

# VU Research Portal

## **Connecting visions and voices: Involving service users in realizing 'good mental health care'**

van der Ham, A.J.

2013

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

van der Ham, A. J. (2013). *Connecting visions and voices: Involving service users in realizing 'good mental health care'*. Gildeprint.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## CHAPTER 12

---

### **Toward healthy migration: an exploratory study on the resilience of migrant domestic workers from the Philippines**

#### **Abstract**

Domestic workers face many migration-related stressors that affect their mental health. Currently there is an emphasis on these workers' problems and vulnerability, while there is little insight in factors that positively affect their mental health. In this study we describe a range of factors that potentially contribute to the resilience of female domestic workers from the Philippines, and explore their relation to stress and wellbeing. The study used an explorative, mixed-methods design. First, data were collected using questionnaires (n = 500) to assess (perceived) stress levels, wellbeing, personal resources and social resources. Then, findings from the questionnaires were validated and elaborated in a work shop (n = 23) and two focus groups (n = 13; n = 8). Results show that participants perceived their wellbeing abroad as relatively good, while they also experienced high levels of stress. Workers used a variety of resources in dealing with stress. Connectedness to others and spirituality seemed to play an important role in personal resources, while the influence of reasons for migration was less clear. Employers and (access to) social networks appeared important in determining social resources. Furthermore, social resources were more often related to stress and wellbeing than personal resources. Findings from this study can help to design strengths-based interventions aimed at improving the wellbeing of female domestic workers and preventing mental health problems. The environmental factors and structural constraints that provide the context for resilience should be further explored as they influence the ability to mobilize resources.

## Introduction

### Migrant domestic workers, migration and stress

A domestic worker is a: “a wage-earner working in a (private) household, under whatever method and period of remuneration, who may be employed by one or by several employers who receive no pecuniary gain from their work” (D'Souza, 2010). They are (mostly) adult women who voluntarily migrate from one country to another to find work in the domestic-service sector. Women are specifically pulled to overseas domestic work because of the preference and demand for them in gender stereotyped low-skilled work (CARAM Asia, 2002). They 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. The Philippines is one of the main countries of origin of migrant domestic workers (UN, 2008; POEA, 2009). Migration in the Philippines is primarily driven by poverty and the need to explore other sources of livelihood. It is further facilitated by the Philippine government's (labour) export-oriented policies (Eviota, 2004; Briones, 2009). In many destination countries, domestic work is not considered part of formal work and the live-in and irregular 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; Anderson, 2000; Chin, 1998; Constable, 1999; Constable, 2002; Holroyd et al. 2001; Parrenas, 2001). Marital problems, worrying about children at home, loneliness, homesickness, poor working conditions and psychological and physical abuse by employers are commonly identified as stressors by (Filipina) migrant domestic workers. As a result, migrant domestic workers constitute a vulnerable group in terms of psychiatric morbidity (el-Hilu et al. 1990; Lau, Cheng et al., 2009; Zahid et al. 2003). However, little is known about factors that help to prevent, reduce or cope with stress and mental health problems among migrant domestic workers.

### The resilience of domestic workers

Theories of strengths and resilience provide insights that are potentially useful in gaining knowledge on how migrant domestic workers deal with the many stressors they face. According to Saleebey (2000) the strengths perspective and resilience literature: “obligate us to understand that however downtrodden, beaten up, sick, or disheartened and demoralized, individuals have survived, and in some cases even flourished.” This appears highly relevant in the context of migrant workers; despite the hardship that they face, many of them are able to adequately deal with stressors. Moreover, a significant number of workers keep looking for opportunities to work abroad.

Resilience is considered to protect wellbeing by minimizing negative effects of stress and promoting (successful) adaptation to changes (Cohen and Lazarus, 1983; Rutter, 1993; Wagnild and Young, 1993). Two types of protective factors can be distinguished: 1)

personal resources, which are dispositional characteristics of an individual such as coping, and 2) social resources which are characteristics of the relationship and support within or outside the family (Lösel and Bliesener, 1990; Saleebey, 2000). Several studies focused specifically on the resilience and wellbeing of migrant populations and found high resilience to be related to improved wellbeing and lower depression scores (Aroian and Norris, 2000; Miller and Chandler 2002). Wong and Song's (2008) findings suggest that workers whose appraisal of being abroad was positive had better mental health, particularly those who perceived migration as providing more financial and material gains. Kheezhangatte (2006) identified factors that contribute to the resilience of Indian domestic workers in Hong Kong, which included the meaningful reasons for migration, membership of small groups, work and income. Other studies reveal social support and religion as important factors in the wellbeing of migrant women (Ritsner, Modai et al. 2000; Yeh and Wang 2000; Bjorck, Cuthbertson et al. 2001; Cruz 2006; Sanchez and Gaw 2007).

