Asia Pacific Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences
Volume 24 (2026)
https://doi.org/10.57200/7fssc674

Bearing the Weight of Care: The Experience of Gendered Imperatives of the Parental Care Role among Filipino Eldest Daughters

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study examines how gendered expectations shape the parental-care role experienced by eldest daughters in Filipino families. The study argues that the burden of care emerges at the intersection of expectations attached to being the eldest child and the gendered socialization through which girls are prepared for caring, domestic, and relational responsibilities. Guided by Eagly's social role theory and Gilligan's feminist ethics of care, and informed by concepts of role strain, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with five Filipino eldest daughters aged 22–25 from low- and lower-middle-income households. The interviews were audio-recorded with verbal consent, carefully transcribed, anonymized, and manually analyzed through an iterative thematic process. Findings show that participants' experiences of care were cultivated through gender socialization and reinforced by eldest-child expectations, positioning them as dependable helpers, guides, mediators, and, in some accounts, a "second mother" within the family. These expectations were associated with restricted autonomy, emotional restraint, pressure to model maturity and achievement, and the prioritization of family needs. At the same time, participants related these experiences to leadership, resilience, responsibility, and empathy. The findings suggest that the parental-care burden of eldest daughters is not explained by birth order or gender alone, but by the convergence of eldest-child responsibility and gendered expectations of care. The study recommends a more equitable distribution of caregiving and household responsibilities within families.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 August 2026
Revised 26 October 2026
Accepted 03 November 2026

KEYWORDS

care role, gender roles, care, gender socialization, daughters

INTRODUCTION

The family is a primary site of socialization where children learn expectations about responsibility, care, authority, and gender (Medina, 2001). Within families, parents ordinarily carry primary responsibility for children's material, emotional, developmental, and supervisory needs. However, family circumstances and everyday household arrangements may also distribute portions of these responsibilities to children. Eldest children, because of their birth position, may be expected to assist younger siblings, model appropriate behavior, and assume greater responsibility within the household. For eldest daughters, however, these birth-order expectations intersect with gendered expectations that girls and women should be caring, nurturing, domestically competent, emotionally attentive, and available to others. In this study, the parental-care role refers to the assumption by an eldest daughter of recurring responsibilities that approximate or support functions ordinarily associated with parents, particularly in relation to younger siblings and the maintenance of family care. This is analytically distinct from performing ordinary household chores: domestic tasks become relevant to the study insofar as they form part of the gendered cultivation and later performance of care.

Adler (1964) observed that firstborn children are often associated with heightened maturity and responsibility because of their position within the sibling order. Subsequent work on birth order and sibling relationships similarly points to the distinctive expectations that may be attached to older siblings (Tsukada, 2011; Whiteman et al., 2011). In Filipino families, these expectations operate within cultural norms that value family interdependence, reciprocity, and responsibility. The eldest child may therefore be expected to contribute to family welfare; when the eldest child is female, these expectations may converge with gendered ideas about caregiving and domestic competence. The central concern of this study is this convergence: being eldest

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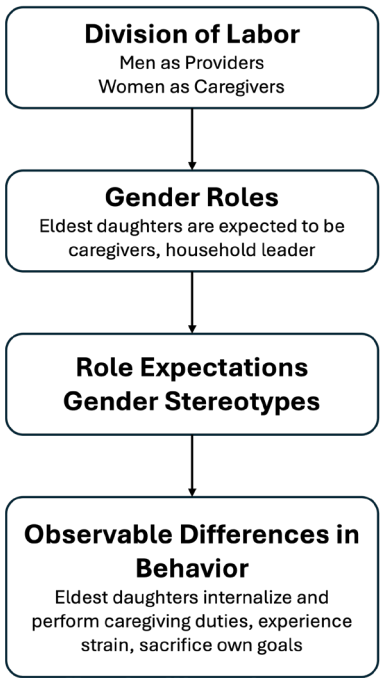
creates an expectation of responsibility, while being female can intensify the expectation that such responsibility will be performed through care.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Eagly's (1987) social role theory, represented conceptually in Figure 1, provides the primary lens for explaining how socially organized divisions of labor contribute to gender-role expectations and gendered behavior. Applied to the present study, the framework proposes that culturally familiar associations of women with caregiving shape what families expect daughters to learn and perform. When these gendered expectations are combined with the responsibility commonly attached to eldest-child status, eldest daughters may become particularly positioned to assume caregiving, supervisory, mediating, and household leadership functions. Figure 1 therefore maps a proposed pathway from gendered divisions of labor and role expectations to the behaviors and responsibilities through which eldest daughters may come to perform care.

