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## **Manning the waves: Masculinity shift amongst Filipino seafarers in the age of precarity**

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## **Manning the waves: Masculinity shift amongst Filipino seafarers in the age of precarity**

### **Introduction**

In this article I explored the performance of masculinity of Filipino seafarers at sea and situated this in the context of fast changing crewing preferences of shipowners, robust implementation of local laws pertaining to Filipino seafarer rights and privileges, and the power of supranational bodies to shape domestic maritime labour policies, amongst other developments in both the global and local fronts of the maritime industry. The aim is to accomplish an ethnographic rendering of masculinities that seafarers perform at sea in their quest for self-preservation and survival, in an industry that is constantly changing and where work precarity has become a normative experience in recent years (Leong 2012; Yang 2010, 2013). Specifically, this article highlights the following: the multiplicity of situationally specific masculinities (Sheff 2006) or what I will refer to in this article as masculinity shift seafarers perform onboard ships; and the salience of structural verities that shape the masculinities of Filipino seafarers whilst ashore and at sea. The performance of masculinity shift at sea by Filipino seafarers manifests their shifting gender strategies in the context of economic and cultural structures and how the experiencing of one form of masculinity ashore is predicated on the execution of different manifestations of masculinity at sea.

In the Philippines, hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) of urban middle-class men refers to a “breadwinner father” (Haile and Siegmann 2014) and this could extend as well to the rural middle-class to which many Filipino seafarers working on ocean-going merchant ships belong. Their hegemonic masculinity is further enhanced by their

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mobility, and perceived cosmopolitanism (Acejo 2013; Sampson 2003) as opposed to other sectors of seafaring (like Filipino seafarers working on domestic or inter-island merchant ships). All this enhances their image of masculine prowess, the kind of self-image that seafarers project and cultivate in their communities. This makes looking into their experiencing and performance of masculinity important from the standpoint of masculinity and gender studies.

There have been attempts in recent years to explore seafarer masculinity (Fajardo 2008, 2011; McKay 2007, McKay and Lucero-Prisno III 2012) though still few and far between in contrast to scholarly probing of masculinity in other areas of work and transnational communities (see, for example, Boehm 2008; Fabinyi 2007; Filteau 2014; George 2006; Haile and Siegmann 2014; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Hunter and Davis 1992; King 2007; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007; Montes 2013). This is quite interesting since ocean-going merchant ships are 98% crewed by men (Sampson 2013) and shipping itself accounts for 90% of global trade by volume with more than 1.6 million seafarers plying the world seas and oceans at any given time (ICS 2020). In addition, focusing on the masculinity of Filipino seafarers as a topic of research merits attention as they constitute one of the single biggest nationality blocs that supply seafarers to the global fleet (BIMCO 2015; MARINA 2019).

Whilst seafaring is oftentimes described as a very masculine world of work (Sampson 2013), and Filipino seafarers as “largely heterosexual, geographically and sexually mobile, and heroically nationalistic, while simultaneously being family oriented and usually “macho”” (Fajardo 2008: 405), very few studies have explored the experiences of seafarers and Filipino seafarers specifically in reference to their display and performance

of masculinity at sea and the contexts of such performance. In addition, whilst relevant studies on seafarer masculinity rely on interviews with seafarers, very few are actual fieldwork-based data gathered by sailing with seafarers for extended periods of time. Such ethnographic rendering provides us with a more robust appreciation and a glimpse into the masculine spaces of ships, where seafarers perform and display their masculinity, including, in the case of Filipino seafarers, masculinity shift as a way to procure survival and self-preservation in the face of rapid unsettling changes in the maritime industry.

This article attempts to contribute to the furthering of discussion on seafarer masculinities and how Filipino seafarers perform masculinity shift at sea, in the context of changes in the landscape (seascape) of the maritime industry during the past decades. Empirically, the article adds to what we already know about the experiencing and performance of Filipino seafarer masculinity onboard (see, for example, Fajardo 2011; McKay 2007; McKay and Lucero-Prisno III 2012), and theoretically, it contributes to a better understanding of the plurality and contextual nature of masculinity in certain situations and places of work. In the bigger scheme of things, this article answers the call of Willis and Yeoh (2000) for a “much greater explicit recognition of men’s migration experiences and the social construction of masculinities” (cited in Pribilsky 2007: 15).

### **Gendered moves, masculinity shift and hegemonic masculinity**

Boehm (2008) explained that contemporary labour migration or movement of workers from one place to another is also very much about gendered moves as it transforms gender subjectivities in places as shown in her study of immigration of Mexican workers to the US. As these Mexicans have experienced, both those who are left behind and opted

to migrate to the US, their mobilities or the mobilities of their husbands or wives instantiated gendered moves as they make sense of their new everyday realities. In turn, this also shapes Mexican men's experiencing and performance of their masculinity. Similar to these Mexican men, Filipino seafarers' perennial move from shore to sea (most of them work nine months at sea and stay with their families from 2 to 4 months) has subjected them to a routine shift in subjectivity, compelling them to undertake gendered moves, including their expression of masculine selves. Gendered moves through masculinity shift help us understand the ways in which Filipino seafarers make sense of their new subjectivities when at sea - all in pursuit of maintaining and enjoying hegemonic masculinity back in the Philippines.

Masculinity shift is used in relation to Connell's (1995, 2005) hegemonic masculinity which pertains to a form of masculinity which at any given time is culturally exalted compared to others. It embody(ies) the currently most honoured way of being a man, it require(s) all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate(s) the global subordination of women to men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). Hegemonic masculinity is often contraposed to and constructed in relation to subordinate and marginalised masculinities which are constituted "by virtue of race, class, sexuality, gender performance and the forms of habitus embodied or expressed by men [...]" (Sheff 2006: 623). They are the opposite of the hegemonic heterosexual ideal and as such are disparaged and conceived negatively as opposed to hegemonic masculinity.

