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Queenie Abad
queenieabad88@gmail.com

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Seafaring and Impact on Seafaring Families in the Philippines: A Qualitative Study

Queenie Ann Delacruz Abad

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Primary Advisor: Carrie Redlich, MD, MPH

Secondary Advisor: Brian Linde, MD, MPH

Abstract

Objective/Purpose: The Philippines is the largest occupational source of seafarers for the international shipping industry. Inherent to this occupation are the recurrent and long duration deployments overseas away from the seafarers' families and communities which may negatively impact family wellness. In this qualitative study, we explored challenges that Filipino seafaring families face and identified protective factors for family and community well-being.

Methods: Participants were selected by purposeful and snowball sampling. Participants were seafarers and their families. We conducted semi-structured interviews which were audio-recorded, transcribed, and loaded on Dedoose to facilitate line-by-line coding. Data was analyzed with a grounded theory approach using inductive coding. Concepts were categorized to build themes.

Results: We conducted 31 interviews with seafarers and their families. We identified 6 main themes that emerged as challenges and opportunities: 1) Obtaining a Contract- A complex process that can put the seafarer at risk for illegitimate or unsafe work, 2) Long Duration Deployments- Can negatively impact mental health, 3) Communication at Sea- An opportunity for improved wellness, 4) The Left Behind Family- Impact and Coping Strategies, 5) "Vacation is Not Really Vacation"- Temporary, unstable work contracts is inherent to work as a seafarer, and 6) Planning for Life After Seafaring- Families must financially prepare for the inevitability of retirement, whether it is a planned or unplanned retirement.

Discussion: Given the current and continued predicted shortage of seafarers in global shipping, shipping companies must focus efforts on the retention of seafarers and increasing the number of years of service at sea by meeting the mental health and social needs of seafarers and their families.

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Introduction

Background

Seafarers, in choosing their profession, balance the risks and benefits of going to sea. The potential to earn is high, but it comes at a cost to the seafarer and their families. At sea, the seafarer may risk life, limb, mental health, and family relationships. Although the literature on current rates of injury and illness in seafaring is limited, Borch demonstrated a six-fold elevation in mortality from occupational accidents in Danish seafarers compared to their land-based counterparts [1]. A study by Hansen of seafarers on a Danish merchant ship showed that the incidence of injury at sea was 11.5 times higher than their land-based counterparts [2]. Despite the high death and injury rate, the decision to work at sea is positively influenced by the high income that can be earned compared to land-based occupations, especially in developing countries like the Philippines.

The Philippines is the largest source for seafarers available for the international shipping community [3]. 25% of seafarers involved in international shipping are Filipino [3-4]. The proportion of Filipino nationals working at sea is also very high, with 2 of every 1,000 nationals of the Philippines working on board a ship compared with fewer than 1 of every 10,000 nationals in India [5], which is the second highest source for international seafarers. That means that seafaring may potentially have the greatest economic, social, and community impact in a country like the Philippines. Filipino seafarers contribute significantly to the Philippine economy and their families; remittances solely from seafaring in 2015 amounted to \$5.8 billion [5].

Few published studies have explored the impact of seafaring on the families and communities of seafarers globally, and studies of the impact on Filipino families and their communities in particular are more limited. Studies in seafaring communities outside the

Philippines have been conducted in India, Kiribati, and Turkey. Fieldwork conducted by Sampson studying the lives of women married to seafarers in India described themes of independence, changes in social engagement, and an expansion of roles beyond domestic duties [6]. A similar study by Borovnik with data from focus groups and interviews in Kiribati focused on changes in family relationships between seafarers and their households [7]. In Yur's study of the wives of Turkish seafaring officers, the wives expressed concern in regards to negative behavioral changes in their children related to the absence of the seafaring spouse [8].

While studies of seafarer families have been more limited, research on families and children of deployed military personnel demonstrate higher risk of anxiety and other psychiatric conditions, a finding which may be mirrored in seafarer families with similar long-term parental absenteeism (9-10).

