

CHAMPSEA–Philippines Policy Briefs

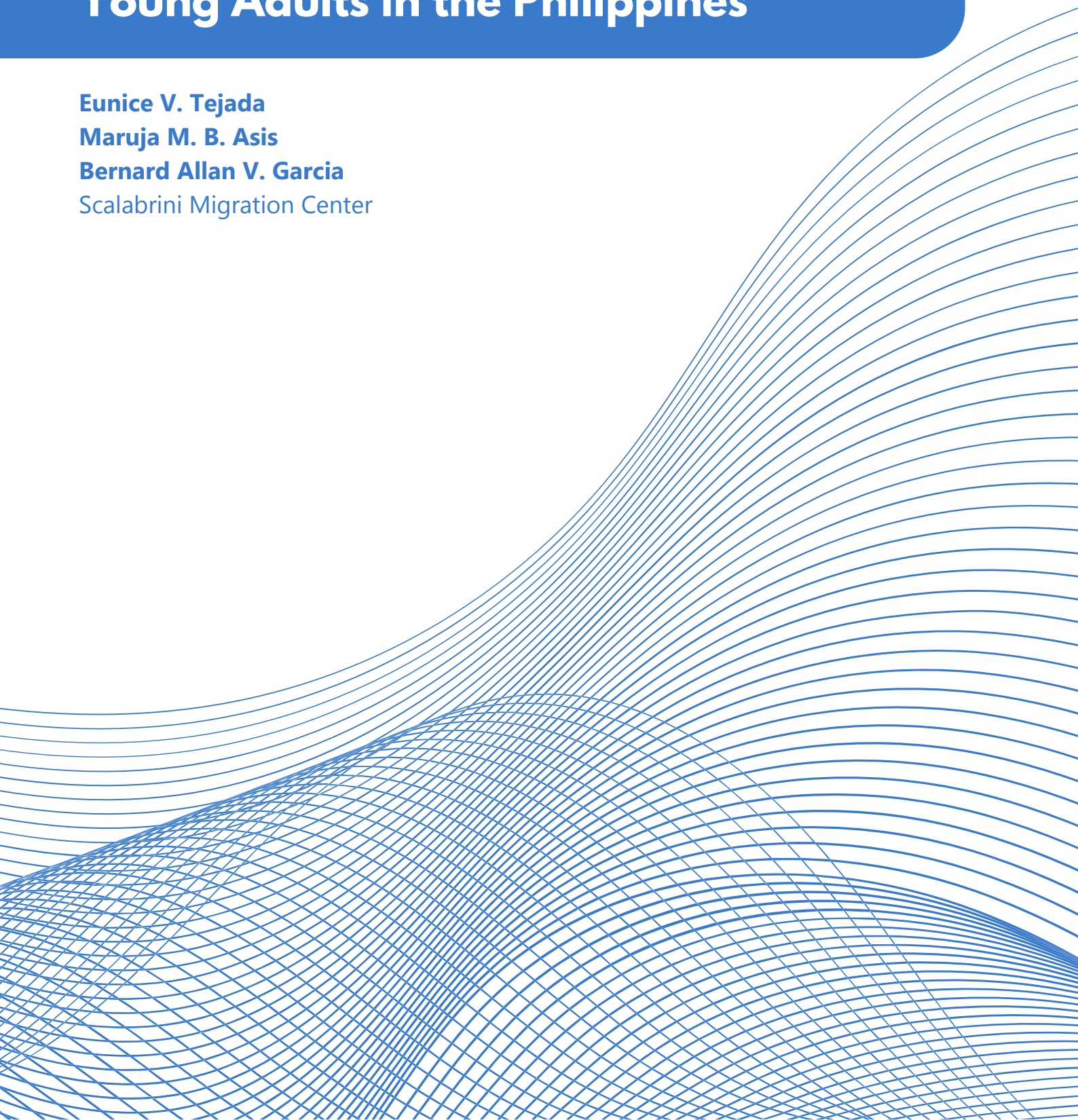
Interconnected Futures: Migration and Related Aspirations of Young Adults in the Philippines