Recent developments in masculinity studies however point to challenges to a rigidly hierarchical and vertical understanding of hegemonic masculinity. This comes for

instance in a number of studies that highlight the varying manifestations of masculinity in different settings emphasizing the “ever-changing negotiability of masculinity” (Buschmeyer and Lengersdorf 2016: 192). Studies that underpin these changes in our understanding of hegemonic masculinity is wide and varied. Buschmeyer and Lengersdorf (2016), for instance, talked about alternative masculinity and reconfigured masculinity based on their study of men in Germany as kindergarten teachers and ‘involved’ fathers, respectively. Johansson and Ottemo (2015) echo very much the givens of reconfigured masculinity of Buschmeyer and Lengersdorf (2016) in their study of “caring fathers” in Sweden which they aver could lead “to a more sensitive, caring, present and gender-equal masculinity and gender position” (2015: 201). Furthering the discussion, Bridges and Pascoe problematise the notion of hybrid masculinities which for them is the adoption of practices characterized by acceptance of diverse masculinities, opening up contemporary meanings of “masculinity” in ways that allow a more varied selection of performance to “count” as masculinities” (2014: 248). Filteau (2014), on the other hand, offered his dominant-nonhegemonic masculinities to explain how oilfield workers put premium on practices associated with industry and organizational safety standards in the workplace as a new way to performing masculinity, eschewing the traditionally conceived idea of masculinity that valorises risk-taking and feminizing lesser men, amongst others.

The article hopes to contribute to the continuing exploration of multiple masculinities as they are performed in place- and work-based contexts. However, rather than employing a concept or two from the studies mentioned above, the article makes use of masculinity shift as the article talks about a set of strategies concerning the performance of



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masculinity in the context of mitigating employment precarity in a particular work setting. In a way, masculinity shift has the advantage of a less constraining framework as it describes a place/work-based shift in experiencing masculinity which is not perceived to be inferior over other forms of doing and experiencing masculinity, but rather, a needed and most appropriate shift in pursuit of another form of masculinity. The intent here is not to rework the concept of hegemonic masculinity, but rather to expand it in context of the masculine performances of Filipino seafarers at sea. Furthermore, the deployment of masculinity shift problematises the rigid demarcations that straitjacket masculinities according to a given hierarchy. Rather, masculinity shift points to the changing and dynamic manifestations and markers of masculinity, framing them in the context of their occurrence and the subjective invocations of performers in relation to how they perceive and frame their masculinity shift in a given time and place.

### **Research methodology**

The Filipino seafarers referred to in the article were those working on ocean-going merchant ships; those who were working on domestic (or inter-island), cruise and passenger ships were not part of the study. They were mostly ratings, whilst a few were junior officers. Ratings are seafarers who do support work for officers, on deck and in the engine room, and oftentimes carry out maintenance work onboard and others such as lashing, mooring, repairing, painting and other physically strenuous jobs.

The bulk of data used in this article came from my fieldwork onboard four merchant ships which I sailed on in 2014, 2015, 2018 and 2019 for a period of five to six weeks each. These ships were trading world-wide and took me to ports in Europe, South



America, and Asia. The original purpose of sailing with seafarers on these ships was not to study Filipino masculinity onboard, but rather to study operational and safety issues amongst the crew. Access to ships had been made possible by ship management companies and ship owners who over the years of our research centre's engagement with them have seen and valued the importance of our studies in the maritime industry.

Writing this article was a long time coming. I was re-reading my journal entries (separate from the journals that I kept for the projects) from the ship voyages that I undertook for an article that I was working on when I realised that I had a lot of entries about the performance of masculinity onboard. For instance, on my second ship, I wrote how a Filipino third engineer frustratingly told me that he found their European chief engineer unjustly bossy and irrational but he could not express his disagreement with him in the open because he was fearing for his job, and therefore he said he always acted meek and obedient. Intrigued by this entry and other similar expositions, I recalled a number of interviews and informal conversations that I had with Filipino seafarers in seafarer centres and maritime training centres that I visited in the UK and the Philippines wherein we talked about their life onboard, including changes in how they experience their masculinity at sea and back in the Philippines.

For the purpose of protecting the privacy of individuals and entities mentioned in the article, all names and identifying markers have been anonymised. Protecting the privacy of my research participants was paramount and I made this clear with regard to the projects that I did with them and this is also the case in relation to the topic of this article. I had the chance of meeting some of the Filipino seafarers that I sailed with onboard for a second time in the Philippines, and during these meetings I mentioned to them that I was

preparing an article dealing with issues on masculinity at sea. Ten of them sat for an interview with me and some of the information that they shared were incorporated in this article. The interviews took place in Manila in 2018 and 2019 during my annual holiday in the Philippines.

Just like in any work space and social environment, power differentials exist onboard.

There is spatial segregation when the crew have their meals, relax and unwind after a day's work and retire for the night (Sampson 2013). As a guest onboard, I dined with the officers (either in the officers' mess or at a separate table reserved for the senior officers if there was a shared mess hall for ratings and officers). Another privilege which senior officers had was the use of the ship office coffee machine which was accorded to me on the two ships that I was on (the other two ships did not have any coffee machine). I was also addressed as Dr by the crew, signposted by the captains who were privy to the communication between our research centre and the ship management companies who called me by my title in our interaction. Everybody followed suit.<sup>1</sup>

To reduce the power imbalance that existed between me and the crew (especially the ratings), I joined many of their social activities onboard, especially after dinner social talks and coffee nights, or Saturday nights which were eagerly anticipated by the crew as they could finally consume alcohol (hard drinks were prohibited though). I also shared some personal information about my life, making it clear that I also wanted them to know

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<sup>1</sup> Crew onboard call each other by their rank and not by their name. So, the captain is captain or master, the chief engineer is chief engineer, etc. although Filipinos have aliases for the crew. So the captain is called "Apat" (referring to his four stripes) or Tano (maybe derived from Kapitan Tano, a character in Jose Rizal's *El Filibusterismo*); the chief mate is "Kamote", chief cook is "Mayor", etc. I was called Dr maybe because it was the easiest way to address me (definitely researcher is a mouthful!) and Dr could also be a way to recognise my academic affiliation and pedigree. I of course recognise the cultural and symbolic capital that came with my "name" onboard.

a bit of my life. After every social event onboard, I helped in clearing tables and cleaning the lounge. In some ways, though these small gestures did not completely absolve the power differentials between myself and the crew, this led to a better relationship as they volunteered and shared personal information and concerns with me about their family life and employment issues onboard.

