Women 'like parched earth in need of rain' and who relax by working:

Gossip and the surveillance of Filipino seafarer wives' morality and mobility

Roderick G Galam

Freie Universität Berlin

Abstract:

Research on the impact of male emigration on stay-behind wives shows that gossip, which transnational migration intensifies, surveils the women's morality and constricts their mobility. Based on semi-structured interviews supplemented by field observations, this article examines the impact of gossip on the lives and experiences of stay-behind Filipino seafarer wives. First, it looks into how the women negotiated an environment in which their morality became dominated by the need to keep their reputation as faithful wives intact. As women whose husbands were away for long periods of time, they were seen as being 'like parched earth in need of rain' and therefore susceptible to temptation and seduction. Second, it examines how through *dibersyon*─activities that translated work into recreation— they counteracted the constricting effects of gossip on their mobility without compromising their perceived morality. The article concludes with a reflection on the contradiction the women's negotiation of gossip creates: they inadvertently help to maintain gendered conceptions of morality and mobility while simultaneously working around the gender ideological and normative boundaries gossip enforces.

Introduction

This article examines the role played by gossip in the surveillance of stay-behind wives married to Filipino seafarers working on ships in the international fleet. It highlights the power of gossip to police and regulate their morality and mobility. This is undertaken in the context of the varied, uneven, and conflicting nature of the impact of male emigration on wives who stay behind and in the context of transnational migration's amplification of the role of gossip (Skolnik et al. 2012). Although increasing attention is now paid to gossip and transnational migration, there remains a paucity of research that examines its role in shaping the consequences of male migration on wives who stay behind particularly with respect to gender norms, relationships and practices (McEvoy et al. 2012; Skolnik et al. 2012). The discussion of the impact of gossip on the lives and experiences of stay-behind Filipino seafarer wives focuses on how the women negotiated an environment in which their morality became dominated by the need to keep their reputation as faithful wives intact. As women whose husbands were away for long periods of time, they were seen as being 'like parched earth in need of rain' and therefore susceptible to temptation. Considering the intertwinement of morality with the mobility of the women particularly those who were not in paid employment, the article then examines their mobility focusing on how their leisure activities—work translated as recreation—enabled them to enjoy spatial mobility. They constructed themselves as women who relaxed by doing more work, which the women referred to as *dibersyon* and which I consider a tactic that enables them to simultaneously engage in recreation and counteract gossip's constricting impact on their mobility without putting their perceived morality at risk.

Migration and Its Contradictory Consequences on Wives Who Stay Behind

Studies of the consequences of male emigration on the wives who stay behind particularly with respect to gender relations and practices have produced varied and conflicting results. Some researchers have noted how male emigration strengthens stay-behind women's association with traditional gender ideologies and roles (Parrenas 2005) and their subordinate position in the family (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). Others have pointed to positive consequences such as enhanced decision-making powers and expanded spheres of influence in the family arising from the women's taking over of their husband's responsibilities (Gulati 1993; Hirsch 2003; Rose and Hiller 2006). Nevertheless, the impact of the absence of husbands on stay-behind women's power and authority is not uniform as they may both gain and lose control of aspects of their lives (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). Moreover, the expansion of roles and responsibilities, which women do not always welcome and indeed assume by default, can result in family and social conflict as these changes go against traditional gender relations (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010). In their comparative study of rural Armenian and Guatemalan women, Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007, 1260) noted that 'neither the nature nor scope of these [additional] tasks challenge the deeply entrenched gender inequality'. Also, the judgement that male migration's consequences on stay-behind women engender 'positive' or 'negative' changes to the women's position 'always has a normative dimension' (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010, 46), that is, valuations depend on who is making these assessments and the particular set of values they espouse or represent. Thus, those who want to see existing gender relations and norms upheld would view as negative development women's expansion of their spheres of influence. As Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007, 1260) have also written: 'what to outside observers may appear to be increased control of the women's lives and decreased emancipation, to the women these outcomes may signal a partner's love and care for themselves and their children'. Finally, scholarly discussions of these impacts need to take into account how stay-behind women themselves perceive these

changes. Bever (2002) found in her Yucatan study that both men and women defended traditional gender ideology despite the changes male emigration brought about. De Haas and Van Rooij (2010) noted in their Moroccan study that the women did not generally view their experience of changes to their gender roles and responsibilities positively. They explain that such changes were not seen as emancipatory because they were imposed on, rather than sought by, the women. The changes put the women in an uneasy position and they did not want the potential backlash from their society that was not ready for, and potentially hostile towards, their new status (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010). Kandiyoti (1988) has coined the phrase 'patriarchal bargains' to refer to the negotiations and compromises that women make in order to secure their positions within existing patriarchal arrangements. As such, changes in gender ideologies, practices and relations attributed to migration need to be understood within broader social changes (Aysa and Massey 2004; De Haas and Van Rooij 2010).

The consequences of male migration on wives left behind are thus complex, uneven and frequently contradictory. They are nuanced and mediated by a variety of factors. Desai and Banerji (2008) noted that the migration of husbands had positive and empowering effects on the wives left behind if they lived in their own households, that is, not within an extended household particularly one with an older woman. Wives of migrant husbands who became *de facto* household heads were more likely to make their own decisions to manage daily life as well as longer-term decisions concerning the well-being of their children. Hadi (2001) noted that Bangladeshi women in rural migrant families gained more autonomy when they decided to form an autonomous sub-unit within extended households, freeing them from the control and influence of in-laws, thus enabling them to exercise more control of their households and domestic affairs (Hadi 2001, 59). Gulati (1993) concluded that the opportunities of a Keralan wife married to a husband working in the Middle East to be on her own depended on her age

and the stage of marital life-cycle at the time of her husband's migration. Older wives with children faced minimal barriers for assuming household headship whereas younger wives were subject to the authority of their mothers-in-law.