Figure 1

Social Role Theory: Gendered Division of Labor, Role Expectations, and Their Behavioral and Personal Consequences for Elder Daughters



Gender socialization provides the process through which these expectations may be cultivated. From childhood, girls may encounter gender-differentiated play, domestic activity exposure, role simulation, verbal expectations, and other child-rearing practices that communicate what girls and women are expected to know and do. Exposure to cooking through play, caregiving through dolls and role simulation, and participation in domestic routines does not by itself constitute parental care. Rather, these practices may cultivate competencies and dispositions associated with care. For an eldest daughter who is simultaneously expected to help, guide, and assume responsibility for younger siblings, gender socialization can provide both the skills and the normative expectation through which eldest-child responsibility becomes expressed as caring labor (Eagly, 1987; Maccoby, 1961).

In the Filipino context, expectations of sibling care, household participation, and contribution to family welfare can be reinforced by relational values and norms of reciprocity. The eldest daughter's care role is therefore understood here not as an automatic consequence of being female or firstborn, but as a socially produced role located at the intersection of birth-order responsibility and gendered expectations. This distinction is important because it allows the analysis to separate ordinary domestic participation from situations in which the eldest daughter becomes a dependable caregiver, guide, mediator, household organizer, or "second mother." (Medina, 2001).

Maccoby (1961) emphasized role taking as a process through which children learn complementary roles by coordinating their behavior with others. Gilligan's (1982) feminist ethics of care further directs attention to the moral and relational value attached to attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness to others. In the present study, these perspectives help explain how care may become meaningful to eldest daughters even when it is also experienced as demanding. Concepts of role strain and role conflict are used as supporting sensitizing ideas for examining situations in which expectations associated with being an eldest child, a daughter, a student, and an individual with personal

aspirations compete for limited time, emotional resources, and autonomy. Together, these perspectives guide the analysis of how care is learned, performed, negotiated, and experienced.

Existing literature has separately examined birth order, sibling relationships, gender roles, and family caregiving. However, less attention has been given to how eldest-child expectations and gender socialization converge in the lived experiences of Filipino eldest daughters. Studies of caregiving also frequently focus on adult children caring for aging or frail parents, which does not fully capture the sibling-oriented and household care examined here. The present study addresses this gap by focusing on how eldest daughters understand the development, performance, burdens, and perceived gains of care responsibilities within their families (Brody, 1981; Himes, 1992; Horowitz, 1985; Neundorfer, 1991; Stoller, 1983; Stone et al., 1987).

Specifically, the study sought to (1) describe how gender socialization and eldest-child expectations shape participants' understanding of care and responsibility; (2) examine how these expectations are expressed in the parental-care responsibilities participants perform within the family; and (3) identify the social, emotional, and personal burdens and perceived gains associated with these responsibilities. By centering the intersection of birth order and gender, the study aims to clarify why the care expected of an eldest daughter may be qualitatively different from the responsibility expected of an eldest child alone.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed an interpretive phenomenological qualitative design to explore the lived experiences of Filipino eldest daughters and the meanings they attached to gendered expectations of care. A phenomenological orientation was appropriate because the inquiry focused on how participants experienced, interpreted, and negotiated responsibility within everyday family life rather than on measuring the frequency of behaviors (Tenny et al., 2022). Rather than seeking to identify a universal essence of eldest-daughter caregiving, the inquiry focused on how participants interpreted these responsibilities within their particular family relationships and sociocultural circumstances. This orientation recognizes that lived experiences are understood through the meanings individuals attach to them and that qualitative analysis necessarily involves interpretation.