I only spoke about Filipino seafarer masculinity in this article for a number of reasons. First, I am a Filipino and the bulk of the data that I gathered onboard, regardless of the presence of other nationalities as I sailed with mixed crew ships, were about Filipino seafarers. The majority of the seafarers that I sailed with were from the Philippines and my interaction with other nationalities was not as engaged and intimate as those with Filipino seafarers. Though I had the chance of observing and interacting with other nationalities as well,<sup>2</sup> I thought that my data was insufficient to talk about seafarer masculinity in general, or even about the masculinity of non-Filipino seafarers that I sailed with.

### **Filipino seafarers as exemplars of masculinity in the age of precarity**

Globalisation has been associated with increased social and economic instability and crises (Arnold and Bongiovi 2013: 290) and the Philippines is not immune to this. In recent years, precarious work has become common across industries in the Philippines (Cristobal and Resurreccion 2014; Edralin 2014; Hewison and Kalleberg 2012) which signifies, amongst others, "employers' ability to hire or fire workers, or increase or lower their wages according to business needs and worker performance (Arnold and Bogiovi

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<sup>2</sup> On the four ships that I had been on, I also sailed with seafarers from other countries like Britain, China, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Montenegro, Norway, Panama, Romania, Sri Lanka and Sweden.

2013: 294-295)." Precarious work could also come in the form of labour flexibility which according to Ofreneo (2010) is the ability to [...] increase mobility, make more elastic use of skills, and introduce nonconventional work arrangements (cited in Arnold and Bogiovi 2013: 294)

However, precarity is also about the day to day experience at work of many workers. For example, in recent years, there has been a boom in employment in the call centre industry in the Philippines (Hechanova 2013; Lee 2015; Sallaz 2019). Whilst wages in this industry have become competitive over the years and some workers get permanent appointments, the experiencing of precarity in this industry in general as shown by a number of studies comes in the form of abnormal working hours, pressure to meet targets, verbal abuse from customers and lack of career progression (Beerepoot and Hendriks 2013; Reese and Soco-Carreon 2013). All these transformations in the labour market, not least precarious work in most modes of employment, have reconfigured the ways in which gender relations are enacted and experienced by Filipinos (Eder 2006; Eviota 1992; Guevarra 2006; Jefremovas 2000; Parrenas 2001, 2007) including seafarers.

On shore, however, regardless of the features of the brave new world of work wherein Filipino workers are not unaffected, there is still an enduring image of Filipino seafarers as patrons and economic providers to the family (Acejo 2012). Quite similar to other nationalities and cultures (see, for example, Hapke 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Hunter and Davis 1992; Yang 2010), Filipino seafarers who provide for the needs of their family, and to a certain extent, parents, siblings and relatives, are looked up to and idealised as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity (McKay 2007; McKay and Lucero-Prisno III 2012). As a sign of their hegemonic masculinity, some Filipino

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seafarers that I interviewed in Manila told me that they had prevailed over their wives to stop working (if at the time of their marriage the woman was already working) or seeking any form employment as they said their salary would be good enough to provide for their needs. Filipino seafarers also enjoy high esteem in their local communities because of their good salary, cosmopolitan appeal, and the international mobility that their job affords them (Acejo 2012; Swift 2011). One seafarer told me how he was elected association president in his last high school reunion even though he was not in the honours list in class. He said that it could be because his income was a lot better than his classmates who graduated with honours.<sup>3</sup> This seafarer was a second engineer. Another seafarer told me that since he became a seafarer and built the biggest house in their barangay (district), whenever he was at home for holiday, he would get invites from their local schools to deliver a talk to students about the importance of hard work and education. He felt embarrassed he said by the attention he was getting from his community but he was enjoying it.

There is of course not one type of hegemonic masculinity in the Philippines (see also Aguilung-Dalisay et al. 1995; Angeles 2001; De Castro 1995; Rubio and Green 2011). In

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<sup>3</sup> Filipino seafarers with the lowest ranks of Ordinary Seafarer (OS) or wiper (engine department) receive not less than 1,000 USD a month (and this gets higher with overtime and depending on the type of ship that they are on), tax free. Whilst onboard, they do not have to pay for their food and accommodation. Filipino seafarers serving as officers receive a higher salary. A junior officer could get as much as 3,000.00 USD per month whilst a captain could receive 10,000.00 USD per month excluding possible bonuses from the company, compared to a regular employment ashore where getting a monthly salary of 25,000.00 PhP (500 USD) is a real struggle. Thus, seafaring, for many Filipinos, is a way out of poverty, and being employed as such makes seafarers privileged over other working men in the Philippines.

recent years, with the coming into power of Rodrigo Duterte, there arises what De Chavez and Pacheco call regional hegemonic masculinity which is “violent, combative, misogynistic and undiplomatic” (2020: 261). The one projected and cultivated by Filipino seafarers is just one amongst many and certainly different from Duterte’s, and it is the kind valorised mainly in rural areas and amongst middle-class Filipinos. Many Filipino seafarers come from the Visayas and Mindanao (Abila 2016; Amante 2003). As many provinces in these two island groups are some of the poorest in the Philippines, the ability of seafarers to provide their families a comfortable life, engage in conspicuous consumption, and travel widely make them more privileged and exalted as an occupational group more than others in their localities. However, in Luzon where the capital city of Manila is situated, a different kind of hegemonic masculinity could be at work. For example, rising wages in the capital affords many male workers a better life and accord them the ability to travel overseas for recreation, similar attributes that Filipino seafarers enjoy. And with the contractual nature of work in seafaring, the hegemonic masculinity that it projects might falter in the face of a much more secure and predictable employment that male workers have in Manila and cities in Luzon.

