

*Chapter 9*

**‘KEEPING YOUR SEAT WARM’:  
THE ROLE OF SEAFARERS’ WIVES IN  
THE MAINTENANCE OF SOCIAL STATUS  
AND SOCIETAL PLACE**

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**ABSTRACT**

This chapter considers the role of seafarers’ wives in protecting the social identity of migrant seafarers within their home communities via the use of both ‘kin work’ and ‘status work.’ As a significant group of migrant workers who regularly return to the Philippines (usually annually) seafarers rely on their family members to maintain social relationships and social status in their absence. Communications between vessels and the shore are limited and whilst seafarers are at sea their wives, in particular, stand in for them in a variety of social roles. These range from making loans and charitable donations, to maintaining links with godchildren and extended family members. The chapter considers this under-explored aspect of migrant social identity drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a town in the Philippines and on board a cargo vessel.

**INTRODUCTION**

Familial roles have long since been recognized as linked to occupational ones and as a result we have witnessed a complex interplay between gender norms, occupational obligations, and familial demands across different regions and cultures. As both societies and

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types of work change, so too are gender and familial roles affected and adjusted. The contemporary period has witnessed rapid transformations in employment patterns in relation to both gender and to the employment of migrant contract labour. Women now constitute a very significant proportion of the labor force and many migrants are engaged in relatively short-term periods of work abroad. In the period 2003-4, for example, some 496,037 foreigners were granted temporary residence with the right to work in Australia (Hugo, 2008). This latter phenomenon can be seen to frequently link to the progression of globalization and associated processes (Sampson, 2013).

While there is some evidence that in the traditional 'old industrial areas' of OECD nations gender roles are slow to adapt to new employment situations (as when male breadwinners are replaced by female ones within the household, see Morris, 1985; Harris, Lee and Morris, 1985), there has been less exploration of gender role adaptation in migrant communities when family members leave their communities for extended periods. Such work, as there has been in this area, has often related to the ways in which those who remain 'at home' may take on non-traditional roles within the family combining both male and female roles within traditional divisions of labor (e.g., Boehm, 2008; Trinidad Galván, 2015). In relation to seafarers such work has emphasized the ways in which seafarers' wives may become more independent and more competent in relation to tasks such as household maintenance, child discipline, and financial management, all of which have been identified as beyond the gender norms of the cultures concerned (McKay, 2015; Sampson, 2005; Thomas, Sampson and Zhao, 2003). However, in Sta Ana (a pseudonym for the community in the Philippines referred to in this chapter) we have found that not only do the wives of seafarers adopt such non-traditional roles when their partners are absent but they may also engage in activities which can be regarded as 'hyper extensions' of traditional gender roles in relation to the management of family and community relationships, which have been conceptualized as kin work (Rosenthal, 1985).

Kin work has frequently been found to be the domain of women in the community who play an important role in maintaining links between members of the extended family. Alicea (1997) describes how among Puerto Rican migrants to the United States such work can even extend beyond national boundaries in the establishment and maintenance of transnational family connections. Kin work may involve offering practical help, emotional support, financial support, or physical care. In a study of wives and widows comprising a diverse sample of women from Springfield Massachusetts (12% black, 88% white), Gallagher and Gerstel (1993) found that widows provided more time and practical help to both kin and friends than wives who focused more on material assistance as a result of their better financial position. In the Philippines, seafarers' wives may work and may have family responsibilities but it is conceivable that with an absent partner they may also have more available time to socialize with others and render support to those in need, of such, in the wider community beyond the immediate family (Waite and Harrison, 1992). This would resonate with the experiences of the wives of some Indian seafarers as described by Sampson (2013).

Seafarers and their wives constitute an appropriate area for the exploration of issues relating to migration and gender roles as the shipping industry has been significantly transformed by processes of globalization and it has come to exhibit what can perhaps be described as the most globalized labor market of any sector. Within this labor market there are a number of countries which are significant providers of seafarers to the global fleet, and seafarers from the Philippines constitute the largest segment of the labor force (Philippine

Overseas Employment Agency, 2013; Ellis and Sampson, 2008). As such Filipino seafarers spend an average of 8.5 months on board cargo vessels every year and an average of 88 days' vacation at home in the Philippines (Ellis, Sampson, Acejo, Tang, et al., 2012). Such long periods of absence, interspersed with relatively short periods of time at home, raise important questions relating to the maintenance of relationships between seafarers and community members in their hometowns as well as associated issues of social identity relating to seafarers' place within communities and their related status as community members.