Working according to a resilience and strength-based approach implies empowerment; helping individuals, families and communities see and utilize their capacities (Saleebey, 2000). This is in line with Briones' (2009) capable agency approach which emphasizes the evaluation and promotion of migrant domestic workers' capabilities instead of merely treating them as passive victims in need of (rights-based) protection. She states that: "Framing rights in the context of capability can allow the 'victim' herself to reclaim her right for her intended and valued quality of life" (Briones, 2009:141).

In this study we aim to provide more insight in the resilience of female domestic workers by presenting the results of an exploratory study on resilience in which personal resources and social resources are described in relation to perceived stress and wellbeing. 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 as well as promote empowerment (Knightbridge et al., 2006). Findings can help to design strengths-based interventions aimed at prevention of mental health problems and improving the wellbeing of migrant domestic workers.

## Methods

### Study design

The findings presented are part of an exploratory study on mental health of female domestic workers from the Philippines (ACHIEVE and VUMC –MHCC, 2011). This research project was funded by the European Union-United Nations Joint Migration and Development Initiative (EC-UN JMDI). This larger study aimed to generate evidence on the mental health issues and concerns of female migrant workers and develop a kit of prototype interventions that address these issues and concerns, thereby promoting their

wellbeing. The study combined quantitative and qualitative methods, and followed a participatory action approach (Wolffers, Fernandez and colleagues, 2002). Former female migrant workers were involved in different phases of the research process (see study methods section). The findings presented in this paper specifically focus on resilience-related factors, stress and wellbeing, which were explored through a questionnaire and validated in a workshop and two focus groups.

### Study area and population

The exploratory study 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.

A total of 500 female migrant workers were included in the questionnaire: 100 from La Union, 200 from NCR, 100 from Metro Davao and 100 from Metro Cebu. The identification of respondents was done purposively, based on the information provided by former migrant workers and local researchers who had a role as gatekeepers in the research sites, and by means of snowball sampling. In our sample we aimed for diversity in age categories, types of domestic work and countries of destination.

### Study methods

#### *Questionnaire*

To address mental health of female domestic workers from the Philippines we used a questionnaire which was administered orally through structured interviews. The questionnaire included mainly closed questions as well as some open questions. In this paper we focus on parts of the questionnaire that assess personal resources and social resources and (perceived) stress levels and wellbeing. Based on the strengths and resilience literature, we included the following items that address personal resources: reasons for migration and coping strategies. Workers were presented with a list of reasons for migration and coping strategies and indicated for each whether it applied to them, using a dichotomous scale (yes or no). Social resources included: employer-worker relationship, social support and group membership. These items were rated on the same dichotomous scale as items for personal resources. 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. They also rated perceived stress levels before migration and after migration. Perceived wellbeing abroad was rated on a 10-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating very poor wellbeing and 10 indicating very good wellbeing. A similar 10-point Likert scale was used for participants to rate their perceived overall

coping ability abroad. These ratings were made in retrospect, since workers reported perceived stress levels of their time abroad, after returning to the Philippines.

The questionnaire was constructed in English by the research team and subsequently translated into Tagalog (national language in the Philippines). Data were collected by field interviewers, among whom were six former female migrant workers and four local researchers, who received a three-day training on the questionnaire and interview techniques. During the training they 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 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for statistical analysis by the research team. We first presented descriptive statistics of all variables. Then we performed t-tests to assess the relation between these variables and stress and wellbeing.

#### *Workshop and focus groups*

Preliminary findings were validated in a validation workshop and two focus groups. The sessions specifically aimed at involving former migrant workers and other relevant stakeholders in the process of verifying and elaborating the research findings. The validation workshop included 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. All sessions started with a presentation of the findings from the questionnaire, which were subsequently discussed. Discussions were structured along the questionnaire findings, but gave participants opportunity to bring in new issues. The focus group discussions lasted for four hours. One and a half hours was devoted to the sharing of the result of the survey and two and a half hours to the discussion. The participants were asked about insights regarding the results of the survey on the state of health and well-being of migrant workers at different phases of migration. They were also asked about their experiences of stress and how they coped and about the factors that facilitated their coping at different phases of migration. The sessions were held in July and August of 2010 and were facilitated by members of the research team. The results were analysed after manual coding by a “summarizing content analysis” method (Flick et al. 2004). The output provided a validation and elaboration of the questionnaire results.