The hegemonic masculinity that Filipino seafarers cultivate and experience in the Philippines has the backing of the state. The Philippines as a labour brokerage state (Rodriguez 2010) has called them 'Bagong Bayani' (modern day heroes) (McKay 2007; see also Terry 2014), Filipino seafarers being part of the highly mobile global overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) sending home remittances which have kept the Philippine economy afloat (ABS-CBN 2011, Inquirer 2017; see also Encinas-Franco 2015) over the years. The consecration of Filipino seafarers as modern day heroes accords them prestige

and importance in the national imagination. In addition, as McKay (2007) puts it, such honorific designation enhances the putative virility of Filipino seafarers, sacrificing their lives for the love of the motherland.

This national narrative and elevation of Filipino seafarers to the pantheon of national heroes is put into stark relief when comparison is made with land-based OFWs, who themselves are also hailed as modern day heroes. For example, amongst other sectors of Filipinos working overseas (nurses, care givers, domestic helpers, construction workers, entertainers, etc), only Filipino seafarers have a day (last Sunday of September) dedicated to them celebrating their contribution to national life. In addition, compared to other sectors of OFWs, they have their own dedicated government agency, MARINA, that looks after their training and certification needs. Though seafaring is not limited to men, as there were also women (though very few), seafarers who work on international ships have been routinely idealised as brave, strong and full of forbearance - all masculine attributes. Filipino women seafarers as a result become peripheralised in the national consecration of seafarers as modern day heroes, symbolically rendered invisible for their contribution to the local maritime industry and the country as a whole.

### **Precarity at sea amongst Filipino seafarers**

Since the 1990s, the Philippines has been the single biggest country supplier of seafarers to the global fleet (BIMCO 2015). However, recent developments in both the global and local maritime fronts have seen threats to the continued dominance of the country as the global manning capital. For instance, in 2018, the Philippines deployed 337,502 seafarers to the global fleet from 449,463 in 2017, down by 111,961 (The Manila Times 2019). In



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contrast, India's deployment grew by 35 per cent in 2019. Thus, whilst the Philippines continues to deploy the most number of seafarers to the global fleet on an annual basis, there are indications that Filipino seafarers could face tougher competition from other nationalities in the years ahead.

Challenges to the dominance of the Philippines in the crewing sector of the global maritime industry come from different fronts. The expansion of European Union (EU) membership beginning in 2004 to include Poland, Romania, Croatia, the Baltic countries and the separation of Ukraine from Russia and its pivot towards the EU, have enabled seafarers from these countries to gain better access to EU-flagged ships. This would have an impact on the share of Filipino seafarers on the global fleet. On the other hand, the continued improvement of maritime education and training of seafarers from other Asian countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, India and Myanmar has also posed vigorous competition to the dominance of the Philippines in the global crewing market. Other nationalities also command lower wages for their work at sea. Whereas Filipino ratings would get as much as 1,400 USD per month, Indonesian and Chinese seafarers are in most cases priced at 600 to 800 USD per month, considerably cheaper than Filipino seafarers.

Furthermore, in the local front, two issues constantly threaten to undermine Filipino seafarers' dominance in the global market. First, the Philippines failed a European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Convention (STCW) audit over the standards of the country's training institutes in 2006. This threatens the employment of Filipino seafarers on EU-flagged ships. The compliance issue dragged on for many years and the results of audits made in February

and March 2020 are yet to be published (Seatrade Maritime News 2020). Second, there have been reports of an increase in the number of medical claims that Filipino seafarers have lodged against their principals (Seatrade Maritime News 2018). Maritime news reports have stated that in the past years around 26 million USD has been awarded to Filipino seafarers for their medical claims against ship owners. These indemnity claims have reportedly forced many ship owners to look for other countries to supply their ships with seafarers.

In addition, as the Philippine government implements stricter local regulations that purportedly protect Filipino seafarers from possible exploitation by unscrupulous crewing agencies, this has the unlikely effect of making it difficult for crewing agencies to fill vacancies in a shorter turnaround time. As crewing agencies in the Philippines require at least two weeks to be able to process documentary requirements of Filipino seafarers with government agencies to be able to send them overseas, the Philippines is losing competition to other countries which have a shorter processing turnaround time.

News on social media about the EMSA audit, Philippine crewing agencies losing out to competitors overseas, and longer waiting time to renew contracts, have made Filipino seafarers realise the increasing precarity of their work. In addition, whilst reports remain anecdotal, seafarers had shared with me stories of themselves, or seafarers that they knew or previously worked with, who had been denied contract renewal by crewing agencies because of work insubordination or poor evaluation by their officers. Whilst charges of insubordination or incompetence at work could be true at times, these seafarers averred that they only got into trouble because they stood up to their officers, or made remarks that displeased them. As one seafarer told me, the captain is right even if he is wrong.

Crossing the captain or any senior officer could land ratings (and even junior officers) in trouble, and ultimately lose them their job. Onboard, captain is king (Sampson and Thomas 2003) and should not be trifled with.