Previous literature has indicated that having embarked upon a working life at sea, seafarers struggle to remain embedded in their home communities (Sampson 2005; Sampson 2013; Thomas, et al., 2003). Furthermore, it has been suggested that this is one of the main reasons that many seafarers give for terminating their maritime career at a relatively young age (Raunek, 2013). However, to date, there has been little written about the ways in which seafarers' families attempt to maintain their social relationships whilst they are out of reach and on board cargo vessels where communications are generally poor. In this chapter we therefore focus upon the ways in which many seafarers' partners (usually wives as there are few women seafarers in this sector) strive to maintain their 'place' in their home communities by undertaking a range of activities on seafarers' behalf and in their stead. These can be seen as broadly congruent with both 'kin work' (Rosenthal, 1985) and what we shall term 'status work,' a concept similar to Taylor and Hartley's (1975) term 'status maintenance' but intending to emphasize that status is being established — worked at — rather than simply being preserved. We are concerned with the ways in which seafarers' wives are associated with maintaining social relationships as well as keeping up appearances. In this way wives attempt to keep their husbands' 'seats warm' in their communities - an English expression which conveys the idea of keeping a comfortable place for somebody during a temporary absence.

The chapter is based upon fieldwork undertaken by one of the authors (Acejo) in a community which we refer to here as Sta. Ana. The town of Sta. Ana is a municipality of Iloilo province situated southwest of the capital city of Iloilo province in the Philippines. The town is ninety-five percent Roman Catholic and is steeped in religious traditions. Most of the town's events and activities reflect the historical influence of Spanish occupation (ending with the Spanish American war of 1898) and include cock fighting, fiestas, and other similar celebrations. The community's long-standing involvement in outward migration impacts on many aspects of Sta. Ana. However it is particularly manifest in relation to community attitudes towards migration and social ties. According to the municipal planning office in 2009, outward migration was associated with 17% of households and of around 2,494 migrants who left the area for work in 2006, 57% were seafarers. These established patterns of migration have influenced the outward-oriented outlook of residents, including their career choices making young people much more open to migration than might otherwise be expected. This is reflected in the international dispersal of migrants, which is quite widespread, testifying to the community's increasing global ties.

The fieldwork, that we discuss in this chapter, was undertaken over a period of three months and involved interviews with a total of 49 seafarers' partners (all of whom were wives as it is relatively rare for women to work as officers or ratings aboard non-passenger cargo ships) and 10 male working-age seafarers who were temporarily 'at home' on vacation. One of the authors lived in one of the communities where seafarers and their partners were based and visited common venues for socialization amongst seafarers including bars, sari-sari stores

(stalls selling a variety of household items), cockpits (venues for cockfighting), restaurants, churches and the town's 'activity hall.' Interviews were conducted in Tagalog (the national language of the Philippines) and subsequently translated.

In the course of this research, a number of ways emerged in which seafarers' partners sought to make sure that their husbands were held in high esteem by both members of their families and the wider community. In doing this, partners protected both their husbands' status and also their own. The process can be seen to have involved wives in a certain amount of 'career support work' of the type described by Pavalko and Elder (1993) on behalf of their husbands in an effort to promote them as important and upstanding members of the local community who should be respected and welcomed upon their return. Thus we found examples of wives who were reluctant to talk (even in confidence to an interviewer from abroad) about their husband's involvement in less respectable activities in the town such as cockfighting and drinking. These endeavours resonate strongly with descriptions of the kinds of reputational work traditionally undertaken by middle-class women in affluent societies in support of their professional husbands' careers whether these be in religious service (Finch, 1980; Taylor and Hartley, 1975), the diplomatic service (Callan, 1975; Hochschild, 1969), or as doctors or academics (Fowlkes, 1980). However seafarers, and particularly ratings, do not have such 'professional' occupational status and in the context of their recurrent migration the work that their partners do on their behalf is related more to their community standing than their specific line of work. This chapter focuses on several features of this effort to maintain and protect seafarer-community relations and status namely: links with godchildren and extended family members; financially supporting parents and siblings; support for fiestas; making loans and charitable donations; and conspicuous consumption.

