

A Hopeful Gamble: Living the Faith as Migrant Workers and Transnational Mothers

Abstract

This article is based on a qualitative research study involving Filipinas who are both migrant workers in Kuwait, Italy, Hong Kong, and Taiwan and mothers of children aged between 0 and 18 years at the time of their departure from the Philippines. The article seeks to answer the following question: How does one's Christian faith assist women in coping with labour migration and the resulting transnational mothering? In an analysis of data gathered from the participant mothers, the concept of 'strategising to gain access to a better life' emerges as central to how the participants navigate transnational mothering as labour migrants. In particular, the participant mothers identify their faith as one of the factors in which they invest. From a theological perspective, such 'investing in faith' is interpreted as an integral component of an ongoing spirituality that is hinged on an active relationship with God. On the one hand, their experience of living the faith reveals encountering the sacred in mundane events, amidst the challenges associated with labour migration and transnational mothering. On the other hand, their experience of hopeful gambling attests to the reality of evil or 'dis-grace' in the here and now.

INTRODUCTION

Coming home in a coffin or returning home to a coffin. These are two of the bleakest scenarios that people who migrate for work may face. Joanna Demafelis, a 29-year-old migrant worker, arrived back home to the Philippines in a casket in February 2018. A year after she went missing, she was discovered dead in a freezer in her employer's apartment in Kuwait (*BBC News* 2018). Erlinda Cagalitan, a cashier in Kuwait, returned home in November 2016 to bury her two-year-old son, who was allegedly beaten to death by his guardians (*ABS-CBN News* 2016). These are just a couple of examples of the many unfortunate events that labour migrants and their families face. Despite harrowing accounts of the abuse, torture, misfortune, and untimely deaths of Philippine migrant workers, as well as disheartening stories of the children of migrant workers becoming gravely ill, having accidents, or even dying or being killed in the absence of one or both parents, there is still a steady stream of Philippine nationals who go abroad for work.

Why are people not deterred from working overseas considering the significant risks associated with labour migration? It is possible that push factors, such as poverty and a lack of employment opportunities paying a living wage, outweigh the dangers that migrants may encounter in receiving countries. Other than these push factors and the most compelling pull factor of earning higher wages, it is necessary to ask what emboldens Philippine labour migrants to make the high-risk decision to work abroad. For migrant mothers who have to be separated from their very young children, the choice to work abroad is doubly burdensome, as it means subjecting themselves to the challenges of labour migration and of transnational mothering. While they grapple with the hardships of migrant living and work-related concerns, they worry simultaneously about the well-being of their children, especially given the great geographical distance between them.

Several scholars have already looked into the significance of faith and religion, including how migrants make sense of their journey and cope with the challenges that come with it (See, for example, Bastide 2015; Lusk et al. 2021; Visser, Bailey, and Meijering 2015; Dorais 2007; Cruz 2006). In the area of mothering and religion, feminist scholars criticising patriarchal structures supported by religion overlook how women and mothers, in particular, can be empowered by their practice of religion. This article contributes to the field by delving into Philippine migrant mothers' experience of their Christian faith as a significant factor that shapes how they navigate labour migration and transnational mothering. Through a theological reflection on their narratives, I aim to present how the grounded theory that emerges from my analysis of data can be interpreted as (Christian) spirituality. I do this by first discussing spirituality as a sensitizing concept that framed my data analysis (Bowen 2006). My next

step is to present the emerging grounded theory of 'strategising to gain access to a better life' and all its underpinning concepts to depict a kind of spirituality at work in the participants' experience of labour migration and transnational mothering. After that, I look into the concept of 'investing in faith' in order to understand the role of the participants' active relationship with God in their experiences of migration and mothering. Lastly, I reflect on how the experiences of transnational mothering and labour migration by the participants, while revealing encounters of grace, also point to the presence of elements that negate grace.

METHODS

The research project is a feminist practical theological endeavor that seeks to bring to light elements in migrant mothers' lives that empower them as well as those that hinder them from flourishing. Feminist practical theologian Joyce Ann Mercer defines feminist practical theology as 'a type of practical theological scholarship, teaching, and action that explores the intersections of gender, diverse women's experiences, and lived religious practices as it seeks the flourishing of women' (Mercer 2014: 97). By looking into their 'everyday, embodied experiences' as migrants and transnational mothers, I aim to perform a theological reflection that recognises their lived realities and perspectives and that seeks to transform oppressive realities (Mercer 2014: 104). With this motivation, the method employed in this study is constructivist grounded theory, which seeks to construct or generate conceptual frameworks or theories from data inductively by performing levels of coding that involve constant comparative analysis (Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Creswell 2014: 14). In solidarity with fellow (Christian) Philippine migrant mothers, I embarked on this task, hoping to make it an opportunity for mutual enrichment. The intention is to elicit appropriate support and inform policies as greater knowledge of their experiences of migration and mothering is produced.

Participants

The participants were Philippine migrant mothers who all volunteered to take part in the study. They were separated from their children aged between 0 and 18 at the time their mothers left the Philippines. Interviews were conducted from October 2020 to October 2021 and took place with workers in Kuwait, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Italy. These countries continue to be common destinations for Philippine labour migrants. The duration of time that the participants had worked in receiving countries ranged from 5 to 27 years. The participants were between the ages of 30 and 57 at the time of the interviews. In terms of educational attainment, one had finished basic education; two had received a year or two of secondary education; six had completed secondary education; eleven were college undergraduates; six were college graduates; and one had attended postgraduate school but had not completed her programme. They each had between one and eight children, with three being the average. The majority of the participants were single mothers, either separated or widowed, and seven of them were married. Most of the participants identified as Roman Catholics, while some were members of other Christian denominations. There were some Muslim reverts among the participants in Kuwait. One participant did not practise any religion but was baptised as a Catholic.