Hoodfar (1997) noted in her Cairo study that the consequences of male emigration were positive for wives who were less educated, who did not have a stable source of income, and who were more bound to traditional gender ideology. In contrast, it had negative consequences on the position of women who were gainfully employed especially the more educated ones who worked in the public sector. Their husbands' migration reversed the family's budgeting pattern. Prior to migration, husbands were responsible for the family's daily and living expenses and the wives spent their money on durables, which they can lay claim on. With migration, husbands did not send money for the family nor did they give any lump sum (which is also an accepted practice) when they came back. They instead spent part of their money on durables for which the wives did not have any say either. Wives lost both access to their husbands' income and any influence over the disposal of financial resources. Migration eroded the women's position within the household, 'reinstated the hierarchical structure of family relations and re-affirmed the traditional gender roles' (Hoodfar 1997, 91). To regain their right to their husbands' income, many of these wives invoked traditional and Islamic family ideology specifically that which pertained to the division of family responsibilities that put the financial responsibility of sustaining the family on men (Hoodfar 1997).

Existing social and cultural norms governing gender relations (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007) as well as societal receptivity to changes in stay-behind wives' roles and responsibilities condition the impact of the absence of husbands on the women (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010). In rural and semirural communities in Morocco, stay-behind women found it difficult to work outside of the home because it undermined the social role and image of

their (migrant) husbands as breadwinners (Ennaji and Sadiqi 2008). Hegland (2010) showed how Tajik generational and gender hierarchies obligated wives of Tajik men working in Russia to serve their in-laws who they lived with and determined their mothers-in-law as the primary recipient of their husband's earnings. Institutions and structures reinforce existing gender relations even where the migration of husbands has the potential to disrupt them (Parrenas 2005). Their entrenchment limits the changes that stay-behind women can positively enjoy and in some cases compounds their difficult situation. Although research on gender and migration has highlighted the above-mentioned factors, little research has looked at how gossip shapes the impact of male migration on stay-behind wives. The following section examines this issue.

Male Migration, Gossip, and the Surveillance of Women Who Stay Behind

Studies of gossip have looked at its function, following on Max Gluckman's (1963) assertion that gossip strengthened group unity (Stewart and Strathern 2004). For Gluckman, rumour and gossip reinforced norms, and policed individual conduct (Stewart and Strathern 2004, 37). Gluckman has been criticised for taking gossip only as negative slander (Mohl 1997) and for taking the community, rather than the individual, as the centre of analysis (Paine 1967). For Paine, gossip advanced the interests of the individual doing it, denigrated others and catalyzed social process (Stewart and Strathern 2004, 37). Others have pointed to the socially constructive aspect of gossip (Mohl 1997) and to its 'democratic or subaltern potential' (Herriman 2010, 725), that is, its capacity to articulate and become a vehicle for resistance particularly by those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy (Herriman 2010). Accordingly, gossip has the 'power to mobilize crowds and to spread subversion' (Herriman 2010, 725). Still others have looked at gossip as a means of social control focusing on its disciplinary power (Brennan 2004; Mintz 1997; Van Vleet 2003; Wolf 1972). Because gossip

'carries moral evaluation, and it can stigmatize those who step outside the boundaries of what the community deems appropriate behaviour', it is hence an effective way to 'reinforce cultural norms and values' (Feeley and Frost 2014, 9).

The migration of their husbands puts stay-behind wives under strict moral surveillance (Carling et al. 2012; McEvoy 2012; Mahler 2001; Skolnik et al. 2012). Aside from the close supervision of these women by family and kin (Gulati 1993; Mahler 2001), gossip is another important mechanism of policing women's morality and mobility, which are inextricably entwined. Transnational migration 'generates and amplifies the role of gossip' (Skolnik et al. 2012, 31) and women's fear that gossip about their moral and sexual behaviour (whether true or not) might reach their husband is fertile ground for controlling women's behaviour and mobility (Chant 1997; McEvoy et al. 2012; Skolnik et al. 2012). The context of these women demonstrates that gossip is particularly gendered (Brennan 2004; Dreby 2009; McEvoy et al. 2012; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007; Skolnik et al. 2012). Gossip about these women centre on moral issues (Dreby 2009), a morality tied to their sexual fidelity to their husbands that affirms or confirms their suitability as wives and mothers (McEvoy et al. 2012; Skolnik et al. 2012). Hence, women took 'more preventive actions to avoid being gossiped about' and were 'more negatively impacted by the effects of transnational gossip' (Skolnik et al. 2012, 12). For men, gossip about their faithfulness, or lack of it, to their wives did not bring about the threat of abandonment (which the women faced and feared) so long as they continued to provide for their families (Dreby 2009; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007).

Within these asymmetrical impacts, gossip reinforces traditional gender ideologies and relations. McEvoy et al. (2012) have noted that research on migrant-sending communities in Mexico and Central America has found that stay-behind women had fears about gossip reaching their husband and what it could lead to. To avoid being gossiped about by their community, they stayed at home and avoided social activities. The women's limiting of their

movement in order to protect their honour highlights the contradictions this policing brings about in terms of the stay-behind women's morality and mobility. The association between the women and the domestic sphere (as safe haven and as their 'proper place') is strengthened (McEvoy et al. 2012; Skolnik et al. 2012). Because of the out-migration of their husbands, these women were faced with the tension created by the absence of their husbands between the tasks they had to take over, which necessarily caused them to venture into the more public sphere but which, however, exposed them to gossip precisely because of their stepping out of their private/domestic sphere. Because of the threat gossip posed to their marriage, women dealt with the conflicting consequences of their husband's absence by restricting their movement (Skolnik et al. 2012). The findings of McEvoy et al. (2012) and Skolnik et al. (2012) on Mexican communities resonate with De Haas and Van Rooij's (2010, 59) explanation of the coercive power of gossip in keeping Moroccan women within socially sanctioned gender roles:

> What plays an important role is the general fear of social criticism and scandal mongering. Such criticism might endanger their respectability and, hence, their social security. In Moroccan rural society, breaking the rules too overtly may well lead to social exclusion, the consequences of which can be disastrous in times of economic hardship. Gossip, in particular, is a powerful social instrument that prevents villagers from breaking too overtly with the prevailing cultural norms on gender roles. The widespread fear of gossiping prevails in all the research villages and maintaining the good name of the family preoccupies the minds of villagers in social interaction.

Gossip is hence an important factor shaping gender relations and structures and affecting the lives and experiences of women who stay behind. It does not only police their morality and

curtail their mobility; it also blunts the potential for positive, empowering and even emancipatory changes to gender ideology and relations.

Philippine Migration, Gendered Subjectivity and Gossip

The preceding section looked at male emigration and gossip's impact on the morality and mobility of stay-behind women. As a complement to it, this section focuses on the Philippines, a major migration-source country, with 10 million Filipinos—around 10 percent of the country's population—living or working overseas. It examines how the migration of Filipino women both leads to a detraditionalisation and retraditionalisation of gender ideologies, subjectivities and practices specifically in the context of family and kin relationships. Within this discussion, I examine the role played by gossip particularly its impact on the men/husbands hence providing a comparative discussion of the consequences of gossip on those who stay behind.

Studies of gender and migration in the Philippines especially those focusing on female emigration and men who stay behind have examined the possibilities for and limitations of transformations in gendered subjectivity as a result of migration processes and experiences. Parrenas (2008) documents how communication technologies intensify the link between female gender and care work. Distance and absence change the way mothering and caring are performed but not the gender ideology that underpins the social expectation for women to perform reproductive labour even when they already undertake productive labour through migrant work. In addition, she notes that the stay-behind men fail to adapt their masculine ideology and practices to the absence of their wives; they leave the work of caring for their children to relatives and others when it would have made more economic sense if they did this themselves since they were not making enough money anyway. Pingol (2001) provides a more nuanced account of masculine gendered subjectification in the context of female emigration. Her research on househusbands married to migrant women shows that men suffer

a diminution in social status because they could not perform their role as family provider. Like women who stay behind who are saddled with responsibilities, these men also become burdened with domestic work and child-care responsibilities, while also trying to make some money in order to salvage their dignity. Pingol explicates the various ways these men reinterpreted their experiences as househusbands and, consequently, redefined and reconstituted their gendered subjectivities as men doing what were traditionally seen as a woman's job. The men countered social criticism, expressed through gossip primarily by their in-laws, by constructing an identity built on endurance, that is, a masculinity defined by the capacity to overcome sexual deprivation and take care of and raise their children on their own.

Pingol's study, conducted in a town in Ilocos Norte (the same province as my research site), enables a comparative discussion of the uses and consequences of transnational gossip on both men and women who stay behind. Although Pingol (2001) shows that men who stay behind also suffer negatively from gossip, it could be said that the goal of the gossip that she documents is not fundamentally to police the men's mobility in order to check on their morality but to deny them access to, or control of, their wives' remittances. One of the cases she presents reveals that the time men get home in the evening, upon which inferences about where they have been to, can be used especially by interfering mothers-in-law to spin gossip around. She shows how the stay-behind men's mothers-in-law employed various mechanisms so that it would be they who received their daughters' remittances and not the husbands themselves. She mentions the practice of *agidanon-danon* (delivery of news or report, from the word *danon*, meaning 'bring'), which could be seen as a form of gossip. Others resorted to manufacturing lies, which reached the women through letters that mothers wrote them. Ilokanos call this practice of fabricating stories *pamadpadakes* (from the word

dakes, meaning 'bad') or portraying someone in a bad light in order to ruin or destroy their reputation.

The *pamadpadakes* of the mothers-in-law ruined not only relationships of sons-in-law and mothers-in-law but also husbands and wives. When the men lost the trust and confidence of their wives on them, husbands felt that they were secondary to their wives (the parents/mothers remained the primary recipient of their wives' loyalty and commitment). More importantly, they perceived themselves to suffer from a further diminution of their social standing not only because they were men who were unable to perform their family provider role but also that they were effectively put more within the authority or control of their mothers-in-law who sought to influence their spousal relationship. This impelled some of the men to prove their worth to their wives, in-laws, and other community members, and to assert their dignity by showing not only that they can earn a living (albeit admittedly limited) but also that they can be good fathers capable of raising their children well. They thus performed both fathering and mothering. Some men took their responsibility seriously that they limited (if not completely avoided) spending time with their *barkada* (mates) especially in the evenings and gave their full attention to taking care of their children, while others sought the companionship and camaraderie of friends through drinking. Still others, who saw themselves as good fathers, sought sexual satisfaction by paying for it. Stay-behind men therefore enjoyed more freedom in terms of where and when they could go, or how they could spend their time. Although some of them were gossiped about for alleged extramarital relationships, the intent of the gossiping or the fabrication of stories about them was not to police their movement in order to make them behave morally. I would argue that this is because sexist and masculinist sociocultural norms make room for men's unfaithfulness while making no concessions of the same to women. The gossip was fundamentally about

laying claim to who should benefit from the earnings of the women migrant workers. Mothers-in-law were fundamentally the brains behind the gossip and lies. These mothers-in-law have therefore used gossip, particularly in the form of *pamadpadakes*, to delegitimize their sons-in-law's claim to their wives' remittances by portraying them as unworthy recipients of the fruit of their hard work.

The Study, Methods and Data

This article derives from a larger study that looked at the spatiotemporality of the subjectivity and agency of stay-behind Filipino seafarers' wives (Galam 2011). Studies of transnational gossip (Dreby 2009; Drotbohm 2010; Lang and Smart 2002) particularly those that have looked at its impact on stay-behind wives (McEvoy et al. 2012; Skolnik et al. 2012) have not paid attention to women whose husbands work in the global maritime industry. Seafarers do not live in the same kind of communities that land-based migrant workers do as seafarers live and work on a ship. Because they work anywhere from three to twelve months with other seafarers sourced from other countries and who they will most likely not work with again, seafarers do not have the dense social networks that land-based workers develop, ones that link them and their families transnationally and through which gossip can travel to the migrant husbands. The accessibility of communication is also more difficult for seafarers and their families because of the mobility of their ship, which means that they do not always have mobile phone signal. Internet on-board ships has become more available than before and this has improved communication between seafarers and their wives/families but only for those who have access to internet at home. Mobile internet has become more accessible in San Gabriel (this was not available in 2010) and interviews with wives done in 2014 showed that a number of women have availed themselves of this technology.

I conducted my fieldwork in the town of San Gabriel (a pseudonym) in Ilocos Norte, Northern Philippines. San Gabriel is an agricultural town and based on income, is classified economically as a third-class municipality. The National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB) of the Philippines defines a third-class municipality as one with an annual income in the last three calendar years of more than 35 million pesos but less than 45 million pesos (roughly between 743, 000 and 955, 000 US dollars at an exchange rate of 47 pesos to 1 US dollar). Latest available figures show that it has a population of 31, 485 and a labour force of 19,766 almost 43 per cent of whom were unemployed (Municipality of San Gabriel 2009a). I chose San Gabriel as my research site for its long history of internal and international migration, particularly to Hawaii, which began in the 1900s. Many from the town have also left for overseas jobs through the Philippine state's labour export policy. Figures from a village-by-village list of migrants from San Gabriel conducted in 2009 by the municipality's Office of Planning and Development show that 4,090 are living or working abroad (Municipality of San Gabriel 2009b). This overseas population is equivalent to 13 percent of the town's population (Municipality of San Gabriel 2009a).

The empirical data on which this article is based come from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 40 seafarer wives I conducted during fieldwork undertaken from February to September 2010. I selected participants through purposive sampling using the following parameters: wives in full-time employment; wives not in employment; wives with dependent children; wives with adult children; wives with no children; wives who live with their in-laws; and wives whose husbands have risen to rank of chief engineer or captain. These parameters—based on different circumstances, points in the lifecycle of the seamen-husband and wife, and points in the seafaring career of husbands—were taken to vitally shape and structure the women's lives and how they experienced their husband's migration. Between October 2013 and June 2014, I re-interviewed 10 of the 40 interviewees in my 2010

fieldwork. I conducted several more follow-up interviews in 2015. Of the 40 interviewees, only four did not have a child. Of the 36 mothers, two fostered or adopted a child. The youngest interviewee was 21 years old, the oldest, 53 years old. Only eight of the women were in full-time, paid employment, with six of them in the public sector (teacher, social worker). Of the 32 who were not in paid employment, 19 were engaged in some form of income-generating or economic activity (farming, raising livestock, buying and selling of food, clothes, and other items, and owning a *tianggi* [small convenience store]).

All interviews were transcribed and recurrent themes identified upon which an indexing and coding frame was prepared. This article elaborates on how gossip shaped the lives and experiences of these stay-behind wives. Names used to identify participants are pseudonyms. Where their statements are quoted, only the English translation is provided, except when particular phrases or words denote cultural concepts in which case the relevant statement is also given in the language in which it was originally said in order to provide the analysis its socio-cultural and linguistic context.

Wives Who Are 'Like Parched Earth in Need of Rain'

The absence of physical and sexual intimacy with their husbands became part of the sexual subjectivity of the research participants and a defining context of how others saw them as women-wives-mothers tied as it is to their virtue and honour. As such, this condition shaped their social lives and relations. A number of the women were forthright in saying they have unmet sexual needs and as such were, as one wife said, 'closer to temptation' but that they were not going to seek to gratify them with other men. They did everything they could to avoid being suspected of sexual impropriety and consequently become the subject of gossip. Rosa, 21 years old, married for three years and with two children, said that when she went to the capital city to do her groceries, she almost always brought along a companion or her two-

14

year old son (even if bringing him alone made the task more difficult). She was worried that people would think she was up to no good if she went out alone. Also, she said she wore very simple clothes and used no make-up or lipstick as her prettyfing might be perceived as being done for someone, that is, 'draw attention to herself to attract men'. This was echoed by another wife who said that even if she was not doing anything improper, her actions might be interpreted differently, if not maliciously, since she 'could not control how others think'. The younger research participants particularly felt that they existed in and moved around an environment in which they were seen as vulnerable women, ones who, because of the absence of their husbands, would more easily succumb to seduction. When they went to the town's *poblacion* or to the capital city, their reasons for doing were related, if not limited, to the provision of care to their families such as getting money from the bank, the purchase of food and clothes, etcetera.

To demonstrate stay-behind wives' careful negotiation of gossip, I will present the case of Marissa who elaborated on her experience. She is 30 years old, has been married for 11 years and has two children (age 10 and 8). Marissa said that men looked at women like her as 'easy-to-get' because she thought they saw her as 'like parched earth in need of rain'. Her perception of men's perception of her was based on her experience of receiving text messages and mobile phone calls from men propositioning her.

> Marissa: There are men who will really [try to exploit the fact that] some women do not have their husbands around. They have the impression that you, the woman, they think you can be tempted easily. They probably think I am like parched earth in need of rain.

> Researcher: Do you tell this to your husband?

Marissa: Of course. There was one time ... he was home. […] There was someone who had been contacting me and he texted 'Well, now that your husband is home', he said, 'what about us then'? But I had no relationship with that man. What he probably wanted to do was to destroy me because I did not succumb to what he wanted to happen. Before my husband came back, he [her husband] would sometimes ask me who I spoke to on the phone, who I exchanged text messages with. And I said, oh there are many. But I never thought he [the man who wanted a sexual relationship with her] would be so serious [as to send her such a text message that suggested they had a relationship]. But I said, before my husband came home, 'there is someone who is doing this'. I only wanted to protect myself from what might happen. There was one time that, 'I heard your husband is now back, what now then?' he said like that. 'Why, what is this?', my husband asked. Reply to him, I said. So my husband replied to him and what he said is 'I don't need you for now since my husband is here, when he is gone, then it will be the two of us again', my husband texted. And they texted each other until the man admitted we did not have anything, there was nothing.

Marissa protected herself by pre-empting the gossip that she knew would find their way to her husband. She already had an inclination that her husband was getting 'news' about her when her husband asked her 'who she was talking to or exchanging text messages with.' Why would her husband ask her such a question? Marissa suspected that it was her husband's relatives who were her neighbours who might have 'planted' the idea to her husband; the one who informed on her to him should at least know his mobile phone number and this limits the

16

usual suspects to his relatives or even mother-in-law. Marissa suspects that gossip about who she was in contact with was spun around her being seen with male and female classmates in a care-giving course she took in the capital city. That someone was so persistent and brazen in his propositions to the extent he sent her text messages as though they indeed had a sexual relationship seemed only to confirm her husband's niggling suspicions that were fuelled by gossip that reached her husband while he was still out at sea. Marissa's act of informing her husband while he was out at sea about a man who was propositioning her is strategic in that it responds to what Marissa was convinced as gossip reaching her husband. This and by showing the text messages to her husband, she prevented them becoming the source of arguments between them and staunched the potential damage it could bring to their marriage. Her husband's willingness to engage in a text conversation the man propositioning her would also seem to indicate that the gossipmonger had been successful in planting a seed of doubt in Marissa's husband's mind. His message to the other guy, 'I don't need you for now since my husband is here, when he is gone, then it will be the two of us again', aside from the fact that it was written as though it was Marissa who was replying, seems like it was designed to trap someone.

A few other wives shared that gossip about them behaving improperly had been spread by their husbands' relatives. They believed the gossip was meant to cause a rift between them and their husbands, who were the intended recipient of these gossip. The wives knew that eventually the gossip would reach their husbands either while they were out at sea through text messaging or when they came back. The wives said that their husbands' relatives would pretend to be merely informing their husbands of what they have heard. Like Marissa, these wives told their husbands of these gossip to forewarn them of what was being spread against them. Thus, mobile communication particularly text messaging played an important role in the spread of gossip. Mobile technology enables information and gossip to circulate

instantly (Horst and Miller 2006). The relatives' improved facility to communicate with the women's husbands has thus led to more surveillance of the women. While these wives understandably worried about gossip, Maria, 51 years old, mother of four children and whose husband has been seafaring for 13 years, in contrast, took a belligerent attitude towards being gossiped about. She said that the final judge will be her husband: 'A man would know if 'it' had been used. What has not been used for a long time tightens [*agserra*]'.

The fear of being gossiped about particularly around infidelity had consequences on how the research was conducted. The wives, especially the younger ones, were concerned that people who knew their husbands would talk about them being seen with a man who was not their relative and that stories would be spun around it. Interviews therefore were done in their homes or work places where others would be around to witness that nothing other than an interview took place so that if gossip about them having behaved sexually inappropriately spread, the interviewees have witnesses to vouch for them. This indicates the care they took to be above any suspicions of impropriety. In two instances where women lived in their own household, and where their children were at school during the time of the interview, the interview was conducted outside of the house making us clearly seen by their neighbours. In interviews I conducted at workplaces, where there was no other employee, arrangements were made by the wife to ensure that somebody else would be around. As one interviewee said, with the sophistication of mobile phones now, it was easy for someone with malicious intentions to take a picture of her talking to someone and send it to her husband. In contrast to younger wives, older interviewees were less bothered by gossip about being seen interviewed by a younger man not only because they have proven through many years their faithfulness to their husbands but also because, as one said, 'who would be interested in me at my age?' Such statement suggests that the potential for being gossiped about for sexual infidelity is mediated by a younger age. The ease with which the wives being seen with me was seen within sexual

relations was demonstrated by the initial concern made by the owner of the snack house where I was going to interview one wife while she waited for her son to finish school. As it was still quite early in the morning, the snack house was just getting ready to open. I spoke to the owner if she could already let us in. The interviewee was known to the owner as she and other mothers went there to wait for their children. The alarm on the owner's face, the questions she asked, and what she said made clear to me her initial hesitation arose from not wanting her snack house to become known as a place where adulterers had their trysts.

The fear of gossip not only made women vigilant about their practical behaviour and who they were seen with. When they had problems, they chose to keep things to themselves rather than seek the comfort and wisdom of others as they have sometimes been betrayed by those they confided with. Finally, gossip had consequences on the women's mobility particularly with respect to leisure. Perversely, the women relaxed by busying themselves with more work. I turn below to an examination of how gossip's role in the moral surveillance of these women played a role in translating work into leisure.

Women Who Relax by Doing More Work: Morality, Mobility, Leisure

Mobility refers to 'the movement of people from one place to another in the course of everyday life . . . the daily rounds of activities such as paid and unpaid work, leisure, socializing and shopping' (Hanson 2010, 7 quoted in McEvoy et al. 2012, 371). I will look at how concerns about gossip, particularly being suspected of infidelity, interacted with the absence of financial and other economic infrastructure in San Gabriel to engender the specific form the women's mobility and leisure took. Finally, I will look at how the way these women relaxed was given an economic justification and used not only as a way to deal with boredom but also with missing their husbands. Such a rationale provided a moral justification to their activities that responded to questions about what their mobility implied about their morality.

San Gabriel does not have a bank and as far as I was aware at the time of the fieldwork in 2010, did not have a single cash machine despite having a considerable number of families with members living or working overseas, and therefore recipients of remittances. The absence of these banking facilities is not due to the town's economic status but to its proximity to the provincial capital city. Its *poblacion*, the more urbanised area, is just seven kilometres away, about 15 minutes by jeepney, the most common public transport in the Philippines. The town immediately to the north of San Gabriel has one bank despite it having the same municipal classification based on income as San Gabriel. This is because this bank branch serves the other northern towns, which are much farther from the capital city.

The absence of these banking facilities in San Gabriel meant that women have to go to the capital city to withdraw money for their family's needs. As their husband's designated allottee, they receive at least eighty percent of their husband's salary, which is deposited directly into a bank account in accordance with Philippine state policy governing the remittance of the salary of seafarers. The dependence of San Gabriel on the capital city's financial and commercial infrastructure—banks, cash machines, grocery stores, restaurants, fastfood establishments, shopping stores, etcetera—necessitated the women's venturing not only out of their homes but also out of town. Also, a number of the women lived in villages that, although were closer to San Gabriel's town centre in terms of distance, were actually less accessible in terms of available public transportation. They therefore preferred doing their groceries and attending church service in the capital city as it was more convenient and cheaper to do so.

These Filipino seafarers' wives were more mobile than the stay-behind wives depicted in Skolnik et al. (2012) and McEvoy et al. (2012) whose mobility was severely restricted by the gendered binary between *casa* (house) and *calle* (street), which respectively stood for the private (domestic) and public (world of work) spheres. These seafarers' wives' mobility was

20

not defined by the same strict gendered delineation of space. Indeed, eight of the research participants were in full-time paid employment who faced no social criticism for being in the world of work. Their working neither put the masculine identity of their husbands as provider in question. One wife, however, shared her husband's wish for her to give up working because he did not like the fact that she often had to get a ride home from one of her male colleagues especially when they finish work late and there is no longer public transportation available (around 7 p.m.). A husband I had an informal conversation with shared that he did not want his wife, who was a full-time mother, to work because he was concerned she might be courted by male colleagues.

For married women, especially mothers, leisure is a problematic concept (Davies 2001; Forman 1989). Messner has noted that 'women's time spent in visiting, parties, outings, or watching television is certain to contain some obvious work, in preparing, serving, and putting away dishes'. He concludes that much of this '"free time" is also *work*' (quoted in Forman 1989, 3; emphasis in original). Messner points to the work inherent in these leisure activities. Here I am interested in how women transformed work into leisure. One wife explained she did not want to be just sitting down doing nothing. For many of these wives, filling in their 'empty time' equated to finding something 'meaningful' to do. Some raised pigs, chickens or goats. Others tended to vegetable gardens. A couple of mothers farmed. For most of the wives, this was a pleasant distraction, what the wives called *dibersyon* (amusement). As Maria, one of the wives who farmed explained, her farm was something she could visit. Many of the wives, particularly those who were not in paid work, said that they rarely went out. By this they meant going out in pursuit of personal recreation or leisure. When Maria said 'you go out', she meant going to her neighbours she was really close with, especially another seaman's wife. When they did go out, it was to perform a responsibility associated with their being a mother, looking after their family, or with activities that are

21

considered proper for a married woman whose husband was away or which affirmed their morality such as going to church once a week. A wife considered the time waiting for her son at school as her leisure time since it enabled her to hang out with other wives she has befriended.

There was, of course, an 'economic rationality' to all of the women's leisure-through-work activities. Those who raised animals had something to sell or had food for the family. Those who grew vegetables saved some money. 'Rather than buy them' is how one wife put it. One wife sold processed food items such as sausages, tapas, tocino (a form of cured meat) in order to have something to do. As a childless wife who partnered with another seafarer wife to make and sell food items said of what she was doing, *libangan lang* (just for recreation or amusement). Thus, their activities not only occupied them and hence filled their empty time. Through them, the wives not only produced goods that saved them money but even more significantly, earned them a modest income, which gave them much to be pleased about as, according to them, it was the fruit of their own labour. The work that they originally intended to occupy themselves with, something that relieved them of boredom, also became work that generated a return they did not simply call profit (*ganansiya*) but rather as income (*sapul*), effectively framing their leisure or recreational activity within ideas of work.

Aside from the economic justification, there was also the sociality that these informal economic activities made possible. They enabled the women to venture much farther from their homes in ways that were socially acceptable and hence did not elicit suspicion. They widened the women's social contacts as they became known to people through the food products they sold. A neighbour who was helping the two women who partnered together to make and sell food items suggested they include their mobile numbers in the packaging of their products so that they could more easily be contacted for orders. The wives did not like the idea, explaining that what they were doing was merely a *dibersyon*, something they did to

occupy their time. They did not want it to grow too big for them that it would dominate their lives. Also, they did not want to expose themselves to people who will contact them for reasons other than making an order. They immediately recognized the risk giving away their contact numbers posed on them. There was thus a limit to how far the wives were willing to take the social possibilities of their business activity, of the social becoming the backdoor to the sexual. But they welcomed how it provided a distraction to what they oftentimes described as a boring life. They thus relaxed but their activities also simultaneously involved work. Indeed, they transformed work into leisure. Leisure, paradoxically, was to be found in work.

Dibersyon might be understood another way. Maria explained that she made herself 'forget' her husband, that is, dealt with missing him by distracting herself with work. She raised pigs and farmed. Maria's farm was located on the other side of the river, which was not far from her house and she used a bamboo raft to get there. To quote her on the link between work and missing her husband: 'I deal with it through work. [. . .] Work so that my mind is taken away from my husband. Just work.' Maria used these forms of leisure-work—farming as well as raising pigs in addition to her care work for her children and elderly parents—to sublimate her sexual longing. This rechanneling of her sexual desire enabled her to simultaneously relax, protect her morality, and enjoy more mobility.

Discussion and Conclusion

Gossip is a significant factor mediating the consequences of male emigration on the wives who stay behind particularly with respect to gender ideologies and practices. This article clarifies the contradictory consequences of the absence of their husbands on stay-behind women's status especially those relating to their freedom of movement. It provides fresh

insights into how stay-behind women negotiate the impact of gossip on their mobility, which is intimately braided with their (public perceptions of their) morality.

The women established their moral propriety by enjoying a mobility that entailed the transformation or translation of work into leisure. They called their activities *dibersyon*, which means enjoyment or amusement. More specifically, it means 'distraction', a way of diverting their thoughts and feelings into something else. Thus, as a form of amusement or relaxation, the women's activities helped to distract them from the empty time that they had to confront, which also helped them 'forget' their husbands. The women missed their husbands and they needed activities to help them deal with their physical and sexual longing for them. These enabled them to go out farther and more frequently. By turning work into leisure, they produced their specific form of amusement or recreation.