#### **Ethical issues**

The research proposal was approved by the European Union-United Nations Joint Migration and Development Initiative. The authors followed the guidelines for ethical principles and practices for community based participatory research, which emphasizes

ethics as embodied in researchers and embedded in everyday practice, 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). Throughout the research process, former migrant workers were consulted on the acceptability of the research; activities were only carried out upon their approval. At the beginning of each questionnaire, researchers explained the purpose of the study, emphasized that data would be processed anonymously and asked the respondents for their consent. For the focus group discussions and workshop, a letter of invitation was sent to individual participants to introduce the project, state the purpose and request their participation in the activity. At the beginning of each session, the participants were asked for their consent for the use of a tape recorder and taking of pictures.

## Results

In this section, we present the main findings from the questionnaire, with additional insights and illustrative quotes from the focus groups and workshops. In the results, we make a distinction between personal (reasons for migration, coping) and social resources (employer-worker relationship, social support, organization membership) in relation to resilience. Below, we first provide a profile of the participants by presenting demographic information, migration-related characteristic and average levels of stress and wellbeing.

### Profile of participants

Demographic data of the questionnaire respondents are presented in Table 12.1. The table shows that most of the women were in their middle adulthood, married, Catholic, finished secondary education and have children.

A large number of the questionnaire respondents left the Philippines with a contract as a domestic worker (86%), while others left as a tourist (10%). Most of the questionnaire respondents had completed one or two contracts (usually a two-year contract) 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 workers did not finish any contract (4.2%).

During their last contract the majority of the questionnaire 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 survey participants lived with their employers (94.8%). The number of working hours per day varied considerably 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 most (70.5%) availed of this. The frequency of the regular day off varied, but usually occurred once a week or once or twice a month.

Table 12.1: Demographic data of study sample (N = 500)

	<i>N</i> (%)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) / median
<b>Age</b> (range 18-60)		<i>M</i> = 35.1 (0.37)
18-30	197 (39.4%)	
31-60	303 (60.6%)	
<b>Education (highest level completed)</b>		
Less than primary	5 (1.0%)	
Primary	43 (8.6%)	
Secondary	338 (67.6%)	
Tertiary	114 (22.8%)	
<b>Religion</b>		
Catholic	383 (76.6%)	
Born again Christian	33 (6.6%)	
Muslim	32 (6.4%)	
Protestant	17 (3.4%)	
Iglesia ni Cristo	15 (3.0%)	
Other	20 (4.0%)	
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	256 (51.2%)	
Single	161 (32.2%)	
Live-in with boyfriend/girlfriend	20 (8.6%)	
Separated	43 (4.0%)	
Widow	20 (3.8%)	
<b>Number of children</b> (range 0-7)		median = 2
<b>Stress level <i>before</i> migration</b> (scale 1-5)		<i>M</i> = 2.97 ( <i>SD</i> = 0.06)
<b>Stress level <i>during</i> migration</b> (scale 1-5)		<i>M</i> = 3.27 ( <i>SD</i> = 0.06)
<b>Stress level <i>after</i> migration</b> (scale 1-5)		<i>M</i> = 2.62 ( <i>SD</i> = 0.06)
<b>Wellbeing during migration</b> (scale 1-10)		<i>M</i> = 7.89 ( <i>SD</i> = 0.07)

The average level of stress during migration was significantly higher than average stress levels prior to migration,  $t(499)=-4.40$ ,  $p<.001$ , and stress levels after migration,  $t(499)=8.75$ ,  $p<.001$ . There were no significant differences in stress levels abroad between younger and older adults, workers who finished secondary education and workers who finished tertiary education, Catholics and non-Catholics, married and non-married workers and workers with and without children. The average (retrospective) rating of wellbeing was 7.86 on a scale of 10. There were no significant differences in ratings of wellbeing abroad between younger and older adults, Catholics and non-Catholics, married and non-married workers and workers with and without children. However, higher education was related to better wellbeing; workers who finished tertiary education rated their wellbeing significantly higher than workers who only finished secondary education

$t(496)=-2.31, p<.05$ . There was a significant negative correlation between average levels of stress and wellbeing,  $r_s(498)=-.361, p<.001$ .

## Personal resources

### *Reasons for migration.*

The most frequently mentioned reasons for migration are presented in Table 12.2.