## **WOMEN SUPPORTING MALE CAREERS AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF KIN WORK**

In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, there were a number of studies that considered the role of wives in supporting the careers of their husbands (Pavalko and Elder, 1993; Finch, 1980; Fowlkes, 1980; Taylor and Hartley, 1975; Callan, 1975; Hochschild, 1969). More recent notable illustrations have focussed, in particular, on the ways in which the wives of high profile figures respond to public pressures to conform to certain behavioural expectations. We have seen, for example, how the wives of college and university presidents negotiate issues of identity and privacy in relation to community expectations with regard to the fulfilment of the traditional role of 'wife' (Trotman Reid, Cole and Kern, 2011) as well as how women married to sports personalities are required to maintain certain standards with regard to personal appearance and charitable acts (Gmelch and San Antonio, 2001). In recent decades, we have also seen an increased emphasis on the household division of labor with regard to 'emotion work' particularly with regard to the relationships between married couples (Minotte, Stevens and Minotte, 2007) which has some relevance here. Furthermore, work considering parenting and gender norms and roles is well-established (Seery and Crowley 2000).

Kin work became a focus for a group of scholars in OECD countries in the 1980s and 1990s who were interested in how women seemed to play a particular role in the community in supporting family members and friends. In operationalizing their research questions

relating to kin work among older women in the US, Gallagher and Gerstel (1993) adapted a technique utilized by Fischer (1982) in undertaking network analysis and categorized help associated with kin work in three ways as: 'practical' assistance (such as meal preparation or carrying shopping); 'personal' assistance (such as advice about work opportunities); and 'material' assistance (such as gift-giving or loan making).

In this chapter we conceptualize the support provided to contemporary migrant Filipino seafarers, by their partners, as combining career-support and kin work. Throughout, there is a strong focus upon 'material' help which is of great significance in the context of the Philippines (Lamvik, 2002) and is particularly relevant in the case of seafarers as a result of their relatively affluent position in the community. Seafarers in the Philippines earn dollar salaries that are considerably in excess of the wages paid to local workers in Philippine pesos. For comparison purposes the average basic pay for officer grades paid in line with International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) scales for open register vessels in 2013 was US\$1,259 per month. This excludes paid overtime which is widely available on board, as well as leave pay, and other financial additions. By contrast the average income for a Filipino household according to the Family Income and Expenditure Survey (2012) was \$415 per month. However, the discussion here is not limited to material assistance and does not discount the likelihood that some other aspects of support may simply be taken for granted in the accounts of participants.

### **Maintaining Links with Extended Family and the Community**

While seafarers are away at sea they have very limited access to communications (Ellis, et al., 2012). Over time, increased access to email on board may come to transform relationships between those at sea and those on shore. However, for the moment, reliance on Short Message Service (SMS) and telephone calls has been reported by seafarers to limit the breadth of their contacts with people ashore to immediate kin (usually partners). Seafarers feel that it would be regarded as inappropriate for them to telephone friends whilst they are at sea, for example, and many also leave contact with their extended family to their wives. When asked if her husband communicated directly with his own family one woman explained how *'I do that [for him] ...say his brother will call me ...and then I will tell him'* (Adela). Another put it this way *'Whatever is the news with his Mom and siblings I relay the information to him'* (Czarina). This kind of practice is commonplace in Sta. Ana and seafarers' partners thereby play a key role in maintaining and protecting seafarers' social relationships. In some respects this may be seen as placing them in a position of considerable influence as they can manage other people's perceptions of their seafarer husbands whilst simultaneously managing their husbands' perceptions of other people. However, such management can be fraught with tension and seafarers' wives accounts often alluded to, or sometimes directly described, associated anxieties and tensions. At times therefore the adoption of the role of mediator was undertaken with reluctance.

Sometimes seafarers demanded more from their wives than the simple passing, to and fro, of information and news. We heard examples where seafarers put pressure on their wives to intercede with family members on their behalf in ways that they sometimes felt were inappropriate or likely to produce tension and conflict. One seafarer's partner for example suggested that her husband not only wanted her to keep him up to date with the things that

were happening in the extended family but he also wanted her to act as an intermediary in relation to ‘bones of contention.’ She was (understandably) rather reluctant to take on this role but her husband would insist. She explained:

He is updated (with the family situation) if I tell him. [...] I am very detailed in emailing. [...] He goes through me [to his parents]. If he is angry with something in their house — such as what his siblings are doing — I tell him that I can’t reprimand them...he should be the one doing that. But he wants me to do it. (Lucille)

Seafarers relied on their wives to maintain relationships with their family and wider friendship networks but they also made it clear that they expected their wives to stand in their stead (to keep their seats warm) in a broader sense. As one seafarer put it:

It is very hard for seafarers because they are in and out [of the community]. If there is an association, then the wife should continue [when the seafarer is at sea]. If he is on vacation, then he is the one who should participate. (Romeo)