Participants and Sampling

Five eldest daughters, aged 22–25, from low- and lower-middle-income Filipino nuclear families were purposively selected. Nuclear-family size ranged from four to eight members and was defined as the participant, her siblings, mother, and father. Selection was guided by the participants' position as eldest daughters and their experiences of family expectations involving care, responsibility, guidance, or support. The small purposive sample was appropriate to the bounded phenomenological inquiry because the study sought detailed, information-rich accounts of how gender and eldest-child expectations were experienced and interpreted rather than statistical representativeness (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Data Collection

The first author, who served as the principal investigator and primary interviewer, conducted semi-structured interviews with the five participants. The interview guide elicited accounts of childhood gender socialization, eldest-child expectations, caregiving and household responsibilities, family relationships, restrictions and pressures, and perceived gains associated with these experiences. Before each interview, participants provided verbal informed consent both to participate in the study and to have the interview audio-recorded. The recordings were carefully transcribed, and the transcripts were anonymized before they were circulated for analysis (Kelly, 2010; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Table 1
Participants' Demographic and Family Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Nuclear-Family Size	Sibling Composition	Income Classification
HB	22	4	1 brother	Lower-middle income
BJ	22	8	2 sisters, 3 brothers	Low income
KN	24	5	1 sister, 1 brother	Lower-middle income
DA	25	6	2 sisters, 1 brother	Lower-middle income
KL	25	4	1 sister	Lower income

Data Analysis

The anonymized transcripts were analyzed manually through an iterative thematic process informed by Braun and Clarke (2013). Analysis began with careful reading and familiarization with the transcripts, followed by the identification and manual coding of meaningful segments of the participants' accounts. Related codes were clustered into candidate themes, which were then reviewed against the individual narratives and the dataset as a whole. Themes evolved throughout the analysis: some were renamed or refined, some were subsumed under stronger recurring themes, and others were dropped when they were not sufficiently supported by the data. No qualitative analysis software was used.

Analytical Rigor and Reflexivity

The analytic review involved individuals who have intermediate to advanced, i.e., undergraduate and doctoral level, academic training in Sociology. Together with the authors, these six individuals participated in coding and analytical discussions. The use of anonymized transcripts enabled the review team to focus on the participants' accounts while reducing unnecessary exposure of participant identities. Emerging codes and candidate themes were discussed collaboratively, including consideration of alternative interpretations and whether proposed themes were adequately supported by recurring patterns in the data. The principal investigator maintained analytical notes documenting emerging interpretations and decisions about what the data could reasonably support. Because the principal investigator also conducted the interviews, this collaborative review provided an additional layer of analytical scrutiny rather than leaving interpretation to the interviewer alone. The study does not claim statistical representativeness, and sample sufficiency is understood in relation to the depth and bounded focus of the phenomenological inquiry rather than inferred from the number of interviews alone.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, the research protocol was submitted to the Xavier University – Ateneo de Cagayan Research Ethics Office for ethics review. The protocol underwent ethics review and received recommendations for minor clarifications concerning the informed-consent process, consent to participate and audio recording, the interview questions, the data-analysis plan, and data-management procedures. A protocol number (SOCIO-202500385) was subsequently assigned to the study. Before each interview, participants were informed about the interview process and audio recording and provided verbal informed consent for both participation and recording. Interview recordings were carefully transcribed, and transcripts circulated for collaborative analysis were anonymized to protect participant identities. Pseudonyms were used throughout the presentation of findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized as four interrelated themes that trace how care is cultivated, performed, experienced as burden, and interpreted by eldest daughters. Rather than treating domestic chores or gendered childhood experiences as parental care in themselves, the

analysis examines how gender socialization prepared participants for caring work and how eldest-child expectations positioned them to use those capacities in relation to younger siblings and the household. The four themes are: (1) gender socialization as the cultivation of care; (2) becoming the "*ate*": performing and anticipating parental-care responsibilities; (3) carrying the double expectation: social and psychological costs of being eldest and female; and (4) negotiating the eldest-daughter role: agency, meaning, and perceived gains.

Gender Socialization as the Cultivation of Care

Participants described childhood practices through which domestic competence, attentiveness to others, and expectations of feminine responsibility were gradually learned. These experiences did not constitute parental care by themselves. Instead, they formed part of the gendered socialization through which participants learned what girls were expected to know, do, and eventually provide within family life.

Gendered Domestic Learning

HB recalled being taught household chores with an explicitly gendered message. In her words, *"Lahi ang pagtudlo nila sa ako sa household chores kay ang reason nila kay ang hygiene… since babaye ka dapat kabalo ka maglimpyo"* ["Their way of teaching me household chores was different because their reason was hygiene… since you are a girl, you should know how to clean"]. KN similarly described being taught to sweep, wash dishes, and cook, connecting these lessons to expectations about what a woman should know in anticipation of adult family life. She also recalled receiving Barbie dolls, feminine clothing, and other "girly" objects. Taken together, these accounts show how domestic work, and gendered play could cultivate familiarity with caring and household roles before those capacities were mobilized as eldest-daughter responsibilities.

Variation in Gendered Upbringing

The interviews also show that this process was not uniform. DA, who grew up with sisters, emphasized that her parents did not require household work simply because they were girls. She described chores instead as training in general responsibility and preparation for independent adult life. This variation is important: the gendering of care was evident across the dataset, but participants did not experience or interpret it in identical ways.

Becoming the "Ate": Performing and Anticipating Parental-Care Responsibilities

The transition from gendered preparation to a parental-care role became clearest when participants described responsibilities directed toward younger siblings rather than ordinary participation in household work. Across the accounts, being the eldest meant being expected to know first, help first, guide younger siblings, model appropriate behavior, and become a dependable person within the family. For several participants, these expectations took explicitly parent-like forms.

Teaching, Guiding, and Mediating

BJ described growing up *"parang second mother"* ["like a second mother"] and feeling the pressure to mature early. She explained that when younger siblings struggled with schoolwork, *"ako yung magbridge o magtuturo na ito gagawin mo ganyan."* ["I would bridge the gap or teach them what to do."]. She also described the eldest daughter as needing patience and understanding and as becoming a "comforter" and neutral mediator. Her account demonstrates that care involved not only domestic competence, but also instructional and emotional labor directed toward younger family members.

Being the Dependable "Ate"

KN described eldest-child responsibility as being expected to graduate, work, help, and guide first. She repeatedly returned to the family phrase "*ate man ka*" ["because you are the eldest sister"] to explain why she was called first, asked to do tasks, and presumed to know what needed to be done. At one point, she expressed the accumulated pressure vividly: "*pwede manghod sa ko karon na adlaw o maging middle child sa ko karon*

na adlaw?" ["Can I be the younger sibling today, or the middle child just for today?"]. Here, birth order supplied the expectation of leadership, while her gendered upbringing supplied many of the domestic and relational competencies through which that leadership was performed.

Protection and Second-parent Positioning

DA did not describe her sibling care primarily as imposed obligation. She nevertheless explained, "As the older sibling you really have to take care and to be there with them. *Mura man gud na siya og second parent.*" ["It is like being a second parent."]. She described defending her younger sisters, guiding them through situations she had already experienced, and offering advice about life after graduation. Her account broadens the phenomenon by showing that parent-like care can be experienced as relational commitment and affection even when it is not described as coercive.

Direct and Anticipated Caregiving

KL provided the most explicit account of sustained caregiving responsibility for a younger sister with special needs. She recalled the family expectation, "*gihatag namo tanan sa imo, imo ra e-sukli sa amo kay alagaan imong manghod*" ["we gave you everything; what you can give back to us is to take care of your younger sibling"]. She described herself as her sister's caretaker while growing up and linked that responsibility to restrictions on her own activities. She also distinguished present from future responsibility, explaining that although she was not currently expected to provide the same level of care, she understood that she would be expected to care for her sister in the future. This account shows how the parental-care role may extend from childhood responsibility into anticipated adult obligation.