Objective

The objective of this study was to explore challenges Filipino seafaring families face with the long periods of family separation and to identify protective factors for family well-being.

Research Design

Research Setting and Access to the Population

This qualitative study took place in three islands of the Philippines- Borongan, Cebu, and Tacloban between December 2018 and January 2019. We collaborated with Sailors' Society, a non-profit organization whose mission is to support seafarers while at sea and port and seafarers and their families in their communities. Through their family outreach work, Sailors' Society had already established seafaring family groups in Borongan and Tacloban and were in the process of developing an additional seafaring family group in Cebu at the time of this study. The

established family groups were the Seafarers' Family Association and the Seafarers' Pupils' Club in Tacloban and families of retired seafarers in the Seafarers' Mission in Borongan.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were selected by purposeful and snowball sampling in collaboration with a Sailor's Society Family Outreach Officer based in the Philippines. Eligible participants were spouses of current and retired seafarers and children and extended family members of seafarers in family groups located in Borongan, Cebu, and Tacloban. 14 interviews were conducted in Tacloban, 7 interviews in Borongan, and 10 interviews in Cebu. 15 were with spouses, 7 were active or retired seafarers, 4 were children of seafarers, and 5 were extended family members.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted semi-structured interviews between December 2018 and January 2019. We asked participants about challenges that they faced as a seafaring family and any resources or strategies that helped them cope with these challenges. Interviews were between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded. Each family member who participated was compensated \$20. Data saturation was achieved with 31 interviews total.

Memos and summaries of each interview were written after each interview day with notes on recurring concepts and preliminary codes. Rev.com was used to transcribe the interviews. Transcriptions were loaded onto Dedoose, a software coding program to facilitate line-by-line coding. The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach using inductive coding and concepts were categorized to build themes from the data.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Yale University Institutional Review Board and the Republic of the Philippines Eastern Visayas Health Research and Development Consortium

(EVHRDC). Consent documents were available to participants in English, Tagalog, Cebuano, and Waray-Waray. Prior to starting each interview, verbal consent was obtained from each individual to participate and to be audio-recorded. Participants were informed they could decline to answer any questions or stop participation at any time during the interview. A Tagalog interpreter was available for interpretation in the event a participant did not speak English.

Participants were informed their identities would be kept confidential. Pseudonyms are provided in place of participants real names and pseudonyms are also used in the transcript excerpts contained in this report. We used Yale Secure Box to store audio-recordings and transcripts using a secure password protected laptop.

Findings

We conducted a total of 31 interviews with 14 interviews in Tacloban, 7 interviews in Borongan, and 10 interviews in Cebu.

Of the 31 interviews, 15 were with spouses, 7 were active or retired seafarers, 4 were children of seafarers, and 5 were other family members like mothers, fathers, and other extended family.

The sections below describe the psychosocial challenges that seafarers and their left-behind families face when the seafarer is searching for a contract to go to sea, deployed at sea, when the seafarer returns home after finishing a contract, and when the seafarer retires from seafaring.

We identified 6 main themes that emerged as challenges and opportunities that seafarers and their families experience: 1) Obtaining a Contract 2) Long Duration Deployments 3) Communication at Sea 4) Impact on Left Behind Families and Coping Strategies 5) “Vacation is Not Really Vacation” and 6) Preparing for Life After Seafaring

1) Obtaining a Contract

Seafarers described three main entities involved in the international seafaring industry- the ship-owner, the manning agency, and the individual seafarers. The shipowner may be an individual person who owns the ship, or more often, a multi-national company that may own a fleet of vessels. The manning agencies are private companies that are in charge of crew management contracts for sourcing manpower for the vessels. The manning agencies are responsible for recruitment and selection of seafarers, managing contracts with seafarers and their deployment, scheduling, and training. The majority of manning agencies in the Philippines are located in the capital city of Manila. Seafarers currently not working travel to Manila to seek temporary employment contracts with a manning agency that represents the vessel going to sea in exchange for a salary. The process of obtaining a contract may not be straightforward and the seafarer can be at risk for scams by fraudulent manning agencies or exploitative work contracts. Jonathon, a seafarer's uncle in Borongan explains the complexities of obtaining a legitimate contract:

*Manila is the center of the Philippines, so that's where most of the offices are. Like, the offices of the manning agencies and then, also, in Manila, there is the main office system for the OWWA and the POEA. OWWA is the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration and POEA is the Philippines Overseas Employment Agency. Before an overseas Filipino worker gets deployed, they have to go through these offices and they have to go look for manning agencies. If you want to be sure that the manning agency is not fake, and that it is registered, you have to check it out at POEA because a lot are scammed. They (the seafarer) are asked to give money, and then they are promised of this and that, but then it turns out to be fake. They are required to pay something and then they are given hope that they will be deployed and then, all along, it was all fake. If somebody gets scammed, they don't get anything back, the people just [run] away and people are left with nothing.
(Jonathon, seafarer's uncle, Borongan)*

Occupation as a seafarer involves unstable work contracts that is not considered continuous employment. Seafarers refer to the time that they are not aboard a ship working under

a contract as “vacation” because they are not paid when they are in between contracts. When the seafarer completes a contract and goes on vacation, the time it takes for a seafarer to obtain another contract can vary from weeks to months to years. During this time, seafarers stay in boarding facilities with other seafarers also seeking employment contracts. Marcus, a retired seafarer from Borongan describes how he was on vacation for 1 year looking for another contract to go back to sea. He believes it was difficult for him to obtain another contract because of his older age.

*I am a retired seaman for a year. I have more than 30 years as a seaman, since 1981 and up to last year in 2017. My seaman's life, it is not a continuation job, staying at sea. I have a vacation, sometimes three months, two months, five months, and it's now almost one year, my vacation now almost one year. So, I decided to quit my profession as a seaman because I have already, I reached already the limit of my age.
(Marcus, retired seafarer, Borongan)*

Richard, another retired seafarer in Borongan described the wide differences in time that it can take to obtain an employment contract with a manning agency.

*Sometimes I stand-by in Manila for one year, two years for applying agencies because I am eager to work. But you need money because of boarding house and also, to eat once a day. Yeah. Difficult but sometimes 5 months, or, 5 days you can already get approved for a contract, one week, or one month, it depends on the availability.
(Richard, retired seafarer, Borongan)*

2) Long Duration Deployments

When the seafarer finds a manning agency to sign with, their contract to go to sea can range anywhere from a minimum of 6 months at sea to a maximum of 12 months, with the average contract 9 months. Kevin, a retired seafarer from Tacloban describes how his 9-month contract was more often than not extended to 11 months due to staffing issues.

We are given nine months contract, regular. The two months contract extension is when there are some emergencies that happened with your reliever. Mostly, my nine-month contracts become always 11 months. It is hard when you think you're

going home at nine months, because we know already when and which port we are supposed to go home. Then all of a sudden two days of your departure, they will say, "Jerry, you have to stay. Your reliever can't do it because he has a family problem. We signed it already so all you have to do then is call your wife." That's how it is and we know it.
(Kevin, retired seafarer, Tacloban)

These long duration contracts are often filled with loneliness, worrying, and anxiety for both the seafarer at sea and their left-behind families. Though communication in many vessels has improved, there are times when a vessel in the deep sea is without a good satellite signal for several weeks and communication with families is not possible. Joanna, a seafaring spouse in Cebu described how these long duration deployments and extended periods without communication worsened her stress and anxiety. At the time of the interview, her seafaring husband was currently deployed and she had not heard from him in several weeks.

You have to fear if there's a fight along the way and he'll be thrown off the boat. We don't know if they're going to be kidnapped or if there will be pirates. It's causing me to be emotional, anxious. Right now, my anxiety, it really is increasing and I'm hoping that I can cope with that, because it's not easy. He is far and his work is very risky. Now, with this contract, after 30 days [of not hearing from him], please, I'm panicking, is everything okay? I have to tell myself it's okay. It's going to be fine, you can text him after this day, because he told me the estimated date of arrival. I have to wait for like 20, 30 days before he can talk to me, if he can talk. It's hard if the contracts are long, nine months, ten months to a year. But I think it's okay if they were three months to four months, that would be bearable. But if it will take about nine to a year, oh please! Come home!
(Joanna, seafaring spouse, Cebu)

Many retired seamen expressed sadness, regret, and guilt because of the long time away from family and not being able to watch their children grow. Michael, a retired seafarer from Borongan, worked as an international seafarer for 33 years. Most of his contracts were 9 months long. After coming home from finishing another long contract, he realized just how much of a stranger he had become to his young children.

You know if you are a seafarer, there will come a time that you will realize that you are a stranger in your home. I just arrived at my home, but it seemed I was just a visitor to them. They [the children] were all going more to their mama than me. One time, I experienced that I arrived home in the middle of the night, just finished my contract, and there in my room, my daughter, she was, I think, was only four years old. She was sleeping with her mama. I arrived and when I go inside the room to sleep with them, my four-year-old daughter cried. She didn't want me to sleep with them on the room. It broke my heart because my daughter never...don't recognize me. She just stopped crying when her mama told her that, "Oh, that guy is leaving tomorrow morning, he will just fix the window for us and then he will leave."

(Michael, retired seafarer, Borongan).

3) Communication at Sea

Communication at sea has improved greatly with access to wi-fi, cell-phones, social media, email, and messaging applications for texting and video chatting. In the past, communication was largely through letters from family members and friends onshore. By the time a letter arrived at the hands of the seafarer or their loved ones, the news was at least 45-60 days old or the problem that the writer was writing about was already addressed.

However, not all shipping vessels have wi-fi installed on the ship. Even if there is wi-fi available on the ship, it is a limited service that must be paid for. Many seafarers described purchasing data "loads" for limited access to wi-fi which they take good care to ration in order to talk with friends and family. Though many seafarers were grateful for the improved ability to communicate, they described conversations as rushed due to this financial constraint.

If a shipping vessel does not have wi-fi installed on the ship, the seafarer has to wait until they are close enough to a port with a signal that can be detected on their cell phones. Other than the last day of a contract before going home, getting a signal on the cell phone when coming close to port is the second-best feeling. Kevin, a retired seafarer from Tacloban recalls the evolution of telephones, wi-fi, and smartphones on shipping vessels:

*From 1993 to 2000 we have no cellphones, no telephone, only mail. I have a lot of mail for her, but the problem is it takes a month to reach the mail in our barangays. So, once a problem arises, and she writes a letter asking me to help her to solve the problem, when I responded to the letter, it's already solved. Then why I send a letter and it takes one, two months just to answer the questions? Then in 2000, it starts - we have now communications because when I go home...we transferred from that barangay to the city. We were able to build an apartment. So, since we are very near to the city, we have already landlines. We have telephones and it really, really makes it easier as a parent because every week I can call them to speak one-by-one to my kids and to my wife. My friends keep buying cellphones over there when we were in China, in Singapore. We can buy, we call it pay card. We have phone card on the ship- the ocean cards. We could buy it \$10 for 50 minutes so that's why I said, why should I have a cellphone, because I know cellphone is a little bit expensive and you can spend more money than phone card. Because phone card if you are just at the land. Yeah, if you are not at sea you cannot call. But in, you know, 2010 I acquire one cellphone because in cellphones, the difference is you can have a chat, you can see her face, your children, and also with the computers. That's the time also got my laptop, my first laptop, the HP laptop. For this time, it's not a problem about communications, but my first three years on the ship it was too hard because the only communication is through writing, through mail.
(Kevin, retired seafarer, Tacloban)*

Another seafarer, Marcus, described the pain he felt when he could not comfort his son when he called in a distressed state. By the time Marcus was able to finish his shift, he could not call because the ship was far from a satellite. When there was finally a signal available, he still could not call his son because of the time difference.