The precarity of their employment also translates to the precarity of their hegemonic masculinity ashore. Without their job at sea, Filipino seafarers would either become 'tambay' (bum) (Salazar 2020) – the very antithesis of being a man - or find work in another sector which would not provide them with the same remuneration and reputational capital similar to what their work at sea provides them with. With greatly reduced income (granted that they find work ashore), their prime role as family provider is compromised (and all the other privileges that work at sea accords them), and their hold to hegemonic masculinity ashore also gets undermined. Recently, in light of the COVID-19 epidemic, as many Filipino seafarers remain stranded ashore, finding it hard to get deployed overseas, a Philippine government official suggested that the government could help these unemployed seafarers find work in the construction industry. A Filipino seafarer whom I met on one of the ships that I sailed on shared this news on his Facebook account with the heading: “Maliit ang kita d’yan. Paano na ang pamilya ko? Anong silbi ko di ko sila mabubuhay dyan?” (Income in this work is a pittance. What will happen to my family? What will become of me? How do I support them with such paltry income?) His post underscores the importance of his work at sea. His centrality in the power relations in the family rests on his ability to meet the needs of his family.

### **Resisting precarity: Masculinity shift at sea of Filipino seafarers**

In the following, I will talk about the ways in which Filipino seafarers enact masculinity shift onboard and when in ports in response to their precarious employment at sea.

Mindful of their tenuous hold to their employment, their only recourse is to manage their work at sea well, including their performance of masculinity, as a way to mitigate their precarious hold on their employment. Masculinity shift here is Filipino seafarers' specific gendered moves in relation to their everyday life at sea. For Filipino seafarers, however, their masculinity shift forms part and sustains the very constitution of hegemonic masculinity that they project and aspire back in the Philippines. Thus, these multiple masculinities manifested onboard are constructed not as separate and in contrast to hegemonic masculinity but rather as necessary constitutive aspects of exercising dominance over other men and women in villages and communities where seafarers live.

It is along this line that masculinity shift is not offered by Filipino seafarers as an expression of their marginalised or subordinated masculine status onboard but rather as well-crafted and strategic gendered moves to ease and address their concerns about work precarity.

Before this it is incumbent, even briefly, that I discuss how officers, who are mostly from OECD countries, India and China, hold court onboard, owning and manifesting hegemonic masculinity in the everyday life at sea. Onboard, amongst others, the expression of hegemonic masculinity rests on the strict observance and execution of power hierarchy onboard, and the manipulation, and dominance of space. For instance, space onboard is well demarcated. The living quarters of officers are on the upper deck just below the bridge whilst ratings are on the lower floors. They are also much larger and better equipped. The officers' mess and lounge are also separate from the ratings.

The captain, being at the top of the hierarchy, can pretty much dictate the tempo of life onboard, from the enjoyment of shore leave when in port, to the possibility of overtime work (therefore additional income for the crew). The hierarchical life onboard also translates to senior officers not tolerating dissent or in many cases, contrarian opinions of the crew, which in a number of cases had resulted in physical abuse or accidents as seafarers were afraid to question the decision taken by their officers (Acejo et al 2018; Sampson 2003). Ratings in these circumstances could not openly argue with their officers, especially with senior officers. If they had been the subject of the officer's anger or harangue (on one of my ships, the chief cook relayed how a previous captain (European) barged into the galley, and called him stupid for not preparing his beef steaks well; the chief cook did not answer back, he just apologised), they had to keep their silence.

It is in the context of the power relations onboard, and developments in the landscape of the global and local maritime industry that Filipino seafarers perform their masculinity shift - all in the hope of making it to the last day of their contract without any trouble, and as such being able to come back to sea, for another term of work. Filipino seafarers exerted conscious efforts to discipline their bodies and emotions, enact what they perceived to be the appropriate manifestations of masculinity. In a way, their display of a host of differentiated masculinities is an act of self-preservation and survival. To put it another way, to be able to enjoy hegemonic masculinity back in the Philippines, they need to undertake masculinity shift – the performance and embrace of differentiated masculinities at sea.

**“No sex please, I want to finish my contract”**

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Onboard my second ship, the chief cook was referred to as “mayora” (feminine version of “mayor” the Filipino seafarers’ nomenclature for chief cook). This was of course not uttered in his presence. Made curious by this, I asked one of the crew about the referencing of homosexuality with the chief cook. One of them said that he seemed too proper and a bit “soft”. And then in one of their previous ports (and I was not yet onboard that time), the captain invited the chief cook and the messman to a bar (which also served as a brothel). The two were offered a woman each for company paid for by the captain. The messman accepted the offer whilst the chief cook declined. Back onboard, the captain shared the story to the rest of the crew, and this further fuelled the rumour that the chief cook was gay.

However, the chief cook offered a different view. In one of our conversations in the mess hall as he was preparing pastries for the crew’s afternoon snack, he recounted the same story to me, and he said this made him the butt of jokes of the crew. But he added that he had availed of the services of a sex worker once during his second year as a seafarer (working as a catering boy). However, once he got married and had children, he promised his wife that he would stop doing this. He reasoned out:

“I don’t want to get infected. Of course, I could always use a condom but that is not a guarantee. Something could happen, you never know. If I get infected, that could be a problem. Some just take antibiotics and they’re okay. But what if I get sick, or worse, really sick that I had to be sent back home like our motorman on my fourth ship?”