My own personal contact with individuals in these countries assisted with finding and inviting participants to take part in the research. Recruitment was conducted online by posting calls for participation in Facebook groups of Philippine migrants working within the four countries and communicating with personal contacts to disseminate information about the research within their circles. In Taiwan, a priest running a migrant shelter in the city of Taichung served as the main gatekeeper, and another personal contact shared information about the study to the Philippine women in her circle. In Hong Kong, the recruitment started with a response from a personal contact

and continued through 'snowballing,' a technique wherein existing study participants refer the researcher to other participants. Snowball sampling proves helpful for studies that involve subjects who belong to populations which are difficult to access (Atkinson and Flint 2001: 1–4). A Christian pastor who is also a migrant advocate also helped in inviting participants in Hong Kong. In Kuwait, the first set of participants came from a Philippine Catholic parish. One participant from this parish referred other participants to the project. The second set of participants came from migrant mothers who also volunteered in a migrant advocate group. In Italy, recruitment was conducted through personal contacts who led Philippine migrant organisations there. The call for participants in Italy was extended to Philippine migrant mothers who have experienced transnational mothering at some point in their lives, albeit not necessarily at the present time. This was decided because of the possibility of family reunification in Italy, which is not available in the other three countries referred to in this research.

In total, 27 participants were recruited. Recruitment ended upon reaching the point of theoretical saturation in data analysis, which scholars argue to be the correct indicator for determining the appropriate sample size (Mason 2010; Dworkin 2012). Theoretical saturation is reached when the gathering of further data about the emerging grounded theory no longer results in new insights or properties of theoretical categories (Bryant and Charmaz 2007: 611).

Data Collection

The institutional review board of KU Leuven, *Sociaal-Maatschappelijke Ethische Commissie*, granted this project approval. The participants were given an information letter and expressed their informed consent to partaking in the study. In order to gather data from the participants on their personal experiences of transnational mothering, particularly their spirituality and familial relations, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted from an hour to an hour and a half. The prepared list of questions and topics ensures that the conversation will cover the different facets of the phenomenon studied while remaining open and flexible enough to include areas that the participants consider meaningful. All interviews were conducted with the use of videoconferencing applications, such as Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. Ten of the 27 transnational mother participants had a second interview session which lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. All of the original participants were invited to a second interview, but only ten of those responded. The photo elicitation technique was used in the second session to support participants in sharing their faith lives. All collected data is pseudonymized and kept confidential. The participants were given instructions to contact me and an indicated support group should they find the need.

Data Analysis

I transcribed all the interviews verbatim from the sound recordings of interviews conducted in Filipino. A piece of qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was used to code the data. Two main phases of grounded theory coding were performed: initial coding and focused coding. Initial coding takes place at the start, after the first round of data collection, and serves as the basis for the succeeding data gathering (Charmaz 2006: 46). During the initial coding, I followed Charmaz's suggestion of using gerunds as codes in order to describe what was happening in each segment of data from the perspective of the participants (Charmaz 2006: 47–49). In the second phase, focused coding, initial codes that 'make the most analytical sense to categorize data incisively and completely' (Charmaz 2006: 56) are identified. These codes, which have eventually developed into categories, are discussed in the following section. An independent researcher performed a separate initial coding of some of the interviews to triangulate data (Guion 2002). The codes generated by the independent researcher are all similar to my codes. Investigator triangulation and member-checking with a group of migrant mothers in Kuwait were conducted to ensure resonance and analytical rigour (Charmaz 2014). The

participants are referred to using pseudonyms and quoted verbatim. The quotations are my translations from Filipino to English.

SPIRITUALITY

Using the method of constructivist grounded theory, the study values the participants' personal understanding of spirituality and living out of faith. At the same time, I recognise that, as a researcher, spirituality is a sensitizing concept that framed my data analysis and theological reflection (Bowen 2006). In this study, complementing descriptions of spirituality are considered in light of the context of the participant migrant mothers who self-identified as Christians at present or, for some, in the past. As presented in this section and succeeding ones, there is resonance in the faith narratives of the participants and the following conceptualisations of spirituality.

Scholars studying spirituality commonly acknowledge that there is no universal definition of the concept (Jastrzębski 2022). In this study, participants who identify as religious spoke about having spiritual experiences in living out their religious faith in their daily lives as migrants and transnational mothers. Hence, it is helpful to consider the concept of 'lived religion', which refers to 'how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives' (McGuire 2008: 12). In a study of the spiritualities of feminists in the UK, sociologist of religion Kristin Aune similarly argues that feminist spiritualities are best understood as lived religion (2015). She notes the continuing influence of religion to the spirituality of her study participants. Although majority of her participants were 'de-churched', meaning 'no longer involved with the institutional church', they continued to perform practices, behaviours and rituals that were inspired by religion (Aune 2015: 129). For the non-religious and atheists in her study, the 'practice of doing good to others' was a significant characteristic of their spirituality (Aune 2015: 138). She also observes that feminist spiritualities are relational in that they are 'shaped by and embedded in relationship networks' (Aune 2015: 129). Two of the three characteristics of feminist spiritualities that Aune identifies are evident in the narratives of the participant migrant mothers in my study, namely relational and practice-oriented (Aune). I will discuss these aspects in the section on findings, particularly the theme of 'investing in people and possibilities'.