Dibersyon expanded the women's domestic sphere to encompass informal economic activities that enabled them not only to engage in some recreational or leisure activities, ones that enabled them to have more mobility outside of their house. It also generated some profit, an income that enabled them to see themselves as contributing to their family's coffers. Interestingly, the women did not talk about their *dibersyon* activities in the context of the insecurity of their husbands' employment. This may well have been part of their motivation to engage in such activities but what was emphasized was the relaxation-through-distraction and sociality they enjoyed. To be sure, the money they made was not big and their activities were fitted around their other responsibilities. The two wives who partnered together to make and sell food stuff have completely abandoned their business activity, as reported in a follow-up interview in 2015. The decision to discontinue it was made when the woman who did not have a child when the business was started finally had a daughter and the caring responsibilities she had for her child gave her something to do, that is, she was no longer left with plenty of time to fill. One wife, who did not have a child but who looked after her

elderly parents-in-law, had a *sari-sari* [small convenience] store that only broke even but which she continued to have because it gave her something different to do. Another wife who did not have a child and who admitted to losing money from selling lingerie, cosmetic and perfume products persisted in what she was doing because it gave her a reason to not 'just stay in the house'. These different cases indicate that the overriding motivation for their *dibersyon* was to counter the boredom and tedium of waiting, which consigned them to the house and its immediate environs.

The conversion of work into leisure resonates with but is not quite the same as that propounded by critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. Adorno and Horkheimer (1979, 137) noted that 'Amusement under late capitalism becomes the prolongation of work'. It is so because workers seek amusement 'to escape from the mechanized work process and to recruit strength in order to cope with it again'. Further, 'mechanization has such power over a man's leisure and happiness, and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, 137). Whereas for Adorno and Horkheimer amusement becomes an extension of paid labour, the stay-behind women engage in activities not simply because of the absence of work since many of them are mothers whose caring responsibilities kept them busy. Especially for those who had no children, there were huge blocks of time that needed to be filled in. They engaged in activities that could be reconceptualised as work or framed within work in order to legitimise and gain social approval for them. To the extent that these activities provided distraction to them, that is, enabled them to enjoy more sociality and acted as a balm to their monotonous lives, their work are leisure activities. Their conversion of work into leisure demonstrates that although they are able to engage in activities that they found pleasurable, their choices were circumscribed and constrained by the gendered moral

politics obtaining in male emigration and which gossip enforces. Gossip structured their mobility; indeed, it functioned as a 'structure of constraint' (Clarke and Critcher 1985, 46) that vitally organized their lives.

The women's leisure activities were also shaped by values inhering in what remains a predominantly agricultural society. None of the wives would ever contemplate going to a disco or some other form of night entertainment. Not only would they have to go to the capital city and leave their children in the care of others (for mothers) but also that availing themselves of such leisure activities would have met criticism. Even going to a cinema on their own potentially risked their reputation. As San Gabriel does not have one, the women would have to go to the capital city to watch a movie. Drinking at home with friends remains mostly a male activity. Clearly, there are socio-cultural limits to what women can choose to spend their 'free' time on. How women relaxed was also mediated, if not limited, by stage in the life course (mothers with school-going children used their waiting time to socialize with other mothers), socio-economic standing (where and how often they and their families can enjoy outside meals), and religious beliefs. How they relaxed had to boost their moral standing and respectability so that even if what they did increased their spatial mobility, such gains did not lead to a loss in social respectability and moral standing.

All of the wives recognized how gossip could ruin their reputation so that even though they were confident about themselves to never be unfaithful to their husbands regardless of where they went and who they interacted with, they took the necessary precaution of protecting their honour. Gossip that put into question their morality specifically their sexual fidelity to their husbands threatened the security of their marriage. Their defence of themselves against gossip responded to ideology. Stewart and Strathern (2004, 30) have said that '[f]or words to be harmful, [. . .] they have to be spoken in contexts of ideology that are

congenial to them'. They could not simply shrug off the slanderous gossip that could be spread about them because their character and actions were being framed by discourses and representations about the behaviour or imagined misbehaviour of stay-behind wives. Thus, it is 'the ideological and historical context rather than the words themselves that ultimately produces the effects' (Stewart and Strathern 2004, 30).

Due to their fear of gossip and its consequences, the women inadvertently help maintain gendered conceptions of morality and mobility. From the point of view of the larger society, women whose husbands are away have to be policed in order to keep them faithful, a policing that is not equally applied to men even when they are at home. Indeed, the husbands of some of the interviewees have had extramarital relationships with other women for which they were not socially condemned. Gossip indicates that women 'bear the moral burdens of family separation' (Dreby 2009, 34). Women bear the social expectation that they are the glue that keeps the family intact and who provides the moral model to the children. In the Philippines, the absence of migrant women, specifically mothers, has been cited as a cause of family break-up and juvenile delinquency. The moral panic that ensued led the government at one time to ban (temporarily) the deployment of mothers for overseas work. Mothers who left behind their children in the care of relatives were portrayed as negligent thus putting the social cost of migration on the women's shoulders, clearly pointing to a masculinist ideology that binds women to the home and to care and reproductive work. Similarly, stay-behind women bear the burden of keeping the family intact through the care work they do and being morally unimpeachable.

Dibersyon functions as an adaptive strategy, a socio-cultural practice that enables the women to bargain with patriarchal gender relations and practices (Kandiyoti 1988). Although they do not radically unsettle the ideology that underpins these gender relations and practices, they nevertheless extend and expand their mobility without compromising their morality.

27

Paradoxically, *dibersyon* loosens and tightens the link between morality and mobility in the women's lives. For wives who are not in paid employment, it also expands their domestic sphere to encompass informal economic activities that enabled them to contribute to the financial well-being of their families. The women's negotiation of the power of gossip to police their morality and mobility reveals a creativity to work around the gender ideological and normative boundaries that gossip enforces for stay-behind wives.