Similar sentiment had been relayed to me by some seafarers that I met either onboard or the ones I interviewed in the Philippines. Whilst many Filipino seafarers (or seafarers in general) still visit brothels, others believe that the practice is not as prevalent as before and more and more seafarers are avoiding these places for financial and health reasons. They told me that nowadays visiting brothels were usually done by first timers, or seafarers on their maiden voyage. Visiting brothels is a rite of passage that all seafarers undergo, they said. Other than that, frequenting brothels could spell trouble for seafarers, they added, as they could get infected with STDs which could then negatively impact on their employment. For example, a Filipino second mate told me how in a bar in Argentina he refused the offer of sexual services by the women working there because it was in this bar that their previous third mate was infected with STD during their last visit. The third mate self-medicated in the fear that his medical condition would be reported to the management company. His condition did not improve, and he had to be hospitalised as a result. His contract had been cut short and was not renewed by the company. Thus, when offered sexual services, the chief cook would jokingly say: “No sex please, I want to finish my contract.”

### **Being obedient, uncomplaining and meek**

On the bridge, the AB was telling me that he found the captain obnoxious. As he was a wheel man, he was always at the receiving end of the captain’s bad temper. When the captain was not finding the pilot particularly good to work with, he would vent his anger on the AB, shouting at him for no reason at all. If he made a small mistake, the captain would call him idiot. But the AB kept his calm. He had no chance of winning an argument with the captain. Standing up to his belligerent ways would only cause him



more trouble. He knew that the captain could always make up stories which might jeopardise his employment, especially since the captain was from an OECD country. He would not take chances. He had plans to qualify as an officer and he would not kill his chances by challenging the authority of the captain.

This is just one of the many instances where Filipino seafarers experience the brunt of their marginalised position in the power hierarchy onboard. Whilst we always think that seafarers, with their weathered faces, rough hands and sturdy bodies, do not and will not condone any hint of indignity, many of them do to be able to continuously work at sea. In this instance, both the nationality and rank of Filipino seafarers determine their reaction to these everyday assaults to their person. Being Filipino and occupying the lowest ranked position onboard relegate them to the margins of the power equation onboard. A changed subjectivity needed a changed strategy. Masculinity shift is needed in this regard. Many of them refrain from arguing with their officers as they know that this could have a detrimental impact on their employment. In their daily work, they keep their pride and bravado in check as picking a fight with their senior officers could lead to problems with their crewing agency, or worse, termination of contract.

Onboard my first ship, after a drill, a meeting was called by the captain. He was pleased with the outcome of the drill but he wanted to be reassured that all the ratings knew how to put on their life jackets. As it turned out, two had difficulties wearing them and the captain, as expected, was livid with anger. He instructed them to put them on several times until they were able to perfect the routine. In between, he was cursing them, calling them idiots. When the meeting was finished, over coffee, I asked one of the two ratings if he was okay as I thought that the public humiliation could be too much for him. He said it

was part of life onboard. Some days later, sitting with me for a chat after dinner, I asked him if this public humiliation (that's how I saw it) had any negative impact on him, especially his sense of manhood. The rating looked at me, puzzled. He said it never entered his mind. One should know his place onboard, he said. But surely, I said, you felt angry. Yes, he said. He felt humiliated but being able to control one's anger and playing meek and accepting of insults are much better than losing his chance of getting a good evaluation from the captain. He wanted to be an officer in the future and he knew that he had to play his game.

Filipino seafarers, in this instance, knew what they were doing and being obedient, uncomplaining and meek does not translate to a sense of diminished masculinity. They were just performing a different kind of masculinity, the kind which was appropriate to their subjectivity and their placement in the order of things onboard. They knew how the power dynamics work onboard, and how it works to their disadvantage. They knew that they would be in trouble if they put up a fight.

Many Filipino seafarers that I had the chance to talk to frowned on their peers who are ill-tempered or do not understand properly how to conduct themselves in the presence of their officers. They see them as naive. For instance, on one of my ships, the Filipino second engineer and the non-Filipino chief engineer had a row about work allocation. The third engineer who witnessed the incident said: "He (second engineer) had all the reasons to be angry but his handling of the problem was too aggressive." The third engineer added:

You know, what the second engineer did? He shouted at the chief engineer. What he could have done was he should have asked him for a talk. But he was too hot headed. He did not weigh in properly the consequences of his action. What if the chief engineer file a complaint against him? You see, the chief engineer is not Filipino. Onboard, they call the shots. Filipinos don't. He's stupid.

Performing masculinity shift, Filipino seafarers are cognisant of their being at the losing end of the power equation onboard. As recognised by one of them, senior officers call the shots onboard. They represent the interest of the shipping company that employs them. Earning their ire is not in the interest of Filipino seafarers since this could have a dire repercussion on their work at sea. Being Filipino and ratings make them vulnerable to power play. The locational shift, from shore to sea, necessitates masculinity shift, disallowing them to go against the hegemonic masculinity of their officers and other nationalities. However, being meek, uncomplaining and obedient does not make them less of a man, it was the appropriate type of being a man. This way of dealing with officers helps them retain their work, and book another contract which testifies to a true measure of their masculinity.

### **"To be afraid is never wrong"**

From the bridge, I could see one of the crew up in one of the cranes. He was greasing crane wires. It was 3:00 in the afternoon. On the deck, the rest of the crew were working, a number of them watching him. It was a difficult task. The height was dizzying. Though he was secured by a safety harness his work was still risky. It could only be done by somebody who was not afraid of heights. There was another seafarer on the bridge doing

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repainting work and as I was watching the seafarer on the crane, the seafarer on the bridge told me that he was supposed to do it but begged off because he was afraid of heights. It was his second ship, and on his first ship, he also asked to be relieved of this work assignment. He was understood by his mates, he said, as they were all conscious of the safety issues onboard. He said that it is important to be honest about what one feels and thinks about certain work allocations. If he could not do it, he would inform the bosun. He said that seafarers need to be honest about their limitations and fears. They should always follow rules, no cutting corners. And to be afraid is never wrong, he said. It is not good he said to plod on regardless of one's misgivings. Too much confidence, he said, would do no good.