Occasionally, alongside the efforts that they made with members of the extended family and the broader community, it was clear that seafarers’ wives undertook kin work that was closer to home and some described the efforts that they would make to ‘oil the wheels’ of the relationships between frequently absent fathers and their children. When asked about seafarers’ bonds with family members one seafarer’s partner was quick to respond that ‘*I initiate that. I tell him that we should go to ‘this place’ and bring our daughters. We go malling [to the shopping mall] and then eat etc.*’ (Candra). Such accounts resonate with the findings of other research which have indicated that even where fathers are regularly present women may take an active role in attempting to build the relationships between them and their children. This has been identified by Seery and Crowley (2000) as particularly relevant in situations where fathers are regarded as occupied with work for long periods of the day and mothers are full-time ‘home makers’. While the parallels here are imperfect, Seery and Crowley (2000) hypothesize that in such households fathers take on the role of ‘helper’ rather than ‘sharer’ and this may produce the circumstances in which there is a need for mothers to play a more significant role in building relationships with fathers and children. They explain this hypothesis in connection to earlier work by LaRossa and LaRossa (1981) describing how:

They noted that the extent to which women and men either embrace and/or disengage from the roles of parent and financial provider is central in shaping the degree to which each becomes involved in baby care. They suggested that women often are encouraged to embrace the parental role, given that society casts them as experts in caretaking, whereas men are socially encouraged to perceive themselves as mothers’ helpers, as they disengage from parenting. Thus creating a differentiation between *helping* versus *sharing*. [...] We would hypothesise that among couples with sharing fathers, there would be less demand for mothers’ father-child relationship management work ... (Seery and Crowley, 2000, p.118)

It is very easy to see how when seafarers, who have been absent for a long period of time, return home they are encouraged to adopt a ‘helper’ role and how seafarers’ wives are inevitably cast as the ‘experts in caretaking.’ In these circumstances it is unsurprising that

they too may require (and accept) more assistance in relationship building and management than other more present fathers who share more of the daily childrearing and domestic tasks.

### **Material (Financial) Support for Parents and Siblings**

The financial arrangements in different families varied as would be expected. However, it is a requirement in the Philippines for all seafarers to remit 80% of their basic salary to a Philippines bank account; and in principle they can accept the remainder on board as a 'cash advance' or receive it at the end of the contract as a lump sum depending on the company rules. In most cases, seafarers' wives have access to such accounts and are in a position to spend and disburse the money they contain. In some families seafarers' wives also had an independent income as a result of their own employment and in many cases more than the basic remittance of 80% of basic salary was sent home.

Given the access to such funds, it was possible for wives to play an important role in protecting family members from financial hardship whilst at the same time taking steps to protect the relationships among family members. One seafarer's partner explained that in doing this she was protecting her own position in the family and investing in some ways in support that she herself might need to draw upon, at times, during her husband's absence whilst at sea. She suggested that to avoid making such financial assistance available would be undesirable and explained that she encouraged her husband to be quick with his generosity when he returned from a voyage. She described how to do otherwise would be:

'[...] quite unacceptable. The impact would be on me. I control that, so I tell him 'go give it to them. It has been two weeks and you haven't given them some.' He says 'they should wait' but I insist that he gives them. [I tell him] 'They really expect something from you!' (Czarina).

Another seafarer's wife made it clear that to maintain social relationships it was imperative that she and her husband were seen to be generous. She felt that to maintain a social life, involving visitors coming to their home, that she and her husband had to spend money on gifts and on hospitality as well as helping out those who were in need with loans. She explained that:

You know, last December he came back but he had just been on board for 3 months. He spent 500 USD for presents. [...] Here in our house, many people visited him. But he was happy with that because it suggests you have a good heart. People will not come to you if they know you will not help them. My relatives also come here.[...] Those who come sometimes ask for help others just visit us. (Ethel)

Wives would often mediate in family financial relationships when they felt called upon to do so. One woman who described her husband as rather irascible and hot-tempered described how his mother had come to learn that her best course of action, when in need, was to approach her son's wife. She explained that '*when his mother wants to ask him for something then she talks to me first. His mom also has problems...she cannot get through to her son*' (Grace).

Another example illustrated the extent to which wives sometimes seemed to have a more generous approach to their husband's families than they did themselves. One seafarer's wife said:

Sometimes his siblings need money [...] but my husband tells me that we won't give money all the time [...] because we won't be able to save any money. Although, when it comes to his siblings you cannot help but lend money. (Elena)

Similarly she described how she insisted that her partner make direct regular payments to his mother after his reluctance to do so had led to some disagreements within the family. She explained that:

I told him to give the money directly to his mother. I don't want the money to touch my hand before his mom's. I told him that his mother has more right to him because if not for his mom, he would not have been able to go to school...and he would not be where he is now. So he also needs to give money to his parents...in this way, there will be no trouble. (Elena)

In insisting upon her mother in law's 'right' to her husband's money, Elena (as the previous quote shows) was influenced by the local cultural norms which can be summed up in the term 'utang na loob' which roughly translates as 'debt of gratitude.' Seafarers, as well as their partners, were conscious of the need to 'repay' such debts of gratitude as were regarded as 'owing' to the members of seafarers' extended families who had made sacrifices in the past in order to allow them to study to become mariners.