Carrying the Double Expectation: Social and Psychological Costs of Being Eldest and Female

Participants described the convergence of eldest-child and gender expectations as a source of pressure that reached beyond specific caregiving tasks. The burden involved being available to others, demonstrating maturity, regulating one's emotions, succeeding as a model for younger siblings, and accepting restrictions that participants believed would have been different had they been male.

Emotional Restraint and Relational Responsibility

BJ described maturity as involving the withholding of emotion: "*e-ki-keep mo na lang 'yung emotions*" ["you just keep the emotions to yourself"]. She explained that the eldest daughter was expected to be patient and understanding and to prevent misunderstanding or conflict. She added that there were times she avoided sharing deeper emotions because doing so might lead to conflict. Emotional self-regulation therefore became part of caring for family relationships, carrying a cost alongside the appearance of maturity or resilience.

Pressure to Succeed and Model Adulthood

HB connected being eldest with the need to work toward a better life not only for herself but also for her younger brother. KN described intense pressure to graduate, work, and help first because younger siblings were expected to look to her as an example. She said that being "*ate*" meant thinking not only about herself but also about whether her actions would help her siblings and make her parents proud. These accounts show how individual achievement acquired a family-care dimension: success was expected to create security, guidance, and a pathway for those who followed..

Restricted Autonomy and Accumulated Strain

Several participants believed they would have enjoyed greater freedom had they been male. KL stated, "*Kung dili ko babaye I'd be very different… mas naa siguro koy freedom sa akong mga laag, mas ma-explore siguro nako akong life*" ["If I were not a woman, I would be very different… I would probably have more freedom to go out, and I could probably explore my life more"]. This was especially consequential in her account because restrictions were tied to responsibility for her sister with special needs. She recalled accumulated anger and frustration

that eventually contributed to rebellion and disrupted schooling. Her narrative demonstrates that care expectations can constrain autonomy, identity, and the timing of one's own life course.

Negotiating the Eldest-Daughter Role: Agency, Meaning, and Perceived Gains

The participants did not interpret eldest-daughter responsibility in a single way. Alongside pressure and restriction, they described affection, leadership, independence, resilience, and responsibility. These accounts complicate a purely deficit-based interpretation of the role and show how eldest daughters actively made meaning from expectations placed upon them.

Care as Affection Rather than Obligation

DA explicitly distinguished obligation from what she called "*ate* love." Reflecting on sharing with her younger sisters, she said, "*Dili siya obligasyon to share your stuff because as an ate you feel it that you want to share kasi love your siblings*" ["It is not an obligation to share your things; as an ate, you want to share because you love your siblings"]. Her narrative is analytically important because it shows that practices resembling parental care may be understood by participants as chosen relational care rather than externally imposed duty.

Leadership, Independence, and Responsibility

Participants associated being eldest with learning to lead, guide, and become dependable. BJ described becoming accustomed to taking leadership roles. KN understood her earlier experiences as preparing her to guide younger siblings through situations she had already encountered. KL, reflecting on earlier difficulties, described becoming more responsible and developing a clearer direction for herself. These perceived gains emerged through participants' efforts to negotiate demanding expectations rather than demonstrating that unequal care burdens are inherently beneficial.

Different Meanings of Pressure

DA interpreted family pressure largely in positive terms, reasoning that expectations could communicate confidence in her ability to achieve. As she put it, "*if they pressure you, that means you can do better, you can achieve something*." Other participants described pressure as emotionally costly or restrictive. The contrast underscores that eldest daughters exercise agency in interpreting family expectations: some accommodate them, some derive purpose from them, and some resist or struggle against them. The phenomenon is therefore not a uniform experience of victimization but a negotiated role whose meaning varies with family context and personal interpretation.

Across the four themes, the interviews reveal a sequence rather than four isolated categories. Gendered upbringing cultivated particular forms of domestic and relational competence; eldest-child status positioned participants as persons expected to deploy those competencies for younger siblings and family life; the convergence produced emotional, behavioral, and life-course pressures; and participants responded by accepting, reframing, negotiating, or resisting those expectations. It is this convergence, not gender or birth order considered separately, that constitutes the central experience of the eldest-daughter care burden in this study.