Similar stories under different circumstances had been shared with me by Filipino seafarers whereby they expressed their disavowal of masculine prowess and sense of invulnerability when at sea. They said that being a man means knowing when to retreat from possible harm and not blinded by the desire to prove one's worth at the expense of one's life. Thus, for many Filipino seafarers, when conditions at work are a threat to their safety, they become 'not man enough' to face them; they either abandon work or consult with their officers on how to deal with them. The preservation of one's life, they averred, trumps the swagger of masculine pride and excesses.

However, it is not just in managing dangers at sea where seafarers manifest masculinity shift. It is also in expressing their emotions that seafarers find themselves disavowing the very ethos of masculinity that sets out the rule of (dis)engagement with their emotions. At sea, and on their own, separated from their families, seafarers are not expected to rue about their feelings of vulnerability and sadness. Being emotive is very feminine. It is the

antithesis of being a man. However, as many seafarers told me, expressing emotions helps seafarers unburden themselves. One example stands out.

I was interviewing a seafarer and we were talking about his family back in the Philippines when he started becoming misty eyed. We were in his cabin as he requested that the interview be done in his cabin rather than in the ship office. He stood up and went to the toilet. When he returned after some minutes, his eyes were red. He told me that he was missing his family. When his mother died, he was not able to return home to attend her funeral because the company could not find a suitable replacement at short notice. Then, in a rather bemused and apologetic tone, he told me that at sea, he had become more emotional, prone to shedding a tear especially when talking about his family back home. This admission had been repeated to me countless times by other seafarers who told me that rather than becoming tough and more stern, oftentimes, they found themselves becoming more emotional. However, these emotionalities often transpire in the privacy of their cabins (as exemplified by the seafarer that I interviewed) or in the company of peers that they became friends with onboard. Emotionalities in public spaces are still frowned upon.

Though stoicism is still widely practised and valued amongst Filipino seafarers, being expressive emotionally and not being afraid to show one's emotions to others have become more accepted and seen as normal, and not as sign of weakness. They have owned them and recast them as their masculine way of dealing with life at sea. There was a softening of the hard edges of masculinity. The acceptance of being emotionally vulnerable or appearing being weak and averse to risk taking at sea have become Filipino

seafarers' way of self-preservation, their way of minimising risk and harm to both their emotional and physical well-being.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

By looking at the practices and perception of masculinity of Filipino seafarers, this article contributes to the discussion of evolving masculinities. This article provides further empirical grounding on Connell and colleagues' protestation of masculinity as not a 'fixed entity embedded in the body or personal traits of individuals', but as a 'configuration of practice' which is accomplished in particular social contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Recognising the situational quality of doing gender is also to recognise that masculinities are not static and that, instead, they are open to change, especially in the context of migration. When there are transformations in societal structures, there are ways in which they affect us all, in how practices of gender unfold and also how we respond to changes in relation to our own survival. In the case of Filipino seafarers, the hegemonic masculinity they enact and cultivate ashore is underpinned by the masculinity shift they consciously and willingly perform onboard. Filipino seafarers' embrace and performance of what they perceive to be appropriate masculinities onboard could well be their own essaying and articulation of how fluid and malleable masculinity is.

Changes in access to employment and experience of work precarity have shaped the ways in which Filipino seafarers perform and make sense of their masculinity. At sea Filipino seafarers viewed their masculinity shift as an appropriate strategy to deal with their changing and changed subjectivity. They needed it in their work context. A number of

Filipino seafarers opted to stay away from brothels and engage with commercial sex workers when in port in the fear of contracting STD regardless of what others say about their masculinity. In the face of aggression by officers, they remained obedient and calm. They also embraced safety culture onboard, eschewing risk-taking and adventurism. Emotionalities have also become accepted and not denigrated as the sole preserve of women. In doing and experiencing all this, very much unlike the findings of Margold's (1995) study of Filipino men's work in Arab Persian Gulf countries where their work in factories had whittled away their sense of manhood (Pribilsky 2007), Filipino seafarers did not feel that their manhood was undermined in any way possible. They were agents of their own masculinity shift.

Based on the experience of Filipino seafarers, their masculinity shifts do not occupy a lesser position in the hierarchy of masculinities. They are part and parcel of the masculinity of Filipino seafarers from shore to sea. Thus, whilst the ultimate goal was the continuation of dominance ashore, masculinity shifts are no less important and an appropriate regime of strategy to address their insecure subjectivity onboard. Whilst it is always tempting to read these expressions of masculinity as manifestations of subordinated and marginalised masculinities, this deprives Filipino seafarers of agency. They opted to do masculinity shift because in the context of their subjectivity onboard it was the most appropriate way of dealing with their both experienced and perceived work precarity.

The hegemonic masculinity that Filipino seafarers perform and experience ashore is both a product of state craft and a result of the country's continuing economic condition. The Philippine state continues to elect seafarers as 'Bagong Bayani' and as such sanctions the



legitimacy of their masculine prowess which in turn seafarers ceaselessly cultivate with their narratives of adventures at sea and in port, breadwinner status in the family (and clan, in many cases) and well documented visits in different places (via Facebook and Instagram).”Their conspicuous consumption, their reputation as hyper-masculine adventurers, and their ability to endure hardships [...] (McKay 2007: 630)” allow them to transform their fraught subjectivity onboard to a kind of life ashore that celebrates their hegemonic masculinity. In a country besets by poverty, the great value given to men who can provide adequately for family members, and in the age of social media, boast about their travels overseas, are amplified. Filipino seafarers become the symbol of hegemonic masculinity for many, especially in the countryside.