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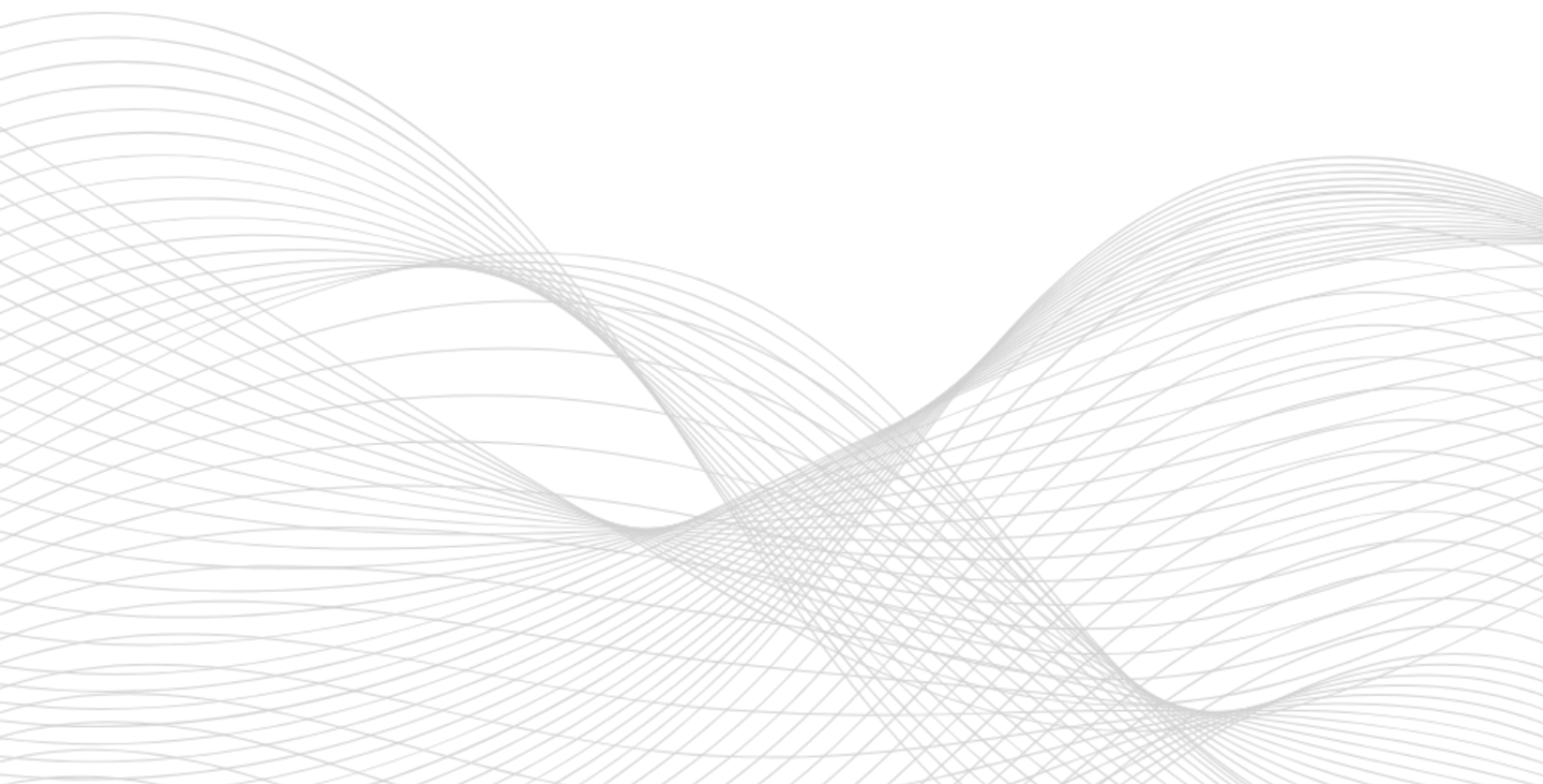
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Introduction

The phenomenon of transnational families in the context of labor migration has been the subject of research and public discourse, often attributing negative outcomes such as behavioral issues, engaging in risky behaviors, and lower educational achievement among left-behind children to parental migration. While labor migration is temporary—that is, migrant workers are expected to return home at the end of their contracts—the temporariness of being a migrant is often protracted in practice, as many engage in repeated migration spanning years, even decades. The separation between migrant parents and their children raises concerns about the latter's well-being.

Young adulthood is an important stage of development marked by key transitions such as completing formal education, starting a career, initiating and navigating intimate relationships, and building a family (Rod et al., 2025). This life stage is often a confusing, even tumultuous, “in-between” period as they are no longer adolescents, but also do not have yet the breadth of experience and responsibilities typically associated with adults (Bonnie et al., 2015). Thus, the impact of parental separation and absence due to migration beyond childhood during this critical period should be better understood to adequately respond to the distinct issues relevant to the age group.