*[My son] called to the ship and he asked, "Tatay (father), please answer." He texted me, "I've been calling you for an hour but you don't answer." But we were at sea and our policy is there's no cellphone while at work. He text "Please, tatay. I don't want text. I want to hear you. Please call me and just scold me or just shout at me. You can say whatever you want, tatay, I just really wanted to hear your voice." When I was off my duty, I wanted to call my son, but I couldn't do it because we don't have satellites. We are out of range, and it takes two hours to take another satellite so that I can call, and it's already around 11 pm or 12 at midnight in the Philippines. That time I cried and cried. I wanted to call but I couldn't.
(Marcus, retired seafarer, Borongan)*

Amie, a seafarer's daughter in Tacloban, discusses additional challenges to communicating with her father when he is at sea:

*He only gets a little time to talk to us. Yes, he can see us in video chats, but sometimes he can't do that because the internet is not good. And sometimes he can't talk to us because there are also other people in the cabin, like cabin mates. When the cabin mates are sleeping, we can't really hear his voice and he can't hear our voice.
(Amie, seafarer's daughter, Tacloban)*

4) The Left Behind Family:

One of the biggest challenges that seafaring partners struggled with while their seafaring spouse was deployed was the added burden of being both the mother and father to the children. In addition to single-parenting, the left behind spouses also took on additional household responsibilities they would not normally have such as plumbing, electrical repairs, and managing finances. However, many women felt proud of their independence and even continued working while their seafaring partner was away.

Older children, especially in their teens expressed guilt when participating in activities at home while their fathers were at sea. They also discussed negative emotions like jealousy when they would see friends with a "complete family." A seafarer's daughter, Emelda discussed these negative feelings but also described how thinking about her father's sacrifice motivated her to do her best in school.

*It's really hard when he's not here. Besides the fact that my mom has to do everything, the responsibilities, but emotionally, you have to think about your father and thinking that you can sleep at night, or at any time, go outside the house, go everywhere and then...you forgot that your dad is working outside just sleeping two hours a day. And when you remember that, you just feel guilty. But it's also a motivation in school, motivation also in life- to always take care of yourselves, to always have high grades and improve yourself as a person.
(Emelda, seafarer's daughter, Tacloban)*

Seafaring spouses reported giving birth to their children alone, celebrating birthdays and holidays without their spouse, and even burying loved ones who have passed while the seafarer was deployed. Another seafarer spouse, Joy, from Tacloban states:

I gave birth to my two children without my husband. Christmas is fast approaching. He is not around. New Year, he will also not be around.”
(Joy, seafaring spouse, Tacloban)

Marital relationships can also be strained by marital infidelities and by lack of trust in marriages recovering from infidelity. Eleanor, a retired seafarer’s wife in Tacloban shares her experience:

Of being a seafarer's wife - it is really hard. Raising our 3 children all by myself, though he supports us financially. And the trials, because it is hard being all alone. Since I was young then, there are temptations. Many men will attempt to court and say “Let's try this one since your husband is away.” It's hard because if I'm not in the Lord maybe I will be something to not good. And before he left, I told him to put in mind that while he's on board to always think and hold in your heart and mind that the reason he's there is because of our family's future. I'm blessed and thankful. I have lots of friends with spouses also outside the country, but they are not whole now, because the spouse has another family, or the one left here in the Philippines also has another spouse. Or the children go into drugs and other vices. I'm thankful now that he's retired, and that we are still a whole family.
(Eleanor, retired seafarer’s wife, Tacloban)

Although a seafarer is able to disembark at the next port in the event of a family emergency, there are negative repercussions to breaking a contract. Not only does the seafarer not get paid if they break a contract, but they also get a negative mark on their record, making it more difficult for them to obtain another contract in the future. Cristina, another seafarer’s wife in Tacloban recalls how difficult it was for her husband to stay onboard when his mother was sick in the Intensive Care Unit.