Philippine theologian Gemma Tulud-Cruz, in her theological reflection on spirituality and migrants, identifies four values embodied in the Christian spirituality of migrants, namely 'courageous hope, creative resistance, steadfast faith, and festive community spirit' (2014: 128). Migrants brave the losses and difficulties that come with the move, believing in the possibility of a better future. Amidst their vulnerabilities and experiences of oppression, migrants are described as finding imaginative ways to communicate their struggle against unjust realities. With the unpredictability of their future and the little control they have on the circumstances they face, they remain certain about their religious faith, which they express through religious practices. Lastly, they build a family with fellow migrants with whom they celebrate and share meals, the Eucharist and other resources. Tulud-Cruz asserts that spirituality encompasses all aspects of life, such as 'the social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions' (2014: 134). Striving towards 'authentic human liberation', migrants take into consideration all these aspects (Tulud-Cruz 2014: 134). A crucial element in this task is identifying their available resources and recognising what they lack. This is a theme in my data analysis, which I will discuss below.

Latin American systematic theologian Marilú Rojas Salazar identifies a panentheistic spirituality that echoes Tulud-Cruz's point on spirituality as holistic:

Spirituality is our attitude toward life, the way we face our human, social relationships. It is the expression of our culture, the way we manage our economies, and includes our political

stances (the common good) in life. Spirituality is the way we build the history of our daily life; therefore, spirituality is necessarily communitarian and affects the comprehensive life of a person: desires, sexualities, affections, basic needs, life situation, and political aims (Salazar 2018: 96).

It is important to include this definition of spirituality from a panentheistic framework that broaches God as '*incarnate* and *immanent* in all beings that make up the cosmos and in each of its elements' to be open to participants' practices of faith and mothering that transcend religious heteronormative suppositions (Salazar 2018: 93). An example of this would be that mothers should be the primary caregivers for their children and must prioritise staying at home to care for them over seeking employment ("*Laborem Exercens* 19 (14 September 1981) | John Paul II" n.d.), which is something my study participants are unable to fulfill. By considering the assertion that 'God is in everything' in theologically reflecting on the participants' narratives, their lived realities are taken as a whole (Salazar 2018: 93). This means that although traditional Christian beliefs and practices are easily identified in investigating their experience of spirituality, the inquiry extends to all aspects of their narratives, going beyond common Christian faith statements, ideals and rituals.

A couple of key aspects of spirituality can be gleaned from the experience of mothering. All the participant migrant mothers believe in God, except one, shaping their experience of spirituality. At the same time, their role as mothers is a central factor in their self-identity. Theologian HyeRan Kim-Cragg's assertion that 'motherhood, one of the most mundane identities, illuminates one of the most profound and sacred natures of God, whose prime desire is to be in relationship' bears significance for how women interpret their mothering in relation to their spirituality (2017: 150). In this regard, it becomes more vivid how a believer's positionality can become a privileged location from where to understand God. This is in keeping with feminist practical theology's aim to 'reimagine knowledge' in a way that incorporates unheard women's voices in the production of theological knowledge (Mercer 2014: 108). Another helpful concept from the field of mothering and theology is Mount Shoop's 'spirituality of ambiguity', where she reflects on life-giving possibilities in mothering despite the fears and anxieties that characterise her experience of mothering a child diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (2017). Similarly, for the participant migrants, their experience of transnational mothering is an ambiguous journey where they explore possibilities to sustain the lives of their children by having to leave them behind and be separated from them for years. Despite the sadness and longing mothers and left-behind family members endure, the participant mothers expressed gratitude for the small and big improvements in their lives. This spirituality of ambiguity is that which makes an opening for the participant mothers to 'negotiate with God', a key concept that will be discussed in a succeeding section.

The participants' thoughtful practise of strategising to achieve their goal of securing a better life for their family and themselves reflect spirituality as described above. The participants go through a spiritual practice when they acknowledge their talents and capacities as gifts and aspire to live a better life by identifying the resources that are available to them as well as those that are lacking. When they embrace the obligation to provide for the needs of their children and other family members, especially in the context of poverty, they are committing to being in the service of others in their relationship networks. The participants' efforts to invest in people and possibilities reveal a movement toward development and transformation, a spiritual quest they pursue amidst fears and uncertainties.

FINDINGS

Strategising to Gain Access to a Better Life

The core concept of 'strategising to gain access to a better life' may shed light on the reasons why participant mothers are not discouraged by grim accounts of migrant workers being abused by their employers or by terrible events involving migrants' children and families who are left in the Philippines. The participants perform strategies to reach their goal of gaining access to a better life for themselves and their kin. While cognisant of the great dangers that labour migration entails and the challenges that come with transnational mothering, migrant mothers take the leap, believing that the opportunity to work abroad can take them to their envisioned better future. The core category of 'strategising to gain access to a better life' is underpinned by others, namely 'identifying (limited) resources,' 'embracing the obligation to secure one's family's welfare,' and 'investing in people and possibilities.'