References

Adorno, T.W., and M Horkheimer. 1979. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.

Aysa, M., and D Massey. 2004. "Wives Left Behind: The Labour Market Behaviour of Women in Migrant Communities." In *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project*, edited by J. Durand and D. Massey, 131-144. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Bever, S. 2002. "Migration and the Transformation of Gender Roles and Hierarchies in Yucatan." *Urban Anthropology* 31(2): 199-230.

Brennan, D. 2004. "Women Work, Men Sponge, and Everyone Gossips: Macho Men and Stigmatized/ing Women in a Sex Tourist Town." *Anthropological Quarterly* 77 (4): 705-733.

Carling, J., C Menjivar, and L Schmalzbauer, L. 2012. "Central Themes in the Study of Transnational Parenthood." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38 (2): 191-217.

Chant, S. 1997. *Women-Headed Households: Diversity and Dynamics in the Developing World*. London: Macmillan Press.

Clarke, J., and C Critcher. 1985 *Devil Makes Work: Leisure in Capitalist Britain.* Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

Davies, K. 1990. *Women, Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life*. Aldershot: Avebury.

De Haas, H., and A Van Rooij. 2010. "Migration as Emancipation? The Impact of Internal and International Migration on the Position of Women Left Behind in Rural Morocco." *Oxford Development Studies* 38 (1): 43-62

Desai, S., and M Banerji. 2008. Negotiated Identities: Male Migration and Left-Behind Wives in India." *Journal of Population Research* 25 (3): 337-355.

Dreby, J. 2009. "Gender and Transnational Gossip." *Qualitative Sociology* 32 (1): 33-52.

Drotbohm, H. 2010. "Gossip and Social Control Across the Seas: Targeting Gender, Resource Inequalities and Support in Cape Verdean Transnational Families." *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 3 (1): 51-68.

Ennaji, M., and F Sadiqi. 2008. *Migration and Gender in Morocco: The Impact of Migration on the Women Left Behind*. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Feeley, K., and J Frost J. 2014. "Introduction." In *When Private Talk Goes Public*, edited by K Feeley and J Frost, 1-16. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Forman, F. 1989. "Feminizing Time: An Introduction." In *Taking Our Time: Feminist Perspectives on Temporality*, edited by F. Forman and C. Sowton, 1-9. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Galam, R. 2011. *Navigating Lives: The Spatiotemporality of the Gender Identity, Agency, and Subjectivity of Filipino Seamen's Wives*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Cardiff University, UK.

Gluckman, M. 1963. "Gossip and Scandal." *Current Anthropology* 4 (3): 307-316.

Gulati, L. 1993. *In the Absence of Their Men: The Impact of Male Migration on Women*. New Delhi: Sage.

Hadi, A. 2001. "International Migration and the Change of Women's Position among the Left-Behind in Rural Bangladesh." *International Journal of Population Geography* 7 (1): 53-61.

Hegland, M.E. 2010. "Tajik Male Labour Migration and Women Left Behind: Can They Resist Gender and Generational Hierarchies?". *Anthropology of the Middle East* 5 (2): 16-35.

Herriman, N. 2010. "The Great Rumour Mill: Gossip, Mass Media and the Ninja Fear." *Journal of Asian Studies* 69 (3): 723-748.

Hirsch, J. 2003. *A Courtship After Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hoodfar, H. 1997. "The Impact of Male Migration on Domestic Budgeting: Egyptian Women Striving for an Islamic Budgeting Pattern." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 28 (2): 73-98.

Horst, H., and D Miller. 2006. *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication*. Oxford: Berg.

Kandiyoti, D. 1988. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society* 2 (3): 274-290.

Lang, G., and J Smart. 2002. "Migration and the 'Second Wife' in South China." *International Migration Review* 36 (2): 546-569.

McEvoy, J., P Petrzelka, C Radel, and B Schmook. 2012. "Gendered Mobility and Morality in a South-Eastern Mexican Community: Impacts of Male Labour Migration on the Women Left Behind." *Mobilities* 7 (3): 369-388.

Mahler, S. 2001. "Transnational Relationships: The Struggle to Communicate Across Borders." *Identities* 7 (4): 441-459.

Menjivar, C., and V Agadjanian. 2007. "Men's Migration and Women's Lives: Views from Rural Armenia and Guatemala." *Social Science Quarterly* 88 (5): 1243-62.

Mintz, J. 1997. *Carnival Song and Society: Gossip, Sexuality and Creativity in Andalusia*. Oxford: Berg.

Mohl, P. 1997. *Village Voices: Coexistence and Communication in a Rural Community in Central France*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Municipality of San Gabriel. 2009a. *Annual State of Local Government Report*. San Gabriel: Office of the Municipal Mayor.

Municipality of San Gabriel. 2009b. *Sons and Daughters of San Gabriel by Barangay*. San Gabriel: Office of Municipal Planning and Coordination.

Paine, R. 1967. "What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis." *Man* 2 (2): 278-285.

Parrenas, R.S. 2005. *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Parrenas, R.S. 2008. *The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization*. New York: New York University Press.

Pingol, A. 2001. *Remaking Masculinities: Identity, Power, and Gender Dynamics in Families with Migrant Wives and Househusbands*. Quezon City, Philippines: University of the Philippines Centre for Women's Studies.

Rose, S., and S Hiller. 2006. "From Migrant Work to Community Transformation: Families Forming Transnational Communities in Periban and Pennsylvania." *Oral History Review* 34 (1): 95-142.

Skolnik, J., S Lazo de la Vega, and T Steigenga. 2012. "*Chisme* Across Borders: The Impact of Gossip in a Guatemalan Transnational Community." *Migraciones Internacionales* 6 (3): 9-38.

Stewart, P., and A Strathern. 2004. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumours and Gossip*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van Vleet, K. 2003. "Partial Theories: On Gossip, Envy and Ethnography in the Andes. *Ethnography* 4 (4): 491-519.

Wolf, M. 1972. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.