The worst part was when his mother was in the hospital in Tacloban. She was there for almost one month, and then after that, in the ICU for three weeks. That's one thing very hard for him because that's his mother. He was crying at sea,

saying he wants to go home, but I said to him, "Consider us, your family. If you come back, and then it's not finished contract, then we are going to be the one to suffer".

(Cristina, seafarer's wife, Tacloban)

In order to cope with the feelings of loneliness, worrying, and anxiety, many seafaring spouses discussed how keeping busy and keeping the mind occupied helped them keep these negative feelings at bay. They reached out to family and friends in the community, continued to work full-time jobs, and volunteered in community activities. All of the families in this study were part of Sailors' Society family groups which connected them to other seafaring families who understood the nature of being in a seafaring family. This contributed to a sense of community cohesion. When the group knew of a family whose seafarer was deployed, this close-knit community rallied together to provide additional emotional and social support to the left behind family. Jessa, a seafarer's wife and mother of two working as a teacher in Tacloban explains:

Since I am a working mother, it seems the loneliness doesn't stay in my mind. I try to have some fun for myself. I mingle with friends so that I can forget a minute. If I am the only one in the room, I feel lonely. During those time, I go out with friends. I talk to them at least to lessen the loneliness.

(Jessa, seafarer's wife, Tacloban)

In addition to helping build community cohesion with the seafaring family groups, Sailors' Society has also helped financially struggling seafaring families especially in situations where the seafarer has died. The Seafarers' Pupils' Club in Tacloban, also sponsored by Sailors' Society, was created after Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 in order to support pupils' through the trauma they experienced after the disaster. Their disaster preparedness program provides the pupils with disaster reduction training and they also hold events throughout the year to provide social support for the pupils.

The Sailors' Society family groups also support families by organizing seminars for financial management of funds, strategies to build capital to prepare for life after seafaring, and connecting seafaring spouses to vocation training programs for employment. Jessa, a seafarer's wife in Tacloban talks about advantages of being part of the family group.

*It's a really big help since they are all seafarers' family. They have this common thing so they can interact and comfort each other. A good support system and people who know what you're going through. Not only in social. They can help also in spiritual level, financial. They will, for example, we found a speaker on "How to build the finances for the family." Because there's some families that broke up because of the financial status. Because there is more in spending and not in savings, so it was about how can we manage our financial status.
(Jessa, seafarer's wife, Tacloban)*

5) "Vacation is Not Really Vacation"

After a seafarer completes a contract at sea, the time spent on land is referred to as "vacation." The seafarer does not earn an income from seafaring during this time, and the time on vacation can vary from a couple months to a year depending on how fast a seafarer is able to secure another contract. So even though a seafarer may be on vacation, a good portion of this time may be spent looking for another contract and not spent with family or other leisure activities. As described by Mary, a seafarer's mother in Borongan, her seafaring son may only spend a few days or a couple weeks of his vacation time at home with family.

*Whenever he's here [on vacation], he just spends at least five days with the family because he has to go back again to Manila to process again his papers for another deployment. So, he felt bad also about it that he doesn't have enough time to spend with the family whenever he's home.
(Mary, mother of a seafarer, Cebu)*

In many cases, the seafarer on vacation may have to find odd jobs to earn an income during this in between time. Angelique, a seafarer's wife in Cebu explains this struggle:

*When they have a vacation, they don't have any salary. For four months, we have to pay the rent and other expenses, school, like that. Sometimes he come in to town and help his father at the cemetery. His father works at the cemetery and he helps in making the tombstone tablets. So even if it's vacation, he is still working. In my house, I also cook little snacks and then I sell it.
(Angelique, seafarer's wife, Cebu)*

6) Planning for Life After Seafaring:

Seafaring as an occupation provides a greater income potential compared to what an individual can make working in a land-based job in the Philippines. The financial incentives of seafaring, especially for an officer, can be very lucrative. This income can be used to send remittances to their families back home to send their kids to school, purchase or build new homes, build capital for business ventures, support extended family, and contribute to their local communities. As mentioned previously, seafaring contributes billions of dollars to the Philippine economy.