How Filipino seafarers experience and make sense of their masculinity do not exist in a vacuum. They are very much underpinned by the changing landscape of the industry: expanding market of highly qualified seafarers from developing economies and eastern Europe; stricter local regulations on the deployment of Filipino seafarers to the global market and the power of supranational bodies like EMSA. These transformations have challenged the continuing dominance of the Philippines in the crewing sector of the global maritime industry and in turn, have shaped the ways in which Filipino seafarers negotiate and perform their masculinity onboard. As explained by some Filipino seafarers, they were more pliant and obedient now compared to the 1980s and 1990s because back then work contracts were long (seafarers could work onboard up to two years if they wanted to), it was a lot easier to change ships, and crewing agencies were less strict in checking the background of seafarers. Now, crewing agencies could easily

check their employment record and a negative report/evaluation about them would affect their chances of getting hired.

Filipino seafarers know that their nationality is both an advantage and a disadvantage in the maritime labour market. Filipino seafarers are known to be good in the English language, hardworking and easy to manage (Manalo et al 2015; Ruggunan 2010). These qualities make them attractive to ship owners, which also explain their dominance in the crewing sector of the industry, especially in the ratings sector. However, their nationality and rank are also their disadvantage as the power differentials onboard benefit mostly officers and seafarers coming from OECD countries. Their working hours and social lives onboard are dictated and managed by their officers. They are severely limited on what they can do and say. Regardless of the grievance mechanism onboard and other related measures stipulated by the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006, seafarers from least developed economies like the Philippines are still at the mercy of their officers. Filipino seafarers' masculinity shift therefore is one of their answers to this. As part of their transnational migratory life, their nationality and its attendant marginalised situatedness in the power equation onboard behoves them to strategise in how they act out their masculinity as required by their workplace subjectivity.

The performance of masculinities by Filipino seafarers diverging from what is perceived to be the proper way of being a man does not, however, mean that Filipino seafarers have changed their attitude towards women in general or there is a transformative decrease of sexism onboard. For example, the overwhelmingly male environment and gender norms onboard can lead to a purely sexual view of women (Montemaggio 2018: 509). When watching films that feature women, there would be a cacophony of sexual jokes and

innuendoes. On my first ship, as the second mate was a woman from Panama, in her absence, Filipino seafarers would joke about her oftentimes unkempt appearance after work hours. They expected her to be always doused in perfume and well groomed. In addition, whilst in general Filipino seafarers would welcome women seafarers in their fold, some would say so with a caveat. They still view them as physically unsuitable for the demanding and harsh working conditions at sea. They also thought that women could only work as officers on deck. Those who had worked with them in the engine room said that they made work doubly difficult as women could not do much manual labour, like lifting heavy equipment. They said the heat easily makes them tired and irritable. In addition, they felt that women were too emotive, temperamental and could be too soft to face challenges onboard like adverse weather conditions and oftentimes physically demanding inspection in ports. Filipino seafarers, just like any other seafarer, would want to preserve their dominance at sea. It is for them to conquer and enjoy. Seafaring is still a “masculinised migration” (Boehm 2008). Though they could be “incorporating elements of various “Others” into their identity projects” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 246) they were still maintaining and reasserting the dominance of men over women.

It has been said that the attainment of hegemonic masculinity is at best ideal, “uncapturable’ yardstick, used to describe something that extends beyond local practices and actions” (Speer 2001, cited in Lusher and Robins 2009: 392). There is always a distance, a tension, between collective ideal and actual lives (Carrigan et al 1985, cited in Lusher and Robins 2009: 392). This, in so many ways, also applies to Filipino seafarers. Whilst they are consecrated as “Bagong Bayani” by the Philippine government, and enjoy the respect and awe of their families and communities, the privileges that come with

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hegemonic masculinity are oftentimes short lived, and fractious. For instance, many Filipino seafarers that I talked to were also highly critical of the power and privileges that come with their being seafarers. One seafarer told me that he had become his relatives' "personal bank". It is also the case that after one or two months of being ashore with his family, when he was already running short of money, friends and relatives who used to check on him and invite him for social events would become scarce. As he had no more money to share, his worth had diminished in their eyes. Even the rhetoric of the government hailing them as "Bagong Bayani" had fallen flat for many in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst funds were made available to OFWs who had been sent back home by their employers or their deployment overseas had been halted indefinitely, many seafarers who had been left stranded in Manila and had already run out of money were complaining that they had not received any support from the government. They were left to hang out to dry. Their status as "Bagong Bayani" was useless. As one seafarer told me on Facebook messenger, he felt so sorry for himself. He had no more money. He felt useless. He was reliant on the kindness of strangers for support. And in cases like this, the experiencing of hegemonic masculinity is nowhere near in sight.

Further research could focus on other nationalities such as Indonesians, Burmese and other seafarers from developing economies and how they relate to their officers who also in most cases are from OECD countries. In a mixed crew with both Filipino and Indonesian ratings, how they relate to one another in terms of their masculine display could also help us understand the verities of masculinity in conjunction with their ethnicity. In addition, it would also be interesting to explore the power dynamics onboard and the ensuing display of masculinity in whole nationality crewed ships (all Filipinos,

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from officers to ratings). In such settings, how do Filipino seafarers manifest their masculinity? Are they similar in mixed crew ships? If that is the case, does that mean that onboard ships, rank matters more than nationality? And in what labour contexts? There have also been studies which say that seafarers find it challenging at times to reassert their control over their family members because of their long absence from home (Thomas and Bailey 2009). Wives could feel threatened and refuse to give way to the power manoeuvres of their husbands. Filipino seafarers also spoke about changes in their attitude to parenting. They told me that they became more lenient with and tolerant of the infractions of their children compared to their wives, characteristics which are oftentimes attributed to women. As one seafarer told me, he was much more ‘motherly’ than his wife with their children. These are some of the issues that are worth pursuing as Filipino seafarers continue to man the waves, finding ways to re-assert and enjoy their hegemonic masculinity ashore whilst at the same time performing masculinity shift onboard that keeps them working at sea for the foreseeable future.

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