Drawing from the Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA) Young Adult datasets from the Philippine study, this paper aims to explore the aspirations of Filipino young adults in relation to parental migration.

Young adults in the Philippines

One of the few large-scale research projects focused on the youth population in the Philippines is the Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS). YAFS is “the largest series of nationally and regionally representative, cross-sectional surveys on the 15-24 age group,” providing information and insight on the social condition of the Filipino

youth population (*2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS5)*, 2021). The fifth and latest YAFS survey, conducted in 2021, covers various aspects of the age group, including the demographic profile of the youth population, family and peer relationships, education and work, health and lifestyle, mental health, gender and sexuality, and beliefs and attitudes on various topics, among others.

Relevant to the present study, key insights from the latest YAFS survey include: (1) there is a decline in the percentage of Filipino youth being raised by both parents, influenced by migration, separation and death; (2) school-age youth continue to attend school despite major changes to the educational system, such as the addition of two years to basic education, and having to work part-time; (3) youth who are already in the labor force are mostly in elementary occupations and service and sales work; (4) youth continue to hold traditional Filipino values, but there is a disconnect in their perceived ideal ages for marriage, sexual initiation and having children, and their practice and experiences (Laguna et al., 2024).

Young adults and migration

The intersection of migration and personal development, particularly in early childhood to adolescence, has been the subject of research. Many are focused on left-behind children and transnational families, but few have made empirical comparisons with families without transnational migrant parents. In the Philippines, a nationwide study on the social consequences of labor migration explored the effects of migration from the perspective of children aged 10-12 years old from both migrant and non-migrant households (Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People-CBCP/Apostleship of the Sea-Manila [ECMI-CBCP/AOS-Manila] et al., 2004). The 2003 study found that parental migration affects children emotionally, especially when mothers migrate due to rearrangements of gender roles in the household. This, however, does not necessarily mean that children with migrant parents are

disadvantaged compared to those without in various measures of well-being and development. Extended family members, in particular, play an important role in caring for and supporting the children.

As a transitional life stage, migration is also a part of young adulthood for many. In a study exploring the connection of youth mobility and the labor market in the Philippines and abroad, Asis & Battistella (2013) note how the lack of opportunities in the country drive the youth to turn to overseas employment for economic advancement, not just for themselves, but also for their family. The educational system and the choices that the youth make in relation to their education are also oriented towards overseas employment.

Youth aspirations

With the Philippines' long history of labor migration, the culture of migration has become deeply embedded in Filipino society, and influenced the life aspirations of Filipinos, including the young population.

In the same study by ECMI-CBCP/AOS-Manila et al. (2004), about half of young children aged 10-12 years old from both migrant and non-migrant households expressed an openness to working abroad in the future. Economic reasons were the primary motivations for both groups.

This is echoed in the study by Asis & Battistella (2013), where focus group discussions with young Filipinos from Metro Manila and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao revealed that youths perceive overseas employment as a chance for a better future and their intention to migrate for work despite the dangers and risks associated with migration. However, their idea of a better future is not limited to a future lived abroad, as participants also considered and preferred staying in the Philippines if certain conditions—such as the availability of jobs, fair compensation and peace, particularly for participants from Mindanao—are met.

The aspiration to migrate among young adults is also not only for employment. Preliminary findings from a qualitative study on the aspirations of Filipinos to Europe sheds light on the breadth of motivations and imaginaries of young Filipinos, most of whom were not economically motivated to migrate (Tejada & Garcia, 2024). The aspiration to study abroad and experience different cultures as a tourist emerged as the most common among the youth sample, heavily influenced by exposure to social media and their academic networks. While youths with study aspirations were open to the possibility of working abroad, long-term migration plans are less clear and going back to the Philippines is positively considered as a viable option in the future.

Research questions

CHAMPSEA is a transnational longitudinal research project studying the impact of parental absence due to migration on the health and well-being of children in Southeast Asia (see appendix). Started in 2008 and now on its third wave of data collection, CHAMPSEA provides valuable insight on the impact of transnational parental migration as it not only samples migrant households but includes non-migrant households as a comparison group. This paper focuses on the young adult samples of CHAMPSEA II and III, which were conducted in 2016 and 2023, respectively.