Identifying (Limited) Resources

Migrant mothers' efforts to strategise to gain access to a better life depend on their identification of resources. By assessing their living conditions in the Philippines, they identify which resources they are lacking and which are sufficient in order to secure a better life for themselves. Most of the research participants identified a scarcity of financial resources in the Philippines which rendered them unable to provide adequately for the needs of their families as a motivating factor for labour migration. Limited job opportunities and absence of employment offering a liveable wage are factors that fall under identifying resources. As Gina, a domestic worker in Hong Kong, recalls:

I got married when I was 19 years old. My husband and I got into a relationship when we were in third year college. At 18, I got pregnant. I did not finish my studies. We got married, lived together, and our family grew. With five children to support, our life was tough. I did not have work, and neither did my husband. He was a construction labourer but eventually stopped working. We were just surviving daily. We had our own house made of bamboo and nipa. When it rained, all of us, including my then very young children, would all get wet. We cooked our food on the ground and did not have electricity. One day I was listening to the AM radio and heard about an opportunity to work in Hong Kong. [. . .] My husband and I talked about it. I expressed my dissatisfaction with the life we had. I told him that working abroad might change our life for the better. But we did not have money to go through the process of application. My husband's grandfather had a carabao which we borrowed and sold, so I had money to pay the training fee of 25,000 pesos [around 425 euros] and for the other fees that come with securing required documents. I went to the city, filed my application, and waited for six months. While waiting, I did laundry for other people and planted corn to earn some money daily. By doing laundry, I got 150 pesos [around 2.50 euros] per day, which is the same amount I earned from planting corn. I used that to buy rice. I guess what really pushed me to go abroad was the reality of a tough life. [*starts crying*] Oh, I am sorry, I couldn't contain my emotions, sorry, sorry. We had a very hard life; that pushed me to go abroad. Yes, that really is the reason.

While inadequate financial resources featured significantly in the stories of the participants, they also identified other resources that can be capitalised on in order to gain access to a better life. Their skills and capacities are in line with the needs of the receiving countries' labour markets. Since most of the employment opportunities abroad have to do with care work, mothers are easily qualified. Some of

the participants were even overqualified given their educational backgrounds. Connections with other labour migrants, such as friends or relatives, have facilitated their employment abroad through referrals. Family members who can care for the children while the mother is abroad are also an important resource. In most cases, people who serve as guardians to the left-behind children are members of the immediate or extended family. The availability of people to serve as guardians for their children is an important consideration when deciding whether to pursue labour migration. Cynthia recalls, 'I went home to my parents who live outside of Manila and asked my mother if I could leave my children with her. She agreed to the idea, saying no one else would help me but them.'

Embracing the Obligation to Secure Family's Welfare

Along with the process of identifying resources, participants demonstrated a process of accepting the obligation to secure the welfare of the family. This means they recognise their responsibility for ensuring that their families' needs, particularly those of their children, are met. Many of the mothers spoke of taking sole responsibility for providing for their families because their husbands were unable or unwilling to do so. For instance, Vilma took it upon herself to raise funds for her children's education: 'I have decided to go abroad because my husband did not show any concern about my children's education. When he arrived from work, he went straight to his friends to drink or to gamble. We have five children, and my husband did not seem to think about their education at all.' Many of the mothers are the breadwinners for their families. This is especially true for single mothers like Jelai, whose husband's untimely death prompted her to extend her stay in the receiving country.

I came to Kuwait in 2011 to work because our income in the Philippines was not sufficient. Although my husband was working as a security guard, what he was earning was not enough, especially because we had two children. I was just planning to work for two years to save up some money that we could use as a capital for a business. However, six months into my stay in Kuwait, my husband died. I needed to keep my job. If I went home to the Philippines, I didn't think there were employment opportunities for me. I decided to stay here in Kuwait.

The length of stay in the receiving country is determined by the participants' commitment to meet the needs of their family members, particularly by providing financial support. Most intend to work abroad until their children have graduated from college. However, many of the participants eventually realise that there are other needs for which they must save, such as their sustenance and healthcare for when they retire in the Philippines, motivating them to stay and work further.

This category brings together migrant mothers' diverse experiences of adversity, which they strive to overcome for the sake of their loved ones. Giving up in the face of hardship is not an option for a mother who accepts the responsibility to provide for her family's well-being. In Nina's words, 'For my child, I will do everything. No matter how hard things may be. Whatever happens, I will strive to overcome a difficult situation.' This is also one of the reasons the participants stay abroad. Going home to the Philippines abruptly when things get tough in the receiving country is tantamount to neglecting their responsibilities, which migrant mothers are unwilling to do. As Joana puts it:

Be steadfast in keeping your decision. You have to realise that you are sacrificing for your loved ones. Even when it is painful, you have no choice. Just cry it out. And think positive. Think positive. Sacrifices are necessary. If I go home, what will happen to us? Sacrifice.

It is important to note that migrant mothers find themselves responsible not just for their children (and spouse) but also for other relatives, such as parents and siblings. Many of the participant mothers

mentioned leaving nothing for themselves in order to provide as much as possible for their families in the Philippines. This is better understood in relation to the following category of investing in people and opportunities.

Investing in People and Possibilities

In order to fulfil their obligation of providing access to a better life, the participant mothers engage in processes of investing. This means that they manage their resources and spend them on the things they believe are important in order to achieve and maintain access to a better life. In this category, there are four identified objects of investment: migration, relationships with others, oneself, and faith.

