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# Marital conflict and finances among Filipinas in Australia

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## Abstract

Differences in finance practices emerged as a major theme in interviews conducted by The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health among the Filipina community in Queensland. Women's decisions to migrate and marry Australian men are influenced by their perceptions of relative wealth of their future husband, and their presumed enhanced ability to provide support for Filipino kin. However, because of unrealised financial expectations, issues related to the remittance of money to family in The Philippines, the husband's disapproval of his wife's participation in the paid workforce, and financial practices such as the management of the household finances and roles with money, finance is a constant point of tension in many Filipina–Australian marriages. It seems that in migrating to Australia, many Filipinas exchange one type of money problem for another — one that they rarely foresee. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Filipinos are the second largest Asian immigrant population in Australia,<sup>1</sup> with twice as many women as men born in The Philippines currently living in Australia

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<sup>1</sup>The largest Asian immigrant population in Australia are the Vietnamese (Australia, Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

(Australia, Bureau of Statistics, 1997). The major reason for this migration imbalance is the high percentage of Filipinas (women from The Philippines) migrating as spouses or fiancés of Australian men. Although Filipinas have immigrated to Australia since the early 1900s, the number of women from The Philippines immigrating as spouses of Australian citizens or permanent residents increased steeply in the mid-1960s and peaked in the mid-1980s, resulting in Filipinas constituting 80% of all wives who entered Australia from Asian countries (Australia, Bureau of Immigration and Population Research 1994; Hagan, 1989). This trend reversed somewhat through the late 1980s and 1990s, but overall immigration from The Philippines has remained high (Australia, Bureau of Statistics, 1991, 1997; Australia, Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research, 1996). As a result of this demographic phenomenon, much has been written concerning the reasons for, and outcomes of Filipino–Australian marriages, and these marriages have often been stereotyped and stigmatised by the popular press and academic literature (Watt, 1983; Kaminskis & Smith, 1990). Part of this stigmatisation deals with the financial aspects of why Filipinas marry Australian men. A popular perception in Australian society is that Filipinas’ motivation to marry an Australian-born or resident man is to profit economically,<sup>2</sup> causing instability and conflict in the marriages. Much of the scholarly literature supports this stance. Ang (1995, p. 45), for example, maintains that there is a widely held view in Australian society that “Filipinas have made use of their husbands to obtain passports and citizenship here” and therefore escape the poverty of the Philippines. This study found that finance is indeed a constant point of tension in many Filipina–Australian marriages, but not primarily for the reasons outlined above. In this paper, we argue that while finances play a major role in the decision making of Filipina brides to migrate and marry Australia men, the basis of financial marital conflict is much broader and entails fundamental issues of culture. Little, if anything, has been written in the academic sphere about the clash of cultural understanding relating to finance, in Filipina–Australian marriages or in other cross-cultural unions, and the resulting unhappiness and conflict in these marriages. This paper provides some illustration of these issues and provides much needed information to multicultural communities both in Australia and overseas about sensitive issues of culture in cross-cultural marriages (see also Woelz-Stirling, Kelaher, & Manderson, 1998).

## 2. Methodology

The empirical data on which this paper is based were collected as part of our work within The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH), jointly

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<sup>2</sup> During the 1980s when Filipina migration into Australia was at its highest, the Australian print media widely portrayed the motivation for Filipino–Australian marriages as financial. *The Sydney Morning Herald* headline states, “Brides by mail: for love and money” (Arnold, 1989, p. 13). *Time Magazine* in its article entitled “The Filipina Phenomenon” also suggested that Filipinas enter into marriage with Australians primarily for economic advantage (Kissane, 1990, p. 24).

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