*Table 12.2: Reasons for migration analyzed in relation to stress levels and wellbeing using t-test (N = 500)*

Reason for migration		Stress level				Wellbeing			
		mean (SD) (Scale 1-5)				mean (SD) (Scale 1-10)			
		No	Yes	t	df	No	Yes	t	df
1	To save for the future	3.35 (1.30)	3.21 (1.34)	1.14	498	7.83 (1.72)	7.88 (1.61)	-0.32	496
2	Send children to school	3.14 (1.31)	3.40 (1.31)	-2.27*	498	7.87 (1.65)	7.86 (1.65)	0.07	496
3	Poverty	3.24 (1.27)	3.30 (1.37)	-0.50	498	7.94 (1.50)	7.78 (1.79)	1.07	473.29
4	No jobs in the Philippines	3.22 (1.31)	3.32 (1.33)	-0.78	498	8.07 (1.61)	7.64 (1.67)	2.98*	496
5	To help parents and siblings	3.26 (1.35)	3.28 (1.28)	-0.15	498	7.95 (1.58)	7.76 (1.72)	1.32	460.22
6	Low salary in the Philippines	3.31 (1.26)	3.20 (1.41)	0.86	363.53	7.84 (1.70)	7.90 (1.56)	-0.42	496
7	To build a house	3.25 (1.34)	3.29 (1.28)	-0.36	498	7.85 (1.62)	7.88 (1.69)	-0.16	496
8	To see other places	3.31 (1.27)	3.15 (1.43)	1.10	207.36	7.86 (1.64)	7.88 (1.68)	-0.17	496
9	To have capital for business	3.19 (1.29)	3.51 (1.38)	-2.30*	498	7.93 (1.69)	7.66 (1.50)	1.52	496
10	To buy what children want	3.19 (1.33)	3.78 (1.14)	-3.48*	498	7.90 (1.62)	7.62 (1.82)	1.32	496

*Note.* In case of unequal variances Welch's t-test was used instead, which corrects degrees of freedom yielding a non-integer

\* Significant at  $p <.05$  (t-test)

\*\* Significant at  $p <.001$  (t-test)

Most of the reasons given by the participants are economic in nature and/or relate to providing support to family members. Some reasons were related to stress levels or wellbeing. The only reason for migration that was related to wellbeing is the lack of jobs in the Philippines; people who listed this as a reason for going abroad had relatively poor wellbeing. Having capital for business was associated with higher stress levels, while there was no relation to wellbeing. There was a similar pattern for going abroad to be able to send children to school and to be able to buy them what they want. The following comments from two focus group participants illustrate that reasons relating to being able to support children can be particularly stressful:

*When I was leaving for abroad, my children only told me what they wanted me to buy for them; this was stressful. Also, their text messages were about what they wanted me to buy for them. They told me that they love me, but that was always followed by the gifts they wanted.*

*My problem was really about how I would support my 2 children since I am a solo parent. I started a small business now (back in the Philippines).*

### *Coping strategies*

Participants were asked to rate their overall ability to cope with stress. There was a significant negative relationship between the overall ability to cope and stress levels  $r_s(497)=-.378, p<.001$ , and a significant positive relationship between the overall ability to cope and wellbeing  $r_s(497)=.660, p<.001$ . The eight most frequently reported coping strategies are presented in Table 12.3.

*Table 12.3: Coping strategies analyzed in relation to stress levels and coping ability using t-test (N = 500)*

Coping strategy	Stress level mean (SD) (Scale 1-5)				Wellbeing mean (SD) (Scale 1-10)			
	No	Yes	t	df	No	Yes	t	df
1 Praying/ Reading the Bible	3.15 (1.30)	3.38 (1.32)	-1.96	498	7.95 (1.61)	7.79 (1.69)	1.11	496
2 Crying	2.91 (1.29)	3.84 (1.15)	-8.23**	498	8.00 (1.49)	7.64 (1.85)	2.27*	347.56
3 Rest/ Sleep	3.29 (1.34)	3.21 (1.27)	0.626	498	7.82 (1.68)	7.95 (1.58)	-0.81	496
4 Staying busy/ active	3.29 (1.33)	3.20 (1.30)	0.663	498	7.84 (1.68)	7.93 (1.57)	-0.58	496
5 Talking to a friend	3.33 (1.35)	3.10 (1.21)	1.87	265.69	7.77 (1.66)	8.11 (1.59)	-2.04*	496
6 Talking to children	3.25 (1.36)	3.34 (1.18)	-0.68	206.65	7.83 (1.67)	7.99 (1.59)	0.94	496
7 Hobbies	3.24 (1.33)	3.36 (1.29)	-0.78	498	7.82 (1.73)	8.05 (1.30)	-1.51	205.79
8 Talking to partner/ spouse	3.27 (1.34)	3.27 (1.24)	-0.06	498	7.85 (1.67)	7.91 (1.58)	-0.32	496