One very concrete form of investment is seen in how the participants raise a substantial amount of money and devote a significant amount of time and energy in order to work abroad. Gina, whose narrative is quoted above, had to borrow and sell her husband's grandfather's carabao to fund her application to work abroad. Risks taken and years spent in the receiving country are viewed as a high-risk investment intending to generate gains sufficient to support oneself and one's family, as well as to achieve goals such as owning a house in the Philippines.

The participants prioritise their relationship with their children. Despite the temporal and spatial distances, they strive to remain present in their lives. Sending remittances, staying in touch with each other through the use of information and communication technologies (Francisco-Menchavez 2018; Madianou and Miller 2013; Madianou 2012; Uy-Tioco 2007; Oliveira 2019; Baldassar 2016), taking holidays in the Philippines, and sending home boxes filled with gifts and supplies (Camposano 2012; 2017) are some of the ways in which mothers attempt to maintain their presence in their children's lives. Marissa, a labour migrant and transnational mother for 18 years, recounts the evolution of her relationship with her children, from their inability to recognise her to them taking on the responsibility of supporting her when she became jobless:

When I was starting, I could only go home by the time my contract of two years end. When I started working outside of a household, I could already go home every year. Since then, I targeted to go home each year to bond with them [the children] for two months. I can vividly recall my first time to go home. My youngest child refused to come to me, so my mother explained to my child that I was his mother. My mother had to refer to a photo of mine, which she used to show him, to remind him it was me in the photo. He recognised the connection but still refused to come to me. I remembered how it took one peso coin for him to warm up to me. After I gave him one peso coin, he started coming to me. Today, I thank God that I never had a problem with my children. I truly thank God that despite the distance, I could continue my mothering. I have always made myself available, giving pieces of advice and explaining to them why I have to be away. I am so grateful that they understand why I am here; they understand up to this day. I am happy that my children turned out to be very understanding. Thank God! We are very open to each other. We are like close friends. I raised them this way. Whatever problems they are going through, I encourage them to open up to me. I tell them to think of me as a close friend and not as a mother. That worked for us. During the pandemic, I have just come back to Kuwait from a vacation in the Philippines and was jobless for four months. That occasion revealed my children's great love for me. I realised that the mother is not the only one capable of giving and supporting family. My children voluntarily offered to support me and provide for my needs. Their gesture truly touched me.

Not all mothers are as pleased as Marissa with how their relationship with their children turned out. There are also those who realise that their children have grown apart from them. Some mothers

perceive that some of their children cannot connect and be open with them. Although mothers claim that they understand their children for feeling or behaving that way, they express the pain of being in such a situation because of labour migration.

Migrant mothers also invest in their relationships with other family members in the Philippines, especially those relatives with whom they have entrusted the care of their children (Peng and Wong 2016). In the receiving country, they invest in relationships with their employers by performing well, negotiating, and adjusting to please them, as well as with other migrants and Philippine nationals who have become their second family. Importantly, participants invest in themselves by engaging in activities and tasks that promote self-development. As a result, they are better equipped to strategise in order to gain access to a better life.

Finally, transnational mothers invest in their faith. The process of investing in faith can be better understood by considering the interplay of more specific processes in relation to faith, such as experiencing God's presence, prioritising faith, negotiating with God, and perceiving transformation. The interaction of these four categories can shed light on how Christian faith plays a role in the participant mothers' lives. It explains, in particular, how migrant mothers develop resilience or the capacity to recover from setbacks and persevere in reaching their dreams and goals in the face of adversity.

The grounded theory of strategising to gain access to a better life builds on Kerilyn Schewel's aspiration-capability approach to understanding 'migration processes across the forced-voluntary spectrum'. This approach takes into account both the agency and the 'unfreedoms' (Sen 1999) experienced by migrants. Her proposal is to consider both the desire of the migrants to leave and their motivation for it, alongside the structures and capacities that allow them to migrate. An important point for Schewel's approach is to evaluate how migration allows migrants to build other capabilities that can lead them to the kind of life they value (Schewel 2018). The category 'identifying (limited) resources' points to both the participants' capabilities as well as their aspiration to respond to their lack of resources. The agency of the participants, despite the reality of their unfreedoms, comes to the fore in 'embracing the obligation to secure the family's welfare'. This category also underscores the clear familial dimension of the aspirations of the study participants, who are mothers to young children when they first left the Philippines. The last category of 'investing in people and possibilities' depicts how migration and other significant factors motivate the development of the participants' other capabilities. A distinct contribution of this study, in connection to Schewel's approach, brings to light how migrants' faith plays a role in their 'capabilities-enhancing development' (2018).