Specifically, this paper seeks to answer the following questions about youth aspirations:

1. Is there a difference between aspirations and ideal concepts of young adults from migrant and non-migrant households?
2. How did the aspirations and ideal concepts of young adults change between CHAMPSEA II and III?

Data analysis

This paper uses CHAMPSEA II and III (hereinafter referred to as Waves 2 and 3, respectively) young adult datasets. The analysis focuses on the Wave 3 dataset, with some comparisons from corresponding Wave 2 variables.

It is important to note that the comparisons draw from two different groups: The Wave 2 young adult sample (2016) follows the older child sample of 2008, while the Wave 3 young adult sample (2023) follows the middle childhood sample of 2016 who were also the young child sample of 2008 (see appendix). As such, the paper uses repeat cross-sectional design, which allows comparisons across time while controlling for attrition between waves.

While CHAMPSEA was designed to collect data from the household and individual levels, the paper draws only from the individual-level

dataset. Sampled young adults were 17-20 years old when the interviews were conducted in Wave 2, and 17-21 years old in Wave 3. From 390 and 317 young adult households in Waves 2 and 3, respectively, only 361 and 310 individual interviews with young adults were collected (see Table 1). Most of the young adults come from non-migrant households¹ at the time of interview. In terms of educational level, it is important to note that young adults from Wave 2 are part of the old curriculum, before the K-to-12 program, which extended basic education by two years.

The analysis used descriptive and inferential statistics. Chi-Square Test of Independence was conducted to assess the association between categorical variables, such as migration status and aspirations. Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the distributions of outcomes between groups (e.g., migrant vs. non-migrant households, Wave 2 vs. Wave 3, and males vs. females) as the distribution of the data does

Table 1. Demographic profile of the young adult sample.

Characteristics	Wave 2*			Wave 3		
	Migrant	Non-migrant	Total	Migrant	Non-migrant	Total
Gender (%)						
Male	46.04	47.27	46.80	50.79	48.18	48.71
Female	53.96	52.73	53.20	49.21	51.82	51.29
Mean age (in years old)	18.10	18.04	18.06	19.14	19.16	19.16
Educational level (%)						
No Schooling	0.72	0	0.28	1.59	0.40	0.65
Pre-elementary	0	1.82	1.11	0	0	0
Primary/Elementary School	8.63	15.91	13.09	1.59	3.64	3.23
Junior high school ^a	82.01	74.55	77.44	20.63	30.77	28.71
Senior high school ^b	0	0	0	74.60	64.37	66.45
Diploma/Post-secondary	5.76	4.55	5.01	0	0.81	0.65
College/University	2.88	2.73	2.79	1.59	0	0.32
Other	0	0.45	0.28	0	0	0
Total N	140	221	361	63	247	310

Note: * Wave 2 has 2 missing values.

(a) Junior high school (Grades 7-10) is equivalent to first- and second-year high school in the old curriculum;

(b) Senior high school (Grades 11-12) is equivalent to third- and fourth-year high school in the old curriculum.

¹ Household migration status (migrant or non-migrant) is determined by having or not having a transnational migrant parent. Households with internal migrant parent/s are classified under non-migrant households. (See appendix for further information about household classification and sampling)

not meet assumptions of normality. The findings of the study do not infer correlations and are not generalizable to and representative of the population. For further information about the methodology of CHAMPSEA, see appendix.

Migration, educational and occupational aspirations

In general, there is no significant association between having migrant parents to young adults' aspiration to migrate and finish higher education, and the type of job they expect to have in the future (see Table 2). Specifically, the question for migration aspiration asks, "Do you want to go to another country/away to work in the future?" The aspiration to work overseas is prevalent among the sample regardless of their household migration status or sex.

Similarly, young adults aspire to finish either an undergraduate or post-graduate degree regardless of their household migration status or gender. This was answered by the multiple-choice question "Imagine you had no

constraints and could study for as long as you liked or go back to school if you have already left. What level of formal education would you like to complete?" While there is no significant difference in the aspiration to finish higher education, among young adults who aspire to finish either an undergraduate or postgraduate degree (n = 289), more young adults from migrant households aspired to complete a postgraduate degree, while those from non-migrant households mostly aspired to complete an undergraduate degree.

It is important to note that aspirations do not equate to educational achievement. Data from the Commission on Higher Education in the school year 2021-2022 suggests that while higher education enrollment remain high, 4 out of 10 Filipino students drop out, with almost half citing the need to prioritize employment (Argosino, 2025).

