

Ensuring the welfare of children who stay when parents migrate

Summary report of an online consultation

Many children and adolescents remain in their home communities when parents migrate to other countries. A wide range of negative repercussions for children have been reported, including depression, behavioural problems, involvement in delinquency and vulnerability to abuse. The prevalence of such problems undoubtedly varies. What is clear, however, is that the conditions under which families live separately have a decisive impact on the outcome of family separation for children and adolescents. These conditions can be influenced by family members, communities, civil society and governments.

Brief Points

- Staying behind when parents migrate can have serious negative consequences for children, but this need not be the case.
- Ensuring the welfare of children who stay when parents migrate requires joint action by family members, communities, civil society and governments.
- Preventing stigmatization and blame can go a long way towards minimizing the negative impact of family separation.
- Even when children do not migrate, the migration policies of sending and receiving states can have significant consequences for children's lives.

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Boys in Bangladesh. More Bangladeshi mothers go abroad for work after bans on female migration were lifted in 2007. (UN Photo by Kibae Park)

This policy brief is the summary report of an open online consultation that took place in September–October 2013 as a side event to the 2013 United Nations High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development. The final section of the policy brief provides background information about this consultation.

The posts in the online consultation reflected a range of perspectives, including those of practitioners, academics, and people with personal experiences of migration and family separation.

The nature of the consequences of separation for children and adolescents depends on the individual socio-economic context and family circumstances, as well as on whether it is the father, the mother or both who migrate. Moreover, the age of the child and the duration of the separation are decisive. The observations and recommendations made here need to be adapted to specific cases. Most of the online consultation focused on international migration, but migration-induced family separation is also an important consequence of mobility within countries.

Each heading below is followed by a short background text and key recommendations. Recommended actions are deliberately not targeted to particular constituencies, since there is often a need for joint efforts by governments, local institutions, communities, family members and others.

In some cases, targeted interventions to support children of migrants are needed. However, it is important to remember that other vulnerable children in migrants' communities of and children of divorcees, for instance—might experience similar challenges or worse, without the financial benefits origin—orphans that migration brings. Some of the measures suggested here have broader beneficial impacts for vulnerable children, while others are specific to the context of migration.

Avoiding stigmatization

Judgmental attitudes and a negative focus on migrant families can make the situation more difficult for children and youth whose parents have migrated. Normalizing separation might go a long way to minimizing the impacts of such separations. Public policies, school curricula and the media all play important roles in this context.

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Recommendations

- Reduce stigmatization by communicating that family separation is widespread, and that families exist in many forms other than mother, father and children living together.
- Avoid blaming parents for having made the difficult choice to migrate without their children; such blame can be an unnecessary additional burden for parents, children and caregivers.
- Use terms other than 'left behind' to describe children of migrants to avoid representing them as passive victims.

Preventing false promises

Adults sometimes try to comfort children of migrants by saying that they will soon be reunited with their parents. If children believe that they will shortly be emigrating to join their parents, their motivation for schooling, maintenance of friendships and relationships



Girls in Vietnam. About 80,000 Vietnamese contract workers go abroad every year, especially to Taiwan, Malaysia, and Korea. (UN Photo by Kibae Park)

with caregivers may decline. A prolonged situation like this could have negative consequences for the lives of the affected children. Moreover, if reunification keeps being delayed, a sense that promises have been broken may strain relationships with parents.

Recommendations

- Be honest with children about the obstacles to family reunification abroad and the timeframe to which it might be subject.
- Be honest with children about the problems that might prevent parents from returning on holidays.

Providing support and stability

A stable and supportive environment can minimize the effects of separation on the well-being of migrants' children. Living with grandparents is often the best solution for children whose parents have migrated. However, grandparents may be poorly prepared to assist with schooling and to handle the challenges of adolescence. Younger caregivers may be in a better position to provide certain types of support and guidance, but lack the bond to both parents and children that grand-

parents have. Depending on their caretaking arrangements, children could be in need of different types of support.

Recommendations

- Recognize the importance of other sources of stability when children are separated from their parents; for example, bonds to older siblings could be even more important when parents are away.
- Strengthen social safety nets to ensure school attendance, health care and other basic services for children whose parents have migrated.
- Give children of migrants support with homework and other aspects of schooling that their caregivers may be unable to provide.
- Encourage children's day-to-day efforts at school, regardless of the possibility of future migration to another country.
- Facilitate regular and reliable communication between migrant parents and their children—for instance, through phone calls or Internet services such as Skype.

Maximizing the benefits of migration

Children of migrants fare better when they see tangible material benefits resulting from their parents' work abroad—for instance, the expansion of the house or access to better schools. Such benefits not only have a direct impact on welfare, but also make it easier for children to understand their parents' decision and not feel abandoned. But while money and its uses often represent the benefits of migration, economic disagreements between adults in children's lives can be a major burden on their welfare.

Recommendations

- Support parents (remittance-senders) and caregivers (remittance-receivers) in managing remittