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## THE SIRC COLUMN

# Seafarers' families: the children speak



**Dr Erol Kahveci of SIRC conducted more than 100 detailed interviews with Filipino seafarers' wives. The study looked in depth at how families were affected, socially and financially, by their absent fathers. During the study, focus group discussions were also organised with seafarers' children to document their experiences. Twelve children were randomly selected and organised in three different groups according to their ages. The youngest child was 11 and the eldest one was 20.**

IT IS known that the Philippines is one of the most schooled nations in Asia. However, in comparison to the rest of the population, one of the striking characteristics of seafarers' children (aged between 7 and 21) is that they are overwhelmingly in full-time education. They also tend to study at private schools. As well as contributing to the social and cultural capital of Filipino society, this puts the seafarers' children in a better position for their future prospects, in particular for employment opportunities.

When seafarers' children were asked to highlight the advantages of having seafarer fathers – apart from better education opportunities – they highlighted a number of things. One fifteen-year-old girl said: "You can easily ask for money from him". Other comments which highlight the positive side of being a seafarer's child were:

"He can tell us about the other countries";

"I think seafaring is very good for money, and when my father arrives we can eat many chocolates";

"For me the advantage is we can get things like nice clothes and all the material things that you need";

"I can appreciate the happiness that my dad gives me like new shoes but then happiness is not all about material things. If you share some fun it's totally different because it never ends. It will always be with you, not like shoes that will be disposed of."

As the quotes above suggest, however, the needs of seafarers' children go well beyond material things. In fact some children see the gifts as their fathers' "guilty consciousness".

"I think for my father the idea of giving presents is a mechanism for coping with the time that he has not been with us," said one 19-year-old son. A seafarer's daughter made a similar point: "I think when my father tries to give us presents when he gets home it is his way of trying to compensate for all those times that he wasn't there for us. Although he says it's his present, there's that feeling deep inside that he's really trying to compensate for all those lost times."

The memories of "those lost times" and of their father's absence during their childhood remain with the children for quite some time. They particularly recollect the memories attached to special days, such as birthdays, Christmas Day, degree ceremonies and other per-

sonal achievements. This is what one girl said:

"It's basically those special days, such as when you achieve something, and then you really want to share your achievement with your family. But then you know there's one member in your family who can't attend, who can't share your happiness. It's just that there are times when you feel you need your father the most. It's those times that he's away."

The lengthy absences of seafarers from their children also has adverse effects on paternal bonding. As one child put it: "The bond has been broken ever since my early childhood. We never talk, he never shared opinions, we never shared ideas or whatever."

Another, a girl, had this to say: "I just get used to the idea of my father being away. I was a little kid when he went away so maybe that's why I just get used to it. I miss him

and I send letters sometimes, but then it's just it."

Without any exception all the children say that having their father at home made them feel more secure and the family complete. However, adjustment to the fathers' arrival is not a smooth process as the children explain.

"Most of the time I feel like we are one of his men on the ship. There are times he keeps on saying 'you have to finish this at this time' and 'you have to do this before this'. There are lots of commands."

"We have to wake early because my dad wants us to wake up when he is up. He doesn't want us to sit down and relax, he wants us to do things. He wants all the people of the house working and working and working. Maybe he's used to the ship. When he is in the ship everybody's working."

As these comments suggest, sea-

farers' leave period brings mixed feelings for their children – feelings that move between feeling "more secure and complete" to being under "command". The children also expressed the negative side of their fathers' arrival home in relation to financial matters. As one child explains:

"Mostly my mother and father argue about money and why there aren't any savings and also why we kids spend so much money."

The children were appreciative and aware of their fathers' hard-earned money. However, being reminded of it all the time has negative effects. It makes them feel that they are a burden to their families, as one girl explains:

"In the first semester I failed in two subjects and that makes me hate myself because I want to prove to my dad that his money is worth something, but I failed the subject. So then I feel I am a burden to my family. I've wasted some of my dad's money and I hate it."

Another child, a boy, had something similar to say. "In my first year I was having a hard time adjusting to college life and after I had seen my grades I thought that I was just a burden on the family. I haven't shown anything of worth and that's the reason why I have changed my course. Now I am studying hotel and restaurant management which is much cheaper."

During a typical seafarer's contract of nine months, great physical and emotional changes can take place in a young child's life and seafarers' children frequently expressed concerns about their fathers' lack of recognition of these changes.

One teenage girl said: "When our fathers come home they expect us to still be the little kids they left behind. Things change, but they think nothing changes because it is fixed



*A FILIPINO seafarer's family but one person is missing – the seafarer himself. (Photo: SIRC photographic archive)*

in their minds that we're still the young ones they loved before.

"Sometimes there are many misunderstandings because our fathers are not with us for a year, or sometimes for 2 years. They cannot understand that when they're away we change. They want us to be what we were before, and sometimes they cannot accept the fact that we are what we are."

As part of another project researchers from SIRC have spent almost 300 days at sea sailing with seafarers on 14 different ships. During the interviews with seafarers it became clear that one of the main reasons that seafarers like their jobs is that they can support their families and provide a better future for their children. The majority of the seafarers also expressed strongly that they do not like being away from their families.

Seafarers are rightly proud of what they achieve for their children. However, as some of the comments from their children suggest, there are certain problems that the children encounter because of the lengthy absences of their fathers. The aim of this article is not to paint a pessimistic picture of seafarers' family life, but to give a voice to their children as a way of seeking solutions to their problems. Perhaps the first step forward comes from the children themselves:

"My dad spends a lot of time away from us because of his job, so communication really matters. If we communicated better all problems would be talked through. By communicating we could understand why we have these kinds of problems. That way it would not be hard for me and my dad to understand each other."



*CHILDREN of fishermen and seafarers in the Visayas region of the Philippines. (Photo: SIRC photographic archive)*