When asked the question "When you are about 25 years old, what job would you like to be doing?" young adults from migrant and non-migrant households, and male and female

Table 2. Wave 3 young adults' aspirations.

Variables	Migrant	Non-Migrant	Total	Test Statistics (p)	Male	Female	Total	Test Statistics (p)
Aspiration to migrate for work (%)	84.13	78.14	79.35	0.387	75.50	83.02	79.35	0.208
Aspiration to finish higher education^a (%)	96.77	93.44	94.12	0.319	92.00	96.15	94.12	0.123
Bachelors	58.06	70.08	67.65		67.33	67.95	67.65	
Postgraduate Degree	38.71	23.36	26.47		24.67	28.21	26.47	
Others	3.23	6.56	5.88		8.00	3.85	5.88	
Occupational aspiration at age 25^b (%)				0.007**				< 0.001***
Manual ^c	15.25	33.33	29.69		39.01	21.05	29.69	
Non-Manual ^d	84.75	66.67	70.31		60.99	78.95	70.31	
Occupational expectation^e (%)				0.201				0.001***
Manual ^c	27.50	38.29	36.28		47.17	25.69	36.28	
Non-Manual ^d	72.50	61.71	63.72		52.83	74.31	63.72	
Total N	63	247	310		151	159	310	

Notes: (a) There are 4 missing values, n = 306;

(b) There are 17 missing values, n = 293;

(c) ISCO groups 5-9 (Service and Sales, Skilled and Craft Workers, Operators, Elementary Occupations);

(d) ISCO groups 1-4 (Managers, Professionals and Associates, Clerical Support Workers);

(e) There are 95 missing values, n = 215.

** p < 0.01

*** p < 0.001

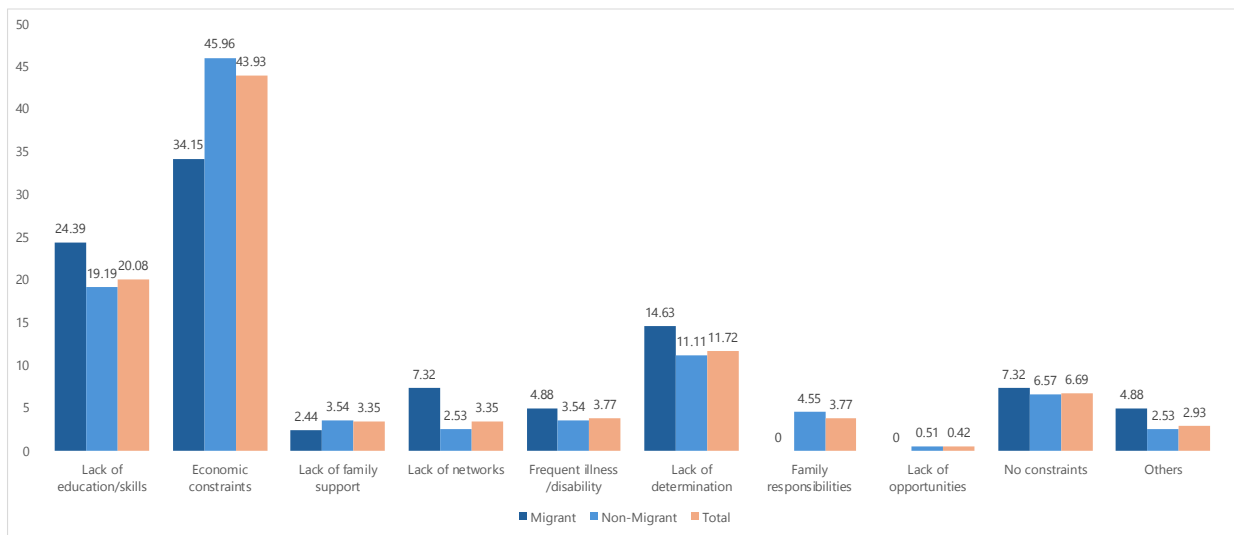


Figure 1. Constraints to occupational aspirations of Wave 3 young adults (in percentage, n = 239).

young adults had different ideas on the type of job² they aspire to have in the future. Overall, aspirations for non-manual jobs are more prevalent. However, more young adults from non-migrant households aspire to have manual jobs compared to migrant households, while more males aspired for manual jobs compared to females (see Table 2).