The findings support an interpretation of the eldest-daughter care burden as the convergence of birth-order responsibility and gendered socialization. Being eldest carried expectations to lead, help, succeed first, and provide a model for younger siblings; being female shaped many of the domestic, emotional, and relational competencies through which those expectations were enacted. The interviews therefore clarify why gendered play, household instruction, and restrictions are analytically relevant without treating them as parental care in themselves: these experiences form part of the socialization through which care becomes feminized, while eldest-child status creates a family position in which those capacities can be expected and mobilized (Eagly, 1987; Maccoby, 1961). This convergence is consistent with recent Philippine research suggesting that gender and birth order are relevant to differences in how young people experience family obligations and

parentification (Abrea & Vargas, 2024, 2025). The participants' experiences further suggest that eldest-daughter responsibility is not simply a consequence of chronological birth order but is reinforced through expectations concerning how daughters should behave toward other family members. Such expectations may acquire a moral dimension when caregiving becomes associated with being a responsible and dependable daughter, an interpretation that resonates with research on culturally situated caregiving obligations among eldest daughters (Choi & Nam, 2024).

The strongest evidence for a parental-care role appears in participants' accounts of responsibilities directed toward younger siblings. Teaching schoolwork, guiding younger siblings through unfamiliar situations, mediating conflict, protecting siblings, providing emotional support, and assuming direct or anticipated caregiving responsibilities extend beyond routine household participation. Participants' own descriptions of being a "second mother," a "second parent," a caretaker, or the dependable "ate" demonstrate how sibling responsibility can approximate supportive parental functions even when parents remain present in the family (Tsukada, 2011; Whiteman et al., 2011). These accounts are consistent with research recognizing sibling caregiving as a distinct form of family responsibility that may involve practical assistance, supervision, and emotional support beyond ordinary sibling interaction (Brolin et al., 2024). The significance of the participants' descriptions lies not merely in the performance of caregiving tasks but in the expectation that they would assume responsibility for younger siblings' needs and well-being. This interpretation is further supported by research identifying gender differences in the distribution and nature of family caregiving responsibilities (Pacheco Barzallo et al., 2024). Within the present study, these responsibilities suggest how the eldest-daughter position may become associated with parent-like functions without necessarily implying that the participants had replaced their parents or assumed complete parental authority.

At the same time, the interviews caution against treating eldest-daughter care as a single or uniformly imposed experience. One participant described sibling care as "ate love" rather than obligation, while another interpreted pressure as evidence that her family believed she could succeed. Others described emotional suppression, restricted freedom, accumulated frustration, or the pressure to organize personal achievement around the needs and expectations of younger siblings. These variations strengthen the phenomenological account because they show that gendered care expectations are negotiated within particular family circumstances rather than mechanically reproduced in the same form across all eldest daughters. The contrasting meanings attached to these responsibilities are consistent with research suggesting that parentification may involve both positive and negative experiences, depending on the nature of caregiving responsibilities and the relationships within which they are performed (Masiran et al., 2023). Similarly, the coexistence of affection, personal satisfaction, and perceived burden reflects the varied developmental and relational outcomes identified in contemporary research on parentification (Dariotis et al., 2023). In the present findings, these differences suggest that the meaning of eldest-daughter care cannot be determined solely by identifying the responsibilities performed. Rather, it must also be understood through the participants' interpretations of whether those responsibilities represent affection, family confidence, personal commitment, or expectations that constrain their choices.

The findings also illuminate the social and psychological costs of role expectations. Emotional restraint, exemplary behavior, academic achievement, and restricted autonomy were repeatedly tied to being the eldest and to being female. In this sense, care operated not only through visible tasks but through what participants believed they had to become: mature, dependable, patient, successful, and available to others. This supports the use of role-strain concepts to interpret the tension that arises when family expectations compete with personal autonomy, emotional expression, and individual life plans (Biddle, 1979; Goode, 1960). The participants' accounts of suppressing emotions, limiting personal freedom, and prioritizing family expectations are consistent with contemporary research associating intensive