Migrant Mothers' Investing in Faith: Towards Sustaining a (Christian) Spirituality

In this section, I discuss a major category that emerged in my data analysis, which is 'investing in faith'. The decision of migrant mothers to invest in faith is underpinned by four interrelated sub-categories, namely 'experiencing God's presence' in their lives, 'prioritising their faith' through practice and beliefs, 'negotiating with God' through prayers and daily choices, and 'perceiving transformation' in themselves, others, and circumstances. I argue that this concept of investing in faith is integral in the participant migrant mothers' efforts to 'strategise in order to gain access to a better life', the grounded theory that explains the participants' experiences of labour migration and transnational mothering. As a kind of lived religion, the concept of investing in faith and its underlying mechanisms point to the 'practical coherence' of the participants' practices, meaning they shed light on how religious and spiritual experiences 'make sense' and are 'effective' in the lives of the participants (McGuire 2008: 15). Their experience of investing in faith attests to how women's spirituality and religiosity support their agency (Braidotti 2008) and flourishing. Scholars of religion and migration Eppsteiner and Hagan, through a comparative study of migrants of different faith traditions and geographical locations, assert that religion serves as a psychological, social and spiritual resource for migrants in all stages of

migration. Religion as psychological support pertains to how religion motivates migrants' coping with challenges faced throughout stages of migration. Religious groups and communities are identified as significant sources of support and protection for migrants (2016). What this article adds to Eppsteiner and Hagan's observation and analysis on the importance of religion in the lives of migrants is the centrality of a personal and relational God whom they experience and in whom they invest their faith. The idea is that support does not only come from religious groups and personal beliefs and practices of migrants as Eppsteiner and Hagan (2016) argue according to the studies they have surveyed. Based on the concepts that emerged in my analysis of data that I discuss below, and coming from the perspective of theology, I argue, as my participants claim, that their relationship with God is a significant resource for them. The dynamics between God and the believing participants are represented by the following categories.

The initial process that grounds a migrant mother's decision to invest in faith is their 'experiencing of God's presence'. The manner in which the participants perceive God's presence can be described in terms of how that presence occurs. The participant mothers, for example, have described encountering God's presence as dreams, visions, hearing a voice, receiving answers to prayers, and getting help or advice from others. They also talk about God's role in their lives, such as being a *sandalan* or *sandigan*, which means someone to lean on and rely on, as well as a friend, companion, and confidant, to name a few. Others describe God as the one who bestows blessings, provides for their necessities, grants their requests, treats them with mercy, brings peace, delivers them from their hardships, creates a path for their aspirations and desires to come true, and/or heals them. Some of the participants' experiences with God have become more vivid when they recall their problems. This is related to the belief held by some of the participants that challenges in their lives are brought on by God. This conviction is accompanied by a sense of assurance that they will withstand or overcome adversity because the same God will provide for them and see them through their trials. There are also those who speak more positively about their experience of God, which is linked to their gratitude for the many favours they have received. When considering the phenomenon of transnational mothering, it is worth noting that the participant mothers' depictions of encounters with God were inextricably linked to the well-being of their children and loved ones. For them, God's mercy and generosity make it possible for their children to receive proper nutrition, have decent shelter and access to education, achieve academic or professional successes, and develop good moral character.

What the participants displayed in narrating the centrality of faith in their lives by affirming their experience of God's presence is sacramental imagination, which allows them to encounter 'grace enfolded in word and action' (Hilkert 1997: 30). Sacramental imagination is 'the way of envisioning reality through the eyes of faith that recognizes that the finite can mediate the infinite, that all aspects of created being can mediate grace' (Godzieba 2008: 21). This very disposition is crucial in order for a believer to continue finding meaning in one's experiences. For the participants, faith lets them live meaningfully and with confidence, knowing that God accompanies them towards the better future for which they hope.

Experiencing God's presence leads to the second process of 'prioritising faith,' which results in further experience of God's presence. Prioritising faith can be defined as the actions and beliefs held by the participating migrant mothers that express how important their faith in God is to them. They discussed their personal expressions of faith, and while they noted feelings of falling short of their idea of an ideal believer, their faith holds strong. For example, some mothers claim they are not as religious as others, but they are steadfast in their faith which manifests in their constant gratitude to God for all the blessings they receive. Similarly, although some mothers believe they do not take part in as many religious activities as others, they are certain about the importance of their faith. This process of prioritising became explicit when the participants talked about their efforts to convey their faith. Statements clearly showing the action of prioritising included: '*Maka-Diyos ako*', which can be

translated as 'I love God' or 'I am religious'; 'I am pure Catholic'; 'Others may not believe but I do'; and 'I will never forget my religion' (which was expressed while the participant was in Kuwait, an Islamic country). In contrast, for some Christian mothers who immigrated to Kuwait, prioritising faith eventually meant becoming *Balik-Islam* or Muslim reverts. *Balik-Islam* refers to the belief that if the Philippines had not been colonised, all of its people would have been Muslims. As a result, when Philippine Christians convert to Islam, they claim they are reverting to their natural and original religion (Lacar 2001). Migration experiences bring about changing subjectivities linked to new religious understandings and opportunities (Constable 2010).

In terms of actions, the participants engage in meaningful rituals such as *pagtitirik*, which translates as lighting candles, listening to the homily, attending Mass, going to church, praying regularly, reading Scripture, practising devotions to the Black Nazarene or Our Mother of Perpetual Help and visiting churches of devotion in Quiapo and Baclaran whenever they return to the Philippines, praying the rosary, serving in the church, and sharing the faith with their children. Some participants prioritise faith by disseminating helpful information to other migrants, educating fellow migrants about their rights, providing shelter, criticising forms of faith or religion that are indifferent to the plight of poor migrants, and becoming active in organising migrants. This shows that their religious expressions are developing and adapting according to their context. Furthermore, this last example of prioritising faith, which is focused on serving the underprivileged and vulnerable, exemplifies how faith leads to discipleship (Holder 2005: 1). This emphasis on practice is also a characteristic of feminist spiritualities, which sociologist Aune similarly frames as lived religion (2015).