*Note.* In case of unequal variances Welch's t-test was used instead, which corrects degrees of freedom yielding a non-integer

\* Significant at  $P < .05$  (t-test)

\*\* Significant at  $p < .001$  (t-test)

Praying/reading the bible, crying and resting/sleeping were the most frequently cited ways of dealing with stress. Other strategies involved talking to others, including friends, children and partners. Few coping strategies were related to stress levels or wellbeing. Crying as a coping strategy showed to be associated with relatively high stress levels as well as poor wellbeing. Participants who talked to a friend to deal with stress had better wellbeing than people who did not use this coping strategy. Focus group participants

further emphasized family as an important source of strength which enables them to deal with problems. They explained that thinking of their families and communicating with them helped them through hard times and gave them joy and happiness. This is illustrated by a comment from a focus group participant:

*Talking with your children makes you strong; you keep in mind that all your sacrifices are for them.*

In addition, focus group participants stated that spirituality and religiosity formed a major source of strength for them; especially praying was mentioned by the workers as an important way of coping with problems.

*A family member also died while I was working abroad. I cannot do anything, I just cried and prayed.*

*I called my family as a way of coping. They told me: 'be tough and always pray, because you'll go insane with the bulk of work.'*

The focus group findings further illustrate that endurance and acceptance is an important element of workers' coping strategies. They try not to think about their problems and to 'just bear it':

*We are good in keeping problems to ourselves, we deal with it alone. While we are abroad, we work very hard but once we are home, we can be happy again.*

*When my employer gets mad, I really wanted to talk back but I didn't because I was afraid to get fired. I just endured it.*

Another recurrent theme in the focus groups was that flexibility and ability to adapt that you need as a migrant worker, as reflected in the following comment:

*To go to other country is a privilege but you will experience culture shock. But we Filipinos are tough, creative and resourceful. We could easily adjust to any situation that we are into. We could easily adapt to situations abroad.*

Several focus group participants indicated that they used practical coping strategies, such as learning the language of their employers:

*I was looking after an elderly man and he does not speak English. One day, he asked me to return the book he borrowed from his friend. I did not understand; I thought he said to throw it away in the trash bin. I threw it away. He scolded me... What I did was to list down everything in Chinese. It helped a lot because I learned how to speak Chinese.*

## Social resources

### *Employer-worker relationship*

The questionnaire respondents were asked about positive experiences with employers. Table 12.4 provides an overview of specific positive experiences in relation to stress and wellbeing.

Table 12.4: Positive aspects of employer-worker relationship analyzed in relation to stress levels, coping ability and wellbeing using *t*-test (*N* = 500)

Positive aspect	Stress level mean ( <i>SD</i> ) (Scale 1-5)				Wellbeing mean ( <i>SD</i> ) (Scale 1-10)			
	No	Yes	<i>t</i>	Df	No	Yes	<i>t</i>	df
1 Received material gifts	3.76 (1.24)	2.94 (1.27)	7.18**	498	7.51 (1.68)	8.10 (1.59)	-3.96**	496
2 Praised for job well done	3.44 (1.27)	3.09 (1.34)	3.02*	498	7.63 (1.49)	8.11 (1.77)	-3.30*	496
3 Treated as “one of the family”	3.60 (1.21)	2.85 (1.33)	6.63**	498	7.57 (1.58)	8.24 (1.67)	-4.63**	496
4 Provided with bonus	3.50 (1.33)	2.89 (1.21)	5.26**	426.26	7.56 (1.71)	8.36 (1.41)	-5.66**	454.39
5 Joined foreign trips	3.35 (1.29)	3.02 (1.37)	2.40*	498	7.80 (1.64)	8.04 (1.67)	-1.38	496
6 Additional bonus upon return	3.35 (1.24)	3.00 (1.33)	2.63*	204.58	7.80 (1.63)	8.07 (1.71)	-1.54	496

Note. In case of unequal variances Welch's *t*-test was used instead, which corrects degrees of freedom yielding a non-integer

\*\* Significant at  $p < .05$  (*t*-test)

\*\*\* Significant at  $p < .001$  (*t*-test)