Notwithstanding such prevalent cultural norms, in some cases there was disagreement between seafarers and their partners about the level of financial support that should be offered to family members. One woman suggested that this difference of view could be at the level of several thousand pesos when she described how:

With my mom in law I give 5,000 php [Philippine pesos] a month. It depends on what she wants to buy with that. I give her medicines every first week of the month. I even buy her milk...groceries...Actually my husband just wants to give 2,000 but I told him that it seems like his mom is complaining. (Rana)

Although seafarers could be understanding about the need for partners to make decisions about who to lend, or give, money to in the extended family and what level of support to offer, there were occasions when decisions made 'on the ground' could anger seafarers who were away at sea. In one case, a woman reported that because of her sense of shame she loaned money to her husband's cousin which caused an argument between her and her husband. She told of how:

There was a time his cousin borrowed money. I felt embarrassed in front of his Uncle so we lent the money to his cousin. Then my husband got mad because I lent the money out. Later on, this [argument between us] was patched up. (May)

Seafarers' partners felt that it was so essential to maintain harmonious family relationships in this way that some revealed that, if necessary, they would make such payments surreptitiously. Where they earned money themselves they might make payments

directly from their accounts or in other circumstances they would find alternative ways of concealing such support or only revealing it once it had been given and was a 'done deal.' One who paid money to her husband's family from her salary recounted that:

Family concerns, I deduct that from my money. His money I save that. Even the allowance for his mom, I take from my own earnings. (Grace)

Whilst another waited to tell her husband about financial support to relatives until after it had been paid, particularly in view of the fact that loans to his family often didn't get repaid in a timely fashion. She described how:

When it comes to his siblings, I give money when I have money. Sometimes when we run short of money, we can't force them to pay it asap [as soon as possible]. Since they are siblings then you are ashamed to ask for the money. Sometimes I just inform my husband after I have lent the money. (Elena)

Despite such evidence of generosity and feelings of obligation it became apparent in the course of several interviews that the disparity between the earnings of seafarers and those of their wider kin could also lead seafarers and their partners to suspect family members of taking advantage of them and of not always being truthful about how money that was given to them was spent. This could cause friction in the family and to avoid such issues emerging seafarers partners reported being 'careful' about monitoring the expenditure of funds even when such scrutiny might be considered risky in relation to the maintenance of harmonious personal relationships. One explained:

Before when they had a party, when I cannot give money, I ask my mother-in-law what is on the menu and then I buy the ingredients. If you give the money, you don't know if it is more or less. When it comes to my husband's siblings, I am strict when it comes to money...because I don't want the money to end in bad hands. So when they say, they will pay for the tuition fee, I will ask how much...and then ask for the receipt...I really check it. (Salve)

At the heart of almost all of these financial exchanges was a manifest tension between a need to be seen to be generous in the community (and often a genuine desire to be charitable) and limitations on resources. It seemed the expectations of the community could massively outweigh the resources of the seafarers and their families who felt under constant pressure not to be regarded as mean or lacking in community spirit. One seafarer's wife describe this tension as follows:

Most people think that when you are a seaman then you have so much money so they ask for it. Also they expect you to give huge amount of money. But for me, it depends. [...] I just participate with what I can give. I give in because that is my way of thanksgiving for the blessings. So it is hard if you are tight-fisted... (Ima)

A captain reinforced the extent to which seafarers were constantly attempting to balance the need to be generous, the need to protect their own self-interests, and the need to be pragmatic. In this they often understood that in order for their relatives to finally become less dependent upon them, and their dollar salaries, they (the seafarers) often needed to support them in medium term educational and business endeavours. The Captain explained it like this:

Sometimes, you want to be practical. Sometimes you get irritated. You have goals in your life...you wish that you have this (money) for yourself. If you won't support your relatives, they will be like that (i.e., dependant) forever. So if you can support them and they can stand on their own then they won't depend on you anymore. For example, she (his wife) has a sister who is sending her kid to school. Now if you don't help them then they will be forever dependent on you. So if you help them, then they will be freed from that. (Joseph)

Decisions about offering material support to relatives were therefore complex and were associated with a sense of obligation, a need to maintain good social relations and sometimes an ambition to see members of the extended family achieving independence in order to free seafarers and their families from long-term continuous financial commitments.

