed at generating money/income and finances (24.6%), of which some responses specifically indicated working abroad (again) as a coping strategy (6.5%). In addition, spending time with one's children was regularly mentioned as way of coping (3.9%).

Coping responses during migration

The results provide additional insight in specific coping strategies that women used in dealing with the issues while working abroad. Women indicated (through closed questions) whether they used a certain coping response when faced with problems. The most frequently reported coping responses included praying/reading the bible (55.2% of respondents), crying (38.8% of respondents) and resting (31.2%). Forms of social support were important ways of coping with stress as well; a considerable number of women talked to their friends (27.0%), children (22.6%) and partners (20.4%) when they faced problems abroad. No significant relationships were found between these particular coping strategies and stress levels, except for crying. Women who indicated that they responded to problems by crying, experienced higher levels of stress than women who did not do this ($p < 0.001$, t-test).

Discussion

Migration and stress

The results provide insight in the dynamics of stress in migrant's lives and the high demands that migration related stressors place on individuals in all phases of migration. Female domestic workers experienced most stress while they were abroad. Loneliness, homesickness, poor working conditions and problems in adjusting to a different culture were common stressors among our study population. Similar migration-related stressors have been found in a range of studies among migrants (Hovey 2000; Ritsner et al. 2000; Torres & Rollock 2004). Our study additionally shows that financial and economic issues are the main reasons for women before migration. Wong and Song (2008) reported similar issues among migrant workers in China. However, migration does not seem to bring a permanent solution since financial problems are again dominant upon return, thereby pushing toward a new cycle of migration. Moreover, returning to the Philippines can create new problems of having to readjust to life in the Philippines.

The findings in our study suggest that, besides migration, individual characteristics influence stress levels, since women who experienced relatively much stress before migration were also more stressed in subsequent migration phases. In our study having children and being married were associated with high stress levels before and after migration, but not during migration. The strain of responsibilities towards family while being in the Philippines and relief from this while being a broad, may explain this pattern.

The lack of options for divorce in the Philippines can play a role, by providing a liberating alternative to women whose relationships or marriages have failed (Constable 2003).

Coping and stress

Coping strategies of female migrant workers changed through the different migration phases. Prior to migration and upon return, women mainly used problem-oriented coping strategies such as finding financial resources and mobilizing relatives to assist them in the preparations for their departure. During migration, emotion-focused coping styles become more dominant; women sought social support, engaged in religious activities or endured the situation. This shift from problem-focused coping to a more passive and emotion-focused way of coping might be explained by the lack of control, resulting from women's isolated position and dependency on employers. Several studies suggested that problem-focused coping is more likely when situational demands are perceived as controllable and emotion-focused coping is more likely when demands seem uncontrollable (Folkman 1984; Forsythe & Compas 1987).

In our study, the use of (most) specific coping strategies was not associated with stress levels during migration. However, this does not necessarily imply that coping is not related to stress, since measures only indicated overall stress levels and not the stress levels in specific stressful situations. In addition, effects might remain hidden since coping can at the same time relate to high stress levels (more stress requires more coping) as well as low stress levels (effective coping lowers stress). Another explanation is that flexibility and variety in coping strategies are more important to stress levels than specific coping styles (Mattlin et al. 1990). It is plausible that the live-in nature of domestic work, accompanied by the working hours, poor working conditions and restrictions from employers, reduces their options for coping and thereby women's coping flexibility. However, these aspects of coping were not explicitly assessed in this study and require further investigation.

Social networks, culture and religion

Social structures showed to be an important part of the lives of female migrant workers in various ways. On the one hand, being away from their family and the responsibility for the family's income seem important sources of stress to them. On the other hand, as reported in a range of studies, social support appears to be an important way of dealing with the stresses of life (Cohen & Wills 1985; House et al. 1988; Ritsner et al. 2000). Our findings emphasize the importance of having social networks for the wellbeing of migrants. However, the temporary nature of their migration process in combination with the marginalized position and lack of financial resources of this particular group of migrants seems to reduce the accessibility of social networks.

More than half of the women in our study indicated that they prayed and read the Bible to deal with stress abroad (and also in the Philippines). A range of studies have indicated that

religious coping is commonly used by people in times of stress and in particular by society's most disadvantaged groups, including female migrant workers from the Philippines (Cruz 2006; Ferraro & Koch 1994; Nakonz & Shik 2009). Nakonz & Shik (2009) indicate that religious coping strategies used by the female migrant workers from the Philippines aim either at emotional adjustment to the (stressful) situation or at a relegation of responsibility to a higher entity, rather than at action to change the stressors. Although religious coping strategies were evident in all migration phases, the meaning and impact of religion and spirituality may be transformed by the migration process (Hagan & Ebaugh 2003; Hirschman 2004). Cruz (2006) for example describes how religion helps female (Filipino) migrants to maintain their cultural identity.

Results relating to stress and coping, especially social support and religion, are likely influenced by Filipino culture. Several studies found similar coping patterns among Filipino Americans (Yeh & Wang 2000; Bjorck et al. 2001; Sanchez & Gaw 2007). Coping styles of Filipinos might not always be adaptive in more individualistic cultures, thereby negatively affecting wellbeing. However, coping patterns reported in these studies could also result from the minority status of these individuals since they all focused on Filipinos living abroad. Cross-cultural comparative research can help to further unravel the interaction between culture, (perceived) stress and coping strategies and culturally validated instruments for measuring stress and coping need to be developed for this.

Conclusion

Our study indicates that although migration is a stressful experience for women, they are often able and willing to deal with the stressors they face in order to pursue financial security and earn a livelihood for themselves and their family. However, migration often provides only a temporary and limited solution to financial uncertainty, pushing women towards a circular process of migration. In addressing the wellbeing of migrants, one needs to take phase-specificity as well as transnational dimensions of stressors and coping responses into account. Interventions should acknowledge the importance of social networks, religion, family and the notion of migration as a strategy to earn a sustainable livelihood. Focusing on women's capabilities, along with the involvement of migrant workers in research and intervention development, can provide a useful approach by simultaneously promoting wellbeing and empowerment. We also recommend more research to gain more insight in the complex processes of stress and coping. Considering that our research was retrospective in nature, longitudinal research would particularly enhance the knowledge on this topic by providing opportunities for more direct assessments of stress and coping.