The nature of seafaring is temporary contractual arrangements with periods of unemployment after the seafarer has completed their contract until the seafarer can obtain another contract for deployment overseas. This is the nature of seafaring throughout a seafarer's career. At any point in time, a seafarer may find themselves less marketable or less desirable as a worker due to injuries or illnesses discovered through a pre-deployment exam, a record of a previous broken contract, an undesirable write-up from a superior, a history of participating in protests or rallies, or more commonly, advanced age. A seafarer may find themselves "on vacation" for years looking for another contract to go back to sea until they decide to retire from seafaring and seek alternate land-based employment. If the seafarer has prepared for this

inevitability, they may have savings set aside for retirement, however, this is most often not the case. Manny, a retired seafarer in Borongan explains:

*Most shipping companies, once the seafarers have already become less productive due to old age, they fire them already. They just let you finish the contract and then, just say, "Bye, bye. Your age is up already. There are many young seafarers coming so ... That's it." Then, that is the start of the nightmare. It's lucky if you have prepared for that because you have something to keep...It happens in many cases to seafarers. Just, they don't know that this could be the last contract and then, no shipping companies with notify them. There is nothing the seafarer can do because every time he signs on a vessel, he's only under contract. There is no permanent employment for seafarers.
(Manny, retired seafarer, Borongan)*

When asked how a seafarer can prepare for life after seafaring, Manny's caution to young seafarers was:

*It is better for while you are still strong and still onboard, save as much as you can, or invest in some business so that not all your monthly salary will be consumed. Then, there will be another source of money coming aside from your salary. And then when time comes, it happens to you, and suddenly, or some circumstances will happen that you stop working at sea, then you have something.
(Manny, retired seafarer, Borongan)*

James, another retired seafarer in Borongan lamented:

*I am a retired seaman. I work onboard more or less 20 years. Because of age limit, I could not go aboard ship, and now waiting for nothing. No job, only planting of rice and gardening...my work today.
(James, retired seafarer, Borongan)*

Kevin, a retired seafarer lives in Tacloban with his wife and adult children. He worked at sea for 20 years and was able to put his 3 children through college. When his 3 children finished college, he retired from seafaring. However, he and his wife thoughtfully planned how they would earn an income for after he left seafaring. They saved aggressively and were able to build a boarding house, a backyard piggery, and a rice mill which are now their sources of income.

I am an ex-seafarer. I was at sea for 20 years. I had a goal; it was supposed to be I stop at 40-years-old. Then I extend when I saw you know, I saw our status of our lives. Do I have a money to put up a business? In that time, I don't have because they were still...all of them (the children) are in school, and they were all in the

private school. I have to go back because we have still kids to brought up to school. Now I have the last daughter, she will be graduating by 2019. Then I retired. So far, I have a small business to survive. I have two rice mills, backyard piggery, and one apartment with one boarding house near in Tacloban City. This is how we live right now. We called it not actually businessman but just like self-employed. I am employed in my business together with my wife. We earn, but not as much as those what I have during my previous years when I was on the ship. Now, I am refilling time of my absence with my family during 20 years I was gone.

(Kevin, retired seafarer, Tacloban)

In order to assist retired seafarers and their families struggling with financial issues after seafaring, a retired seafarer in Borongan asked Sailors' Society to help establish The Seafarers' Mission in Borongan. In addition to providing emergency financial assistance to retired seafarers and their families, this group's goal is to also create a work collective to help retired seafaring families earn an income for life after seafaring.