As the participant migrant mothers prioritise their faith and continue to experience God's presence, investing in faith manifests in their 'negotiating with God.' The negotiating process refers to how migrant mothers express their thoughts, concerns, and desires to God, whom they acknowledge as a significant part of their lives. Negotiating is the part of their relationship with God in which they express their petitions, hopes, and wishes; share their problems; express their fears, worries, and ill feelings; express their gratitude and joy; beg forgiveness; ask questions; seek help, guidance, and strength; and articulate acceptance of what they trust to be God's will. Negotiating develops just as their relationship with God grows. '*Bahala na ang Diyos*', translated as 'God is in charge' or 'God will take care of things,' expresses surrender to and trust in God. These attitudes are possible because of the experience of negotiating. Because God has proven to be trustworthy in their lives, they become courageous and hopeful in their belief that good things will happen. They see the value of surrendering to God, whom they claim has never let them down, as they recount their experiences in retrospect. What research participants feel while negotiating is related to the matter brought up in the conversation. When they recalled their negotiating experience, what particularly stood out was their conviction in claiming the reality and certainty of their relationship with God, even when it involves negative feelings, such as when they question God for unfortunate events. As Saint Teresa of Avila puts it, prayer is 'a mutual presence of two in love' where one can be 'alone with the God who loves us' (Dubay 1990: 58). Such is the experience of the participants when they negotiate with God. As in close friendships, they share themselves with God by expressing their frustrations, dreams, hopes, joys, and suffering, believing that God understands and accompanies them.

The last category of 'perceiving transformation' is a product of the interplay of the three processes that have been previously discussed. In sharing their thoughts about the value of having faith in their lives, the participant migrant mothers described changes in their character, experiences, and circumstances. These changes were mainly positive. Perceiving transformation refers to the process of noticing how one is changing into a state or forming an attitude that is beneficial for the person, particularly when dealing with challenges. For example, the participants identified becoming at peace or feeling unburdened (*pagaan ng loob*) after praying. Some mentioned becoming more patient towards others, being more helpful, and growing confident that they can do what is right given

their situation. The most common transformation in the process of relating to God is their growth in faith. Also significant in this category is the experience of *lakas ng loob*, or having the courage and willpower to work abroad despite the uncertainties that come with migration and transnational mothering.

An example of how the four processes under the category of investing in faith come into play is reflected in Beth's sharing:

The time when I felt so down, for I had so many problems, the first place I went to was the Church. I was just sitting there. Praying. I was talking to the Lord. I directly felt the Lord's presence. Through the Lord's help, it seemed like my problems were going away. My problems were getting solved. My problems were ending. I am like that. I am friendly when I speak. I am not a bully but a joker. But, inside, I really am devoted to God. I always lift everything up to God. I fear the Lord. I really enjoy going to the church here in Hong Kong. It is like I experience holiness. I mean, it is different every time I go to the Saint Benedict church. Even if it is far, I go there. Even if I have to walk far. [...] When I reach the church, I feel this great joy. I feel unburdened and refreshed. I really like it there. [...] When restrictions are lifted, the first place I will go to is the Saint Benedict church.

The category of investing in faith and its underpinning processes can be best summed up by the Philippine axiom, '*Nasa Diyos ang awa, nasa tao ang gawa*', which can be translated literally as 'In God is mercy; deeds rest in humanity.' The phrase can be interpreted as a kind of 'shared agency' between God and humanity (Alabanza 2018). Others understand it as 'God helps those who help themselves' (Constable 2010: 316). In the case of the participants, the interplay between God's providence and their participation in it can best be conceived as a partnership. Their faith in God is concretised in their experiences and actions. Consequently, they exhibit hopefulness as they gamble on working abroad and mothering from afar, believing '[they] can do all things through [God] who strengthens [them]' (cf. Phil 4:13 [New Revised Standard Version]).

Although faith was a central theme in all the interviews and was regarded by most of the participants as one possibility in which to invest, there is reason to assume that this is not always the case. It is possible that some migrant mothers may continue to invest in migration, in relationships with others and in oneself – but not in their faith in God. Michelle, a migrant mother who no longer believes in God, attests to this. In her explanation, her unbelief in God stems from her distrust in the believing community:

When I was starting here in Hong Kong, I belonged to a church community. Eventually, I felt the need to leave because it was not enough to stay in the church to know and respond to the problems of migrants. Spiritual belief is okay, but faith without action is dead. [...] I think I was a Born Again Christian because I experienced water baptism, but I am a Roman Catholic by paper. I no longer believe. I just focus on scientific explanations. I lost my faith. I find church people who disregard the hardships of their neighbours [to be] hypocritical. I really think it is hypocrisy. What happens after prayer? Nothing. What do you do with the problem? Counselling leads to gossiping. I don't know, ha; it's just my experience. I got turned off and left the church. [...] It's okay to cry or pray together, that's good. But you cannot set aside the problems, the reasons you are abroad. I have noticed that the church has biased reasoning concerning political issues. They set aside political issues, but within the church, there is also politicking. To me, that's off-putting.

Michelle's story alludes to the great responsibility of those who identify themselves as Christians to

practise faith that does justice. After all, Christian discipleship is about following Jesus, whose life and ministry is about 'tak[ing] sides with the oppressed and poor in the struggle for life – no matter the cost' (Copeland 2010: 87). For some migrant workers like Michelle, who are engaged in activism and social work, religion has become a barrier to their mission of responding to the plight of poor migrants (Constable 2010).