Most positive experiences were associated with positive outcomes on both stress levels and wellbeing. Especially receiving material and financial gifts and feeling part of the family had a strong relation to stress and wellbeing. About a third of the workers (34.8%) did not report any of the positive experiences listed in table 4. Respondents who could not recall any positive experiences with their employer, reported significantly higher stress levels,  $t(268.78) = 9.33$ ,  $p < .001$ , and lower ratings of wellbeing,  $t(496) = -4.52$ ,  $p < .001$ . Focus group participants explained that having a good and generous employer and maintaining a good relationship with the employers and their family was an important source of joy and happiness. A focus group participant emphasized the importance of having a good employer:

*I believe that the job is very demanding, but as long as my relationship with my employer is good, it's okay for me.*

The payment that workers receive plays a fundamental role in the employer-worker relationship. This is especially relevant considering that many workers experienced problems with non-payment and delayed payment, and the fact that regular payment is

crucial for being able to send remittances to their family in the Philippines. A focus group participant explained what payment meant to her:

*You feel good thinking that your family can eat whatever they like at least once a week.*

### *Social support*

The questionnaire inquired about the specific sources of social support, other than their employers. Workers mostly received social support from Filipino friends in the country of destination, but family members were an important source of support as well (see table 12.5).

*Table 12.5: Sources of support analyzed in relation to stress levels, coping ability and wellbeing using t-test (N = 500)*

Source of support	Stress level mean (SD) (Scale 1-5)				Wellbeing mean (SD) (Scale 1-10)			
	No	Yes	t	df	No	Yes	t	df
1 Filipino friend	3.33 (1.36)	3.16 (1.24)	1.42	403.01	7.80 (1.72)	7.98 (1.52)	-1.22	496
2 Mother	3.33 (1.32)	2.53 (1.06)	4.40**	46.99	7.82 (1.67)	8.45 (1.29)	-2.28*	496
3 Sister / brother	3.28 (1.32)	3.09 (1.23)	0.80	498	7.83 (1.67)	8.36 (1.25)	-1.81	496
4 Relative	3.27 (1.32)	3.30 (1.31)	-1.16	498	7.85 (1.66)	8.06 (1.52)	-0.71	496
5 Father	3.31 (1.33)	2.68 (0.98)	3.38*	37.70	7.81 (1.66)	8.61 (1.20)	-2.63*	496
6 Co-worker	3.27 (1.33)	3.20 (1.10)	0.35	34.71	7.80 (1.63)	7.83 (2.02)	0.10	496
7 Foreign friend	3.30 (1.31)	2.59 (1.26)	2.48*	498	7.86 (1.66)	7.95 (1.36)	-0.27	496
8 Boyfriend / girlfriend	3.29 (1.32)	2.68 (1.20)	1.98*	498	7.86 (1.66)	8.05 (1.47)	-0.51	496

*Note.* In case of unequal variances Welch's t-test was used instead, which corrects degrees of freedom yielding a non-integer

\*\* Significant at  $p < .05$  (t-test)

\*\*\* Significant at  $p < .001$  (t-test)

Some sources of support were associated with improved outcomes. Workers who received support from their mother and/ or father reported relatively low stress levels as well as better wellbeing. A considerable number of participants (42.1%) indicated that there was no one providing them with social support, which was associated with higher stress levels,  $t(251.73) = -3.63$ ,  $p < .001$ , and lower ratings of wellbeing,  $t(236.89) = 2.12$ ,  $p < .05$ . The following statements from focus group participants provide insight in the importance of having sources of social support:

*You cannot ask for help because you cannot go out. Though you know someone, you can't expect them to help you because they have no means.*

*I have no one to help me, I'm alone. Every payday, I spend all my money on overseas calls. I called my mom; I always cry my heart out to her.*

A woman described how contact with others helped her through hard times in a middle-eastern country:

*The good thing is my employer, the family of my employer; they visit her mother every Sunday. They have Filipino domestic helpers too, and we talk about our employers. It also helped. It helped me to release my anger; it helped me to release stress, reduce it.*

Knowing other Filipinas abroad is not always considered positive; a woman in the focus groups explained how this formed a major source of stress:

*When we meet, they also talk about their problems. It was so stressful; I don't want to listen to those kinds of stories. Their problems are their husbands and money... I was affected by their problems. To avoid meeting other Filipinas when I go out, I just walk around by myself. I don't go to places where I could meet Filipinas.*

### *Organization membership*

Some respondents (16.6%) indicated that they were members of an organization while being overseas. Workers who were part of an organization reported significantly lower stress levels,  $t(495)=-5.60$ ,  $p<.001$ , and better wellbeing,  $t(493)=-3.44$ ,  $p<.05$ , compared to other workers. Most respondents joined a religious organization, while others were members of organizations for overseas domestic workers, women's organizations, cultural organizations, ethno-linguistic groups, volunteer groups and sexual identity groups. Focus group participants explained why workers mostly join religious organizations. According to the participants these groups are active in recruiting members, they are conveniently situated in the churches where migrant workers hear mass or pray, they provide emotional and social support and they are nurturing, especially to newcomers in the country. Also, friendships are established through the social network of religious organizations.