Conclusion

We used semi-structured interviews with 31 seafarers and their family members to explore psychosocial challenges that seafaring families face in three communities in the Philippines. We identified 6 main themes that emerged as challenges and opportunities that seafarers and their families experience:

- 1) Obtaining a Contract- The nature of seafaring employment is in the form of temporary work contracts. After a seafarer completes a contract at sea, they must seek another contract for continued work. The majority of manning agencies in the Philippines are located centrally in the capital city of Manila and depending on the seafarer and availability of work, the time to obtain another contract can range from days, to months, to years. During this time, the seafarer is away from family, is at risk for illegitimate or exploitative contracts, and with no guarantee of obtaining another contract to work overseas.

2) Long Duration Deployments- The average contract overseas is 9 months with the possibility of a 2-month extension in the event a seafarer's relief is not available to board.

The long duration contracts can be filled with loneliness for the seafarer, and months of worrying, stress, and anxiety on the left behind families.

3) Communication at Sea- Although communication at sea has improved greatly with wi-fi, mobile devices, messaging, video messaging, and access to computers or laptops on the ship, not all shipping vessels have accessible wi-fi and some vessels may not have wi-fi installed. Even if a seafarer has a mobile device and access to wi-fi, seafarers have to pay for "loads" to pay for data usage which can be prohibitive for seafarers who cannot afford it.

4) The Left Behind Family- When a seafarer is deployed overseas, the left behind spouse can find themselves with multiple roles in the household, including those they were not doing before. The left behind spouse is essentially a single parent and many spouses expressed difficulty in being both the mother and father in addition to managing household tasks, going to work, managing finances, and addressing issues with plumbing and electricity. Additional psychosocial challenges were loneliness, anxiety, stress, and worry. Protective factors were family support and emotional support from friends, those with a sense of strong community cohesion.

5) "Vacation is Not Really Vacation": When a seafarer is in between contracts, they are considered to be "on vacation," and are not receiving an income from seafaring. In many cases, the seafarer is often working in a land-based job to make up for the lost income or looking for another contract to go overseas.

6) Planning for Life After Seafaring: Although there is a potential to earn a higher income as a seafarer, obtaining contracts to work is not a guarantee. A seafarer may have difficulty

finding another contract for various reasons including injury, illness, advanced age, and other factors. If a seafarer has not prepared for this inevitability, they may face difficulty finding land-based employment with a comparable earning potential and can struggle financially. It is important for seafarers to prepare for this by independently saving for retirement. Seafarers who were able to retire early described saving aggressively so that they could build capital for small-business ventures as a source of future income after they left seafaring.

Discussion:

Meeting the Needs of Seafarers and Their Families

A commonly cited reason by seafarers and their families for leaving the seafaring profession is the stress from family separation and its negative effect on family wellness. Given the current and continued predicted shortage of seafarers in global shipping, it is in the best interest of shipping companies to focus efforts on the retention of seafarers and increasing the number of years of service at sea. Shipping companies must be aware of and understand the unmet mental health and social needs of seafarers and their families in order to encourage increased retention of seafarers in the occupation.

Opportunities:

Opportunities to improve wellness may include the availability of shorter duration deployments of 4-6 months which could potentially improve burnout.

Availability and ease of communication with seafarers and their families is an important factor in family health. To facilitate this, shipping companies may want to consider investing in the installation of wi-fi and providing free or affordable access to wi-fi on shipping vessels.

Many seafarers on a limited income cited the expense of purchasing data loads as barriers to communicating with families.

Due to the inherent danger of seafaring and long duration deployments, many seafarers and their families struggle with negative emotions like loneliness, and excessive anxiety, worrying, and guilt. Implementation of mental health programs to support the deployed seafarer and their left-behind families can build resilience and coping strategies.

Lastly, the majority of work arrangements for international seafarers are in the form of unstable and precarious work contracts. Seafarers in between contracts and those who have retired from seafaring often struggle financially and are not able to find employment with a comparable earning potential. Programs that provide financial counseling for saving for retirement and budgeting income may help the seafarer prepare and plan for life after seafaring.

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