Almost half of the young adults considered economic constraints—the top answer—as a hurdle to achieving their occupational aspiration, when asked the question “*What is the main constraint to achieving [the job they would like to be doing]?*” (See Figure 1). Other major constraints are the lack of education and/or skills, and the lack of determination to finish their education.

Considering their aspirations and the constraints to realizing these, the survey also asked about their expected occupation with

the question: “*Given this constraint, what kind of job/activity do you expect to have in the future?*” Household migration status was not associated with the occupation they expect to have. On the other hand, more male young adults having manual job expectations and more female young adults having non-manual job expectations (see Table 2).

Few young adults aspire and expect to be unemployed, which suggests high interest in being economically active. Despite not being statistically significant, it is interesting to note that there are young adults who aspire (n = 6) and expect (n = 9) to be unemployed in the future. There was also slight difference in the percentages of occupational aspirations and expectations, suggesting a gap in their aspirations and expectation: Some may aspire to have a manual job, yet they expect to have a non-manual job, and vice versa.

Table 3. Ideal ages for marriage, having a child and sexual initiation of Wave 3 young adults.

Variables	Migrant	Non-Migrant	Total	Test Statistics (p)
Ideal age for a man to marry ^a	27.30	27.23	27.25	0.650
Ideal age for a woman to marry ^b	27.05	27.03	27.04	0.781
Ideal age for a man to have a child ^b	28.86	28.86	28.86	0.682
Ideal age for a woman to have a child ^b	28.37	28.60	28.55	0.931
Ideal age for a man to have sex ^c	23.84	24.58	24.43	0.273
Ideal age for a woman to have sex ^c	23.74	24.63	24.45	0.147

Notes: (a) There are 2 missing values, N = 308;

(b) There is 1 missing value, N = 309;

(c) There are 5 missing values, N = 305.

² Answers to the open-ended questions about occupations were coded using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08). <https://ilostat.ilo.org/methods/concepts-and-definitions/classification-occupation/>

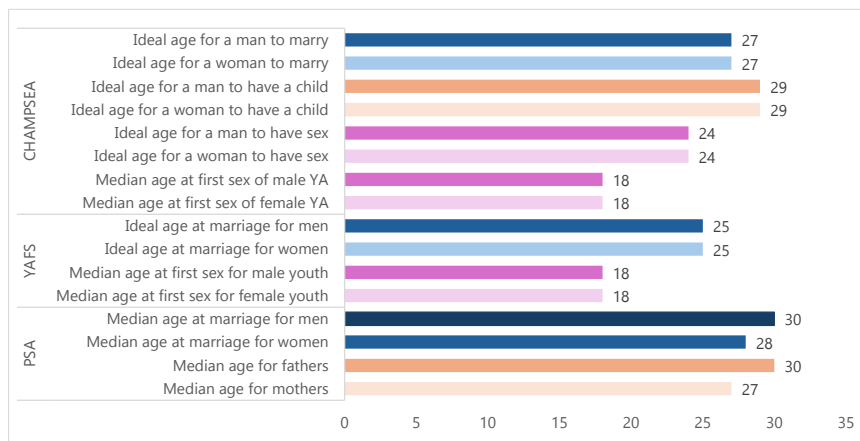


Figure 2. Comparing ideal and median ages for marriage, having a child, and sexual initiation between CHAMPSEA, YAFS and PSA (in years old).

Sources: (PSA, 2023, 2024; UPPI, 2022)

Ideal ages for marriage, having a child, and sexual initiation

Young adults from migrant and non-migrant households had similar ideal ages to marry, have a child, and have sex (see Table 3). There were also no differences to the ages they think a man and a woman should engage in these behaviors.

Comparing these to national-level figures, both CHAMPSEA and YAFS's (University of the Philippines Population Institute [UPPI], 2022) ideal ages for marriage are similar for men and women, and that these ages are all slightly lower than the actual median age at marriage (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2024) (see Figure 2). It is important to note that the PSA data are based on the national registry of

contracted marriages, while the CHAMPSEA and YAFS data reflect what young adults consider is most suitable. The CHAMPSEA average ideal ages for a man to have a child is a year less than the national median age for fathers, while the ideal age for a woman to have a child is 2 years higher than the median age for mothers (PSA, 2023). CHAMPSEA young adults also had higher ideal ages for sexual initiation compared to the median age that youth engage in sex (UPPI, 2022).

Comparing Waves 2 and 3

Comparing aspirations between Waves 2 and 3, there was no significant difference for all variables being investigated (see Table 4). Wave 3 had a marginally higher percentage of young adults who aspire to work overseas and

Table 4. Comparison of Waves 2 and 3 aspirations.