caregiving responsibilities with psychosocial difficulties among young carers (Grangel et al., 2025). These tensions also correspond with research identifying psychological and relational challenges associated with parentification, particularly when responsibilities exceed what young people can reasonably manage within their developmental circumstances (Keny & Banerjee, 2026). Furthermore, the participants' descriptions of balancing academic achievement, family expectations, and personal aspirations reflect the competing demands considered in research on perceived life balance among young adult caregivers (Dang et al., 2024). The findings therefore suggest that role strain among eldest daughters may arise not only from the number of responsibilities assigned to them but also from the expectation that they remain consistently capable, emotionally composed, and responsive to the needs of others. Nevertheless, these experiences should be interpreted as participants' accounts of perceived pressure and constrained autonomy rather than as evidence that all experienced clinically significant psychological distress.

Participants nevertheless identified leadership, independence, resilience, empathy, and responsibility as capacities associated with their experiences. These outcomes complicate a purely deficit-based interpretation without legitimizing unequal expectations. The sociological issue is not whether eldest daughters can become capable caregivers and leaders, but how gender and birth order can make their availability for care appear natural, expected, or morally desirable. The findings therefore distinguish care as a valued relational practice from care as a disproportionately assigned responsibility (Gilligan, 1982). The positive capacities identified by participants are consistent with research recognizing that caregiving responsibilities may be associated with resilience, perceived competence, and personal development alongside possible emotional and relational difficulties (Dariotis et al., 2023; Masiran et al., 2023). However, the participants' recognition of these capacities does not necessarily indicate that the responsibilities through which they developed were equally distributed or freely chosen. Rather, their experiences illustrate how personal growth may occur within family arrangements that continue to place disproportionate expectations on eldest daughters. This distinction is particularly important in the Philippine family context, where sibling-focused responsibilities and perceptions of family obligation form part of the dimensions examined in research on Filipino parentification (Abrea & Vargas, 2024). The findings thus suggest that acknowledging the value of caregiving and the capabilities developed through it should not obscure the gendered processes through which such responsibilities become expected.

The findings should be interpreted within the study's bounded qualitative scope. The five participants provide in-depth accounts rather than a representative picture of all Filipino eldest daughters. Their narratives provide strong evidence for gendered socialization, sibling guidance, emotional and relational responsibility, and the subjective burden of expectation, but the intensity and form of parental-care responsibility varied considerably across participants. The study therefore uses the parental-care role to describe recurring parent-like supportive functions evident in the accounts rather than assuming that all domestic labor, all eldest-child responsibility, or all expressions of sibling affection constitute parental care. This distinction is consistent with contemporary research emphasizing the need to differentiate sibling caregiving responsibilities from broader family participation and to recognize variation in the forms and consequences of parentification (Brolin et al., 2024; Dariotis et al., 2023). The participants' accounts therefore support a context-sensitive interpretation in which the parental-care role is identified through specific supportive functions rather than inferred automatically from gender, birth order, or household participation. In this sense, the study contributes to understanding how eldest daughters may negotiate parent-like responsibilities while remaining situated within families where parents continue to be present. The findings also reinforce the importance of distinguishing the experience of care as a meaningful relationship from its organization as an expected responsibility, particularly when the same family role may be experienced as both personally valuable and socially demanding.

CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of the five eldest daughters suggest that the burden of care is best understood through the convergence of birth-order responsibility and gendered expectations. Eldest-child status positioned participants as examples, helpers, and responsible family members, while gender socialization cultivated domestic, emotional, and relational competencies associated with femininity and care. Where these expectations converged, participants could become dependable guides, mediators, caregivers, and "second mothers" within the household. The study therefore distinguishes the gendering processes that prepare girls for care from the parent-like responsibilities through which care is actually performed. Participants described costs that included restricted autonomy, pressure to mature, emotional restraint, and the prioritization of family expectations, while also identifying leadership, resilience, empathy, discipline, and responsibility as capacities developed through their experiences. These gains do not erase the unequal distribution of care. Families, schools, and communities should encourage care as a shared relational responsibility rather than a duty presumed to belong to eldest daughters. Future research should examine more diverse family structures and socioeconomic settings and should further distinguish ordinary household participation from sustained sibling caregiving and other parent-like responsibilities.

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