## STATUS WORK

In some respects the wives of Filipino seafarers can be seen as occupying the same high visibility roles in their communities as the wives of politicians or celebrities in other cultures. Although there is less research than one might hope for in relation to the adoption of such supportive public roles there has been some interesting work published on groups as diverse as the wives of politicians in Israel and baseball players in the US. This work indicates that the wives of men with high status roles in the community may feel obliged to be particularly careful about their public persona (Simon, Zach, Oglesby and Bar-Eli, 2011) and their personal appearance (Gmelch and Antonio, 2001; Simon, et al., 2011). In relation to such concerns they may attempt to safeguard both their own reputations and relationships as well as those of their husbands. Seafarers' are not a part of a political or a celebrity class yet their economic achievements produce similar expectations with regard to some issues and these extend to their families and particularly their wives. In discussing visibility and status in their communities three main areas emerged where seafarers' wives reported a particular need to conform with social expectations that were felt to be specific to them: supporting fiestas; making loans and charitable donations; and conspicuous consumption.

### Supporting Fiestas and Other Festivities

Fiestas play a very important part in the local culture and every village has at least one fiesta per year which is related to their saint's day with others occurring in conjunction with religious festivals such as Easter and Christmas. In addition there may be pageants and parades and a variety of community activities that require funds. These are occasions when the important and high-status members of the community are expected to contribute to the financing of events. This can be either by way of hosting large 'parties' with huge amounts of food and sometimes with waiters in attendance to serve the attendant delicacies, and/or sponsoring prizes and religious paraphernalia. One seafarer's partner described how extensive such affairs could be when she said '*with fiestas, we also prepare that. My siblings' visitors also come here. I pay for all that. So their co-teachers [their colleagues] will [all] come here.*' Another described in some detail the kinds of things that seafarers' wives were asked to contribute on such occasions:

They ask for contributions. This is for mass, the menu, wine (for offering). During the municipal fiesta, they ask for sponsorship for trophies. I give them cash to buy trophies. Then those having a fiesta, will solicit money for the wall of the Church of the Miraculous Medal. [In December] All the carollers come here. Sometimes, I experience a shortage of cash because it becomes an extra expense for me. (May)

A seafarer made the links between social status, contributions to fiestas/local events, and conspicuous consumption, transparent when he explained how things worked in the community and how there was a certain pressure to 'keep up with the Joneses' which is an English expression (also known in the Philippines) which means match, or exceed, the conspicuous consumption of your social peers. He said:

Here is how it works here in the pageants. It means there will be selling of tickets. 'Oh her father is a Captain,' this means that her father has to prove [demonstrate via largesse] that he is a Captain on the ship. The money they [Captains] can give can reach a million. You have to prove you are a Captain of the ship so that your daughter will be carried on that float. There are also solicitation letters where the norm is to outdo each other in donating big amount of money. You will also notice that their house has cars outside which they don't use that much. They are just there [for show]. (Arnel)

The evidence from the study of this community suggested that once again there was often a tension between more generously inclined seafarers' partners who were present in the community and working hard at kinship building and absent seafarers whose hard work was all directed towards earning dollars and whose main concern was the welfare of their immediate family. As one seafarer's wife explained:

My husband will tell me not to spend much but when your child's classmates pay you a visit, your conscience gets pricked...so you spend. You prepare food. (Salve)

She continued highlighting the role of status and shame when she suggested that:

When it comes to that gathering, it is embarrassing if you do not contribute. So even if my husband doesn't tell me to contribute then I do it on my own. (Salve)

While another seafarer's partner commented on the importance of not getting a bad name or being talked about critically in the community when she explained:

We do... [throw big parties] because we have many relatives visiting us during fiesta. That will be his relatives...Even if there is gap [i.e., a social distance] and they are not close to us, we still invite them so they won't be able to say anything [negative]. (Judy)

The community expectations weighed heavily with seafarers' wives and some described how their contribution to fiestas and events never seemed to be regarded as sufficient and how there always seemed to be demands for more financial support from them as the households which were deemed to be affluent in the locality. One seafarer's partner described how:

We have even [requests for funds] from the barrios...their centennial. You will also notice that if you give, they will [ask you to] give again next year. Sometimes it doubles... Not only religious, so there is the sports league and beauty pageant. We even receive solicitations even from barangay Manila, my husband's place of origin. (Grace)