## **Discussion**

### **Personal resources**

Findings from the questionnaire and focus groups show that connectedness to others (especially family) plays an important role in the coping strategies of workers. This indicates that the needs of family form a source of pressure and stress by driving women to migration, and simultaneously serve as a way of coping during migration; family ties bring stress as well as possibilities to deal with this stress. This study also emphasizes the importance of feeling connected to God, suggesting that a considerable number of workers see God as a part of their social network in the sense that they maintain a relationship with God through praying and reading the Bible. The relationship with God might provide a

stable and ever present point of reference while many other social ties alter because of migration and the isolated position that many female migrant workers find themselves in. The close connection we found between spirituality and coping among Filipino migrants has been previously described by Cruz (2006) and Nakonz and Shik (2009). It likely reflects the strong influence of the Catholic Church and Catholic faith in the Philippines, which continue to affect workers' behaviour and attitudes abroad and possibly become even more dominant. Nakonz and Shik (2009) indicate that religious coping strategies used by the female migrant workers from the Philippines generally aim at emotional adjustment to the situation or transference of responsibility to a higher entity. They argue that religious coping strategies reflect accounts of self-discipline and passivity. Similar attitudes were displayed in our study; workers emphasized the importance of "endurance" and "acceptance", although not always in the context of religion. The emphasis on more passive coping styles probably also reflects the isolated position of domestic workers and the lack of control over their situation, which forces them to find internal sources of strength. Many studies show that passive, emotion-focused coping styles are more likely when a situation seems uncontrollable and that a lack of control is related to adverse effects on wellbeing (Mirowsky and Ross 1989; Turner and Roszell 1994; Folkman 1984; Folkman, Lazarus et al. 1986; Forsythe and Compas 1987; Thoits 1991). Notably, the overall coping ability of workers was related to stress and wellbeing, while specific coping strategies were not. An explanation for the limited impact of specific coping strategies on stress and wellbeing is that flexibility and variety in coping strategies are more important than specific coping styles (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978; Mattlin, Wethington et al., 1990). Possibly the uncontrollability of the situation that workers find themselves in, affects the flexibility and variety in coping strategies resulting in adverse outcomes on stress and wellbeing.

Several scholars suggest that the reasons for migration contribute to resilience and consequently have a positive effect on wellbeing (Wong and Song, 2008; Kheezhangatte, 2006). However, in our study most reasons for migration were unrelated to stress levels or wellbeing. Gong et al. (2011) provide a possible explanation for this finding by arguing that 'human agency' plays a bigger role in determining mental health than specific reasons for migration. From the human agency perspective, having multiple strong reasons for migration and adequate planning were especially conducive to mental health. In light of Briones's (2009) notion of capabilities, structural and environmental characteristics should be taken into account as they can enhance or hinder human agency.

### **Social resources**

The social resources addressed by this study were more often related to significant reductions in stress than personal resources. This could indicate that having a good relationship with an employer contributes to improved wellbeing. At the same time this might point at the absence of negative experiences; a good relationship with an employer is

plausibly related to the absence of abuse and restrictions. The quality of this unequal relationship with employers appears crucial since many workers live in with their employer, spend almost all of their time working in their employers' house and are highly dependent on them.

A considerable part of the workers did not have any source of social support while being abroad and this was related to more stress and poor wellbeing. Ritsner, Modai et al. (2000) reported similar findings in a study among Russian immigrants in Israel. Several other studies show that social support is beneficial to wellbeing and provides a buffer against stress and mental health problems (Berkman 1984; Cohen and Wills 1985; Kessler and McLeod 1985; House, Landis et al. 1988; Rook 1992). Among our study participants support from Filipino friends (abroad) which was the most frequent, seemed unrelated to stress. A possible explanation for this is that Filipinos abroad are in a similar situation and also deal with migration-related stress; they are likely to need social support themselves and have less resources available in order to be able to provide constructive social support to others. Findings further suggest that support from parents may be particularly beneficial to workers' wellbeing. It should be noted that not all workers have parents or opportunities to communicate with them. The findings concerning different sources of social support indicate that different sources of social support can have a different impact on stress and wellbeing. Berkman (2000) provides a conceptual model of how social networks impact health. This model acknowledges that not all social network ties have a positive impact on health and explains that there is variation due to differences in the type, frequency, intensity, and extent of support provided.

