Seafarers’ families: the children speak

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

I T IS known that the Philippines is one of the most schooled nations in Asia. However, in comparison to the rest of the population, one of the striking characteristics of seafarers’ children (aged between 7 and 21) is that they are overwhelmingly in full-time education. They also tend to study at private schools. As well as contributing to the social and cultural capital of Filipino society, this puts the seafarers’ children in a better position for their future prospects, in particular for employment opportunities. When seafarers’ children were asked to highlight the advantages of having seafarer fathers – apart from better education opportunities – they highlighted a number of things.

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

Another, a girl, had this to say: “I just get used to the idea of my father being away. I was a little kid when he went away so maybe that’s why I just get used to it. I miss him and I send letters sometimes, but then it’s just it.”

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

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

“Many of them have never talked to me about his job,” said another 12-year-old girl. “When he arrived two weeks ago he gave me a T-shirt and a pair of shorts for my birthday, but then it turned out to be a bit big.”

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

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

Another child, a boy, had something similar to say: “In my first year I was having a hard time adjusting to college life and after I had seen my opportunities I thought that I was just a load on my dad. A seafarer’s daughter made a similar point: “I think for my father the idea of giving presents is a mechanism for coping with the time that he has not been with us,” said one 19-year-old son. A seafarer’s daughter made a similar point: “I think for my father the idea of giving presents is a mechanism for coping with the time that he has not been with us,” said one 19-year-old son. A seafarer’s daughter made a similar point: “I think for my father the idea of giving presents is a mechanism for coping with the time that he has not been with us,” said one 19-year-old son. A seafarer’s daughter made a similar point: “I think for my father the idea of giving presents is a mechanism for coping with the time that he has not been with us,” said one 19-year-old son. A seafarer’s daughter made a similar point: “I think for my father the idea of giving presents is a mechanism for coping with the time that he has not been with us.”

One 15-year-old girl said: “You never talk to me about your job. I have never seen him do anything of worth and that’s the reason why I changed my course. Now I am studying hotel and restaurant management which is much cheaper.”

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

One teenage girl said: “When my father is away I feel as though he doesn’t care for the little kids we left behind. Things change, but they think nothing changes because it is fixed in their minds that we’re still the young ones they loved before.”

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

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

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

“My dad spends a lot of time away from us because of his job, so communication really matters. If we communicated better all problems would be talked through. By communicating we could understand each other. We would talk about things, and hopefully they will understand.”

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

“My dad spends a lot of time away from us because of his job, so communication really matters. If we communicated better all problems would be talked through. By communicating we could understand each other. We would talk about things, and hopefully they will understand.”