However the expectation of parties and celebrations could also be closer to home and sometimes related to family events where seafarer households were expected to play a lead role in inviting family members to large celebrations. In practice this inevitably meant that it was seafarers' wives who organized such events and issued invitations because of the long absences of their migrant husbands. As such they also bore responsibility for getting things 'right' with respect to whom to invite and whom to omit in ways which resonated with the account given so many years earlier by Hochschild (1969) of the symbolic importance of decisions made by American Ambassadors' wives in relation to social occasions and activities. The following account is illustrative:

If there are birthdays, you invite relatives and then neighbours. It is shameful not to invite the neighbours [...] The same with relatives, if you don't invite them they will feel bad, so you have to invite them. [...] The elders, you have to invite. If you don't they will really feel bad about it. You will also hear, a week afterwards, that this elder is mad at you because you did not invite him/her. [...] (Ima)

Social occasions were therefore understood by seafarers' wives and community members to play a role in signifying and strengthening the bonds between individual family members as well as different family groups. To exclude individuals from such gatherings would be interpreted as a social slight and inclusion signified, by contrast, feelings of connection and affection between kin. Seafarers' wives paid close attention to such matters in planning social events and encouraged seafarers to be supportive of these attempts at kin work because they recognized the importance of maintaining the social glue that kept the family, including the often absent seafarers, embedded into the community.

## **Making Loans**

Within their communities (and as has already been discussed) seafarers' partners generally made a regular allowance or a series of gifts to relatives and close kin who were in need. However, from time to time, they were also called upon to lend money to neighbours in the community and more distant relatives who lived on other islands. Such actions carried with them the risk that loans might not be repaid. Sometimes such acts were not revealed to seafarers and particularly when they were repaid over a relatively short duration as in the following case when a seafarer's wife described how:

Yes they [neighbours] do [borrow money from me]. I also lend out money. They will borrow today and then return it the next day...I decide on my own. That is fine with him [seafarer husband]. He doesn't need to know. (Nina)

She added that in some cases she felt as though she were being 'tested' by friends and relatives and described how on one occasion:

Before his aunt in Mindanao called long distance to borrow money. Maybe just to test me what kind of attitude that I have and whether I can be depended on in times of emergency. She borrowed 45,000 php. Maybe she was thinking that I will have to inform my husband first. But I just said, "Okay, when do you need? I can send it now." (Nina)

It was not always the case that seafarers' families felt that they were in a financial position to make such loans but they understood that the community perceived anyone whose husband earned a dollar salary to be very wealthy and they felt under quite strong social pressure to provide financial assistance to those who approached them. One seafarer's wife described how:

Even if you don't have money. They will not believe that you don't have money. Not all seafarers have the same ranks. Some have small salaries. But because people expects that you are a seaman, so they are all the same. But for me, it differs. [...] Sometimes, I really feel pressured. Because it is different when your husband is just earning ordinary wages this is unlike other seafarers who earns higher wages. [...] If there is a tuition fee they have to pay [for example] I do [loan them money] because sometimes it is my parents asking for help. Sometimes, my co-teachers ask for financial help. (Mariel)

Thus loans were also a complex area which represented important material support but were also seen as more than this, constituting a mark of good 'citizenship.' Where such loans were difficult to make, seafarers' wives felt torn between the need to be seen to 'do the right thing' within the community and within their families and the need to protect their own immediate financial interests.

### **Making Expensive Purchases (Status Related) and Keeping Up Appearances**

A house in a migrant community may represent 'tangible evidence of [...] success' and may simultaneously symbolise 'owners' on-going connection to the place' (Thomas, 1998, p. 438). In Sta Ana, one of the most significant markers of status within the community was the house occupied by seafarers and their partners. The building of a house was frequently the first priority for many seafarers who were keen to establish their financial credentials with the display of a grandly designed residence with ample space. However the construction of a house takes a considerable amount of time and decisions about design, construction, and finance are frequently required at times when seafarers are remote and impossible to contact. In this case seafarers' partners were generally responsible for decision making and took on much of the responsibility for the construction of houses that not only 'spoke' of the financial status of the family but also served as a 'pronouncement' of the presence of the family in the community. In their accounts of the construction of houses and decisions about expensive purchases, in general, seafarers played a very minor role. One wife described how:

I built this house on my own. I went to the city to buy the things needed for the house. I did it all. When we made the house plan, he was in the ship and I was here. (Czarina)

Another gave a very similar account and explained that she made all the decisions about house design and construction with the exception of those relating to technicalities such as the electrics. She said:

Everything here in the house, I decided on that. This house, since he is far (10 months work with only 2 months vacation), I decided on everything about the house....Because he completely trusted me. In fact, in this house, when we constructed the house, I decided on everything. He doesn't want to meddle. I do the design with other technicalities, wiring, lights...then that is his part (Lilia)

And another emphasised her prioritisation of the house as the most important family investment and her husband's secondary role when arriving at decisions about expenditure when she said:

If I decide on something, we buy it but he is consulted. This house I constructed this...he just sends money. The car, I bought that. But I still think whether he can afford it or not...our kids are from private school. Others who want to build a house will still wait for their husband because they want their husband to spend on it. For me, no. I use his allotment<sup>‡</sup> to build the house. (Ethel)

In a confirmatory account another woman suggested that in relation to all major items of expenditure she held the most sway. She explained that when buying a car:

...both of us decided on it. But I had the last say...he asks, do you like this? Then I said, this the one I like. The others are suggesting but I tell him, not that. This is the one I like. (May)

Thus we can see that women played a very central role in deciding what major purchases to make and in this process they were very aware of the importance in the community of status. The importance of such conspicuous consumption in marking status was most eloquently expressed by one woman who was married to a Captain. Her husband was originally from a 'poor' family and she felt that as a result he had previously been overlooked by the community. She felt very conscious of the need to display their wealth to alter the way that he was regarded and treated as the following quote demonstrates:

You have to show that you at least have some accomplishments [financial assets]. If they don't see that you have a house, they will say, "they don't have money." So on my part, I become challenged on how to see to it that in the situation of being a Captain, he have properties like a house etc. How I can do this and the like. So I plan this, I get this. [...] My husband was very poor before. So was treated differently. He was not noticed. So I told him, your life before and your life now is different. He dresses ordinarily, you don't see him with big jewellery. But if there is an occasion which you know is attended by people who are doing well in life (naka-angat), then you also have to dress and fix yourself up so you can be on a par with them. He doesn't want that. But for me, I don't want them to say that, "now that you

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<sup>‡</sup> This is the commonly used term for the monthly salary (or portion of the salary) that is paid by employers of seafarers directly into a Philippines bank account.

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are a captain you are still the same (in appearance and maybe manner of dressing).” I told him we should also [be] level. (Aireen)

Being conscious of surveillance by the community and their associated expectations was a theme that was also highlighted by others who were aware that their own behaviour and appearance reflected upon their husbands and upon the status of the family. As one seafarer’s wife explained the life she had was challenging because:

You have to adhere to their expectations of you. They watch your every move. ...They challenge you. The way one dresses...seaman’s wife? Why like that so shabby? Or if you have a new dress, they will say “that’s natural!” Or they will say, how many years have you been married and you have no project? They always borrow money from you [...] there is a notion that you have money always. (Michelle)

Thus there was more to keeping up appearances than having a big house or making a lot of donations within the community. Seafarers and their families also had to make expansive gestures of hospitality, they needed to be willing to loan money to others and yet never request such loans for themselves, and they needed to attend to their personal appearance making sure that they looked the ‘part’ at all times and didn’t ‘let the family down.’

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have considered the ways in which seafarers’ wives respond to the need to maintain the position of their absent spouses within the community. In doing so we find resonances with past work on the public performance of the role of high status ‘wife’ (Gmelch and San Antonio, 2011; Hochschild, 1969) as well as that on emotion work (Jones, 2004). In this case seafarers’ wives engage on both fronts, in establishing themselves and their absent husbands as respected members of the community as well as making an effort to emotionally (and financially) support family members, godchildren and friends, much in the spirit of the findings of di Leonardo (1987) with regard to the relationship building activities of Italian American women in the nineteen eighties. Notwithstanding the self-evident benefits of such efforts to the community, and the wellbeing of family members, such ‘kin work’ or ‘kinkeeping’ (Rosenthal, 1985) is not without its costs to seafarers’ wives in terms of time, money, and emotion, particularly when effort is spread across a large number of family members (Gerstel and Gallagher, 1993) as is often the case with regard to the demands on seafarers’ wives. It may also be experienced as particularly challenging when women are left to manage such ‘work,’ in relation to their husbands’ connections. Thus seafarers’ wives find themselves faced with a range of demands and expectations relating to the absence of their husbands as a direct result of their chosen occupation and migrant status. These demands may not always be anticipated by women when they choose to marry a seafarer. It seems that notwithstanding changes in gender roles in the Philippines (and elsewhere) certain types of work (in this case migrant contract employment) still demand a considerable degree of ‘career support,’ ‘status work,’ and ‘kinkeeping’ by partners, who are most commonly found to be wives.

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