Being part of an (religious) organization appears strongly related to stress levels and wellbeing. The social support that workers receive through an organization appears to contribute to improved wellbeing. Another explanation is that workers who were in distress, were more restricted by their employer or had less free time and were therefore less likely to join an organization. Sanchez and Gaw (2007) emphasize the collectivistic character of the Filipino culture, which is associated with family, peer groups and regional affiliation. Reciprocity and mutual caring characterize these relationships and impact on the way that people seek help; support from family members and friends is sought before support from professionals and specialists. Cross-cultural comparative research can help to further unravel the interaction between culture, resilience and wellbeing.

### **The resilience of migrant domestic workers**

This study gives an indication of the resilience of female migrant workers from the Philippines. Despite relatively high levels of stress, their perceived wellbeing was generally good. Our study indicates that although migration is a stressful experience for migrant workers, they are willing accept and deal with the stressors they face in order to pursue financial security and earn a livelihood for themselves and their family. Escaping poverty and improving quality of life appear to be the main drivers. As found in this study,

workers draw on various resources in dealing with stress, with social resources having a bigger impact on stress levels and wellbeing than personal resources. While the resilience perspective focuses on personal and social resources, environmental aspects (having actual access to resources) play an important role as well. These factors are addressed by the capable agency approach introduced by Briones (2009). She explains how resources of Filipino domestic workers are affected by environmental factors as they: “exist in a highly political environment of restrictive immigration and employer controls that can constrain FODW use of domestic work migration as a livelihood strategy, but also of development processes that have obliterated livelihood resource access in their country of origin” (Briones, 2009; 138). The contextual and environmental aspects of the resilience of migrant domestic workers have only been indirectly addressed in this paper, and should be further explored. As each receiving country has differing access to environmental resources, further studies on structural constraints should focus on characteristics of specific host settings, as well as the transnational context of it.

In our study, the active involvement of former female domestic workers helped to gain insight in resilience-related factors. At the same time their involvement reflected domestic workers’ capability through their expertise and accomplishments. It is therefore recommended that future studies assessing the strength of female domestic workers actively involve them in the research process and development of interventions. This means that they are actively involved in all phases of such activities, co-deciding on the design and progress. This contributes to emphasizing capability and resilience both in the process of doing research and developing interventions, as well as in the perspective and the proposed outcomes.

### **Limitations**

This study should be viewed as an explorative and descriptive study of factors that (potentially) contribute to the resilience of female domestic workers during migration. Several study limitations have to be taken into account. First of all, there is currently no validated instrument to measure resilience in the context of migration. In addition, there were no generic instruments to measure stress, wellbeing or coping ability that had been culturally validated in the Philippines. Therefore we started developing our own questionnaire for this purpose. Because of the nature and scope of the study a full validation study could not be carried. We recommend that this be done in a future study. In addition, stress levels during migration were assessed in retrospect; workers’ return to the Philippines might have altered their perspective on the earlier experiences during migration. Another limitation of this retrospective approach is that there is no insight in baseline measures; multiple measurements during migration would have provided more insight in the role of personal and social resources in relation to fluctuations in stress levels. Considering this, we recommend doing longitudinal research for a more direct assessment of stress and coping. Furthermore, it is uncertain to which extent our study findings can

be generalized to other populations of migrant workers, since the results may reflect culture-specific notions of stress and wellbeing.

### **Implications for practice**

Our study indicates that although migration is often a stressful experience for workers, they are willing to accept and deal with the stressors they face in order to pursue financial security and earn a livelihood for themselves and their family. Workers use a range of personal and social resources, with social resources especially showing to have a clear contribution to resilience. This points to interventions that focus on maintaining and strengthening social networks of the migrant and her family or community. While sending countries may particularly focus on family involvement and family expectations, receiving countries are better suited to address loneliness and home-sickness by enhancing contact with family, for example by providing easier, cheaper and faster access to means of communication. Furthermore, it is crucial to pay attention to the role of employers in the wellbeing of domestic workers, for example by proper preparation of employers and monitoring of the employer and employee during the contract. The structural and environmental constraints that provide the context for resilience should be taken into account as they likely influence the ability to mobilize social resources. These constraints may differ between countries of destination. We recommend that more research is done on environmental and structural factors in relation to resilience.