Variables	Wave 2	Wave 3	Total	Test Statistics (p)
Aspiration to migrate for work^a (%)	77.29	79.35	78.24	0.095
Aspiration to finish higher education^b (%)	95.28	94.12	94.74	0.504
Occupational aspiration at age 25^c (%)				0.605
Manual ^d	27.84	29.69	28.68	
Non-Manual ^e	72.16	70.31	71.32	
Occupational expectation^f (%)				0.279
Manual ^d	40.94	36.28	39.07	
Non-Manual ^e	59.06	63.72	60.93	
Total N	361	310	671	

Notes: (a) There are 12 responses of "Don't know" in Wave 3 (n = 298) tagged as missing values for consistency in the comparison with Wave 2;

(b) There is 1 missing value in Wave 2 (n = 360) and 4 missing values in Wave 3 (n = 306);

(c) There are 9 missing values in Wave 2 (n = 352) and 17 missing values in Wave 3 (n = 293);

(d) ISCO groups 5-9 (Service and Sales, Skilled and Craft Workers, Operators, Elementary Occupations);

(e) ISCO groups 1-4 (Managers, Professionals and Associates, Clerical Support Workers);

(f) There are 41 missing values in Wave 2 (n = 320) and 95 missing values in Wave 3 (n = 215).

Table 5. Comparison of ideal ages for marriage, having a child and sexual initiation between Waves 2 and 3 young adults (in years old).

Variables	Wave 2 ^a Total		Wave 3 Total
Ideal age for a man/woman to marry	26.27	Ideal age for a man to marry	27.25 ^b
		Ideal age for a woman to marry	27.04 ^c
Ideal age for a man/woman to have a child	26.68	Ideal age for a man to have a child	28.86 ^c
		Ideal age for a woman to have a child	28.55 ^c
Ideal age for a man/woman to have sex	24.77	Ideal age for a man to have sex	24.43 ^d
		Ideal age for a woman to have sex	24.45 ^d
Total N	360	Total N	310

Note: (a) There is a slight difference in the question asking ideal ages between Waves 2 and 3. Wave 2 asks for the ideal age for a man or woman depending on the gender of the respondent (e.g., “What do you think is the ideal age for a woman to get married?” is only asked to female respondents), while Wave 3 asks the ideal ages for a man and a woman in separate questions for all respondents;

(b) There are 2 missing values, n = 308;

(c) There is 1 missing value, n = 309;

(d) There are 5 missing values, n = 305.

slightly lower percentages of young adults who aspire to finish higher education and have a non-manual job. Moreover, similar to Wave 3 findings, there was a gap in the occupational aspirations and expectations between waves, where aspiration to have a manual job slightly increased between waves, but expectations to have a manual job slightly decreased.

Due to a change in the questions used, a test cannot be conducted to check the statistical significance of the changes between Waves 2 and 3 in the ideal ages for marriage, having a child, and sexual initiation. However, it is interesting to note some changes based on the means (see Table 5). Firstly, young adults from migrant and non-migrant households had different ideal ages for marriage in Wave 2, while not in Wave 3. Secondly, the average ideal ages for marriage and having a child were higher in Wave 3 than Wave 2, but the ideal age for sexual initiation was the same. And lastly, the ideal age for sexual initiation is lower than for marriage and having a child in both waves, suggesting changing norms on sexual behaviors, marriage and childbearing.

Conclusion

Findings from Wave 3 suggest that young adults from migrant and non-migrant households have similar aspirations to migrate and finish higher education, as well as the type

of their expected job in the future. The comparison of young adults in migrant and non-migrant households has been helpful in identifying outcomes that are due to migration and those due to other factors.

Moreover, the aspiration to migrate for work among young adults across Wave 2 and 3 reflects the deep-rooted culture of migration in the Philippines, as it is about broader social transformation and its far-reaching impacts.

While migration and other aspirations discussed in the paper are embedded in the imagined futures of Filipino youth, realities and opportunities to realize these aspirations do not always align. Whether youths with migration aspirations eventually and actually migrate is a different matter. Literature suggests that intergenerational support reproduces migration across generations, as migrant households are more likely to have the resources and social capital to migrate (Artajo, 2016; Asis & Battistella, 2013). Further studies on factors associated with youth migration from a developmental and family perspective can contribute to policies supporting young adults in the Philippines.