Discerning 'Dis-grace'

Labour migration is a phenomenon of which transnational mothers partake as they strategise to gain access to a better life. In this context, faith emerges as one possibility in which mothers invest. They invest in faith and take it as a significant resource in their overall experience of labour migration and mothering from afar. Their faith in God motivates their choices and daily living, particularly towards their central goal of gaining access to a better life for their family and themselves, and is central to their ability to survive and thrive. Their way of life, influenced by their living relationship with God, is a kind of spirituality. The focus of this article, as a practical theological piece, has been to explore the 'lived religious practices' of migrant mothers (Mercer 2014: 99). The faith lives of migrant mothers depict a spirituality that exemplifies grace. However, also as a feminist theological work, it is imperative that oppressive elements in the experience of transnational mothering and labour migration by women be brought to light. As theologian Mary Catherine Hilkert duly points out in her book *Naming Grace*, 'the scope and extent of suffering in the world confirm the dialectical imagination's assertion that grace is interlaced with sin throughout human history' (1997: 111). While a discussion of the lived faith and discipleship of transnational mothers can usher support towards their flourishing, a failure to discern evil in their midst is a disservice to them. In this section, elements in the participants' lived realities that oppose grace or are a 'dis-grace,' as Hilkert (1997: 111) puts it, are considered.

One of the most pressing challenges for migrant mothers is separation from their loved ones, particularly their young children. The mothers who took part in the study recall the agony and paradox of having to leave their young children to support them. While I agree that women should not essentially be tied to domestic duties and be encouraged to engage in life-giving work outside the home, they should not feel forced to leave their children because of poverty. Unjust structures and inefficient systems that leave them without suitable employment options in their home country have to be addressed. All of the participating migrant mothers were aware of cases of unjust treatment and inhumane working conditions for migrants performing care work in the receiving countries. Either they or someone they know has experienced abuse at work. The participants and other caregivers and domestic workers alike experience a lack of recognition for the value of their service through low wages, absence of social security, unjust working hours, discrimination, and verbal and physical abuse, among other issues ("Recognizing the Rights of Domestic Workers" 2018). Considering this, it is imperative to actualise sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn's vision of a caring society where care work is considered as 'real work', just as other services, and workers in this sector receive 'social recognition and entitlements for their efforts' (Glenn 2010). Beyond the valuable service migrant workers provide to the receiving societies, it is necessary to reiterate that they be acknowledged, first and foremost, as fellow human beings worthy of respect and deserving of rights. Most of them are single mothers. Many are estranged from their husbands. Those who are separated from their spouses claim that marital problems already existed prior to migration but worsened because of it. In this respect, it might be helpful to reflect on how normative expectations on the rightful place of men and women in the family influence how families in migration cope with changes in roles and identities. Theologian Hoon Choi's 'caregiver as a new model for fatherhood' (2020: 70) is a good starting point. Having to shoulder parental responsibilities on their own makes transnational mothering even more challenging for

migrant mothers. They do, however, recognise the significant help provided by other relatives who act as guardians for their children. Such recognition develops into an attitude of indebtedness in which mothers find it difficult to refuse financial support to family members even when they do not have the means. Some resort to loaning money in order to avoid turning down relatives who request financial support. There are also mothers who experience difficulties in reaching or communicating with their children when they cannot send remittances to their families in the Philippines. This gives migrant mothers the impression that they only matter when they can provide financially for their families. To some extent, some mothers believe they must always be monetarily capable of supporting their families. Such an idea has led mothers to stay abroad longer and work more to support their adult children, their children's families, and other relatives. While self-giving love is a Christian value that can be traced in the transnational mothers' efforts to support their families, it does not prove helpful to romanticise the idea of 'giving until I have nothing left for myself'. If the idea is to lead everyone to an experience of flourishing, it must be explored how communal responsibility can be fostered in migrant families. Support given to families at home should not encourage dependency nor lead to infantilism. In this regard, ecofeminist theological principles of interdependence and mutual obligations can contribute (Salazar 2018).

Having identified these concerns, the next step for a future study is to explore Christian sources to evaluate which beliefs and practices in the tradition are burdensome to transnational mothers and their families and which can better promote their flourishing.

CONCLUSION

Labour migrants who are also transnational mothers engage in a hopeful gamble as they strategise to gain access to a better life despite the risks and challenges associated with working abroad and being away from their families. The participants' narratives attest to the ambiguity of labour migration and transnational mothering as experiences of grace and dis-grace. In the process of continual 'gambling,' they are sustained by their relationship with God, motivating the strategies they employ as labour migrants and transnational mothers. Their spirituality, practised in the self-giving choices they make daily towards bringing a better life to their families, testifies to a lived experience of faith and discipleship. It is a spirituality of flexibility that does not dismiss institutional religion but allows room for other expressions and adjusts to the possibilities given their context. In recognising God's presence as they pursue their goal of securing a better life, they gain and renew a sense of hope that motivates them to remain on their mission. They persevere amidst sadness, longing, and discouragement from losses experienced. In them, we discover a face of Christian discipleship that proclaims that God will make a way (cf. Isa 43:16–19 [New Revised Standard Version]) and boldly commits despite apparent worries. Knowing that something must be done to improve their lives, they take a gamble on working abroad, finding confidence in 'the hope of the paschal imagination ... that death, injustice, and loss do not have the final word; the future lies in the hands of the living God' (Hilkert 1997: 83).

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