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Appendix

About CHAMPSEA

As in other parts of the world, in Southeast Asia, many parents leave their families to work abroad in the hopes of providing a better, brighter future for their children. However, parental absence has fueled concerns about children growing up without one or both parents, casting doubts on the hoped-for benefits from working abroad.

The Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA) research project was launched to examine the impact of parental migration on the health and well-being of the children remaining in the origin communities. Since destination countries in Asia do not allow migrant workers in less skilled occupations to bring their families with them, migrants and their families are separated, with the latter being left behind in the origin countries. CHAMPSEA collected data in four origin countries—Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand—to provide a comparative perspective on how the absence of parents due to migration affect the children who remain at home. The longitudinal and mixed methods design and the comparison between migrant and non-migrant households add to the unique and strong features of the project. For the baseline survey, the children of interest to CHAMPSEA (referred to as the index child per household) were young children in the formative years (3-5 years old) and children in middle childhood (9-11 years old), an age group that is under-researched compared to young children and adolescents. These children and their families were tracked, revisited and reinterviewed in two further rounds of data collection in Indonesia and the Philippines.

The first wave or baseline survey, CHAMPSEA I, was conducted in 2008, covering circa 1,000 households in each country, followed by qualitative interviews with a small number of households in 2009. In 2016, CHAMPSEA II tracked and reinterviewed 756 households in the Philippines, supplemented by qualitative interviews with selected households in 2017. CHAMPSEA III was carried out in 2023, reinterviewing the tracked households and drawing a new sample of 506 households with young children. Combining the tracked households from the previous surveys and the new sample, 1,506 unique households were enrolled in CHAMPSEA in the Philippines

For each Wave, 2 to 3 face-to-face interviews were conducted in each sampled household involving a responsible adult (a person who is knowledgeable about household matters), a carer (someone who was identified as the main carer of 3-5 years old and 9-11 years old children), the index child aged 9-11 years old or the young adult (the index child aged approximately 17-21 years old) at the time of the follow-up survey. An overview of how the children were followed up at different points in time and the respondents per sampled household are outlined in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Research participants in CHAMPSEA I, II and III.

Age of index child (at first interview)	2008 CHAMPSEA I	2016 CHAMPSEA II	2023 CHAMPSEA III
3-5 years old	3-5 years old (2 interviews: Responsible adult; Carer)	11-13 years old (3 interviews: Responsible adult, Carer, Index child)	17-21 years old (2 interviews: Responsible adult; Young adult)
9-11 years old	9-11 years old (3 interviews: Responsible adult; Carer; Index child)	17-19 years old (2 interviews: Responsible adult; Young adult)	-
3-6 years old (new sample)	-	-	3-6 years old (2 interviews: Responsible adult; Carer)

In the Philippines, CHAMPSEA was implemented in two high out-migration provinces in Luzon, Laguna (San Pablo City and Bay) and Bulacan (Malolos City and Calumpit). As in the other countries, the project adopted a flexible quota sampling design to ensure a sufficient number of migrant households with key features. The sample is not nationally representative. The sampling considered two-parent households, the migration status of the household, the gender of the migrant parent and the gender and age of the index child (3-5 years old and 9-11 years old) in the first survey. The project defined an international or transnational migrant household as one where the father, mother or both parents have been working abroad continuously for at least six months prior to the survey, while a usual resident or non-migrant household means both parents and the index child were living together continuously for at least six months prior to the survey. In the recruitment of a fresh sample of households with young children in CHAMPSEA III, the Philippines adopted the same adjustments that were made in Indonesia: the six months of continuously working abroad to define international migration was reduced to one month, and the age range of young children was extended to 3-6 years old from 3-5 years old.

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For a list of journal articles, reports and multi-media knowledge products from CHAMPSEA, see <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/champseapublications/>

Filipinos have gone global in the search for employment opportunities and higher incomes for more than five decades. The family is the reason why migrants leave the comforts of home, the site of migration decision-making, the direct beneficiary of the benefits of migration, and the all-around safety net of its members throughout their individual and family life stages. The Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia (CHAMPSEA) research project inquires into the impact of transnational labor migration on the families and children left-behind in origin communities while fathers, mothers or both parents work abroad. Conducted in the Philippines and Indonesia in three waves—in 2008, 2016 and 2023—findings from the CHAMPSEA project provide insights on the family as it strives to meet the economic, social, care and emotional needs of its members amid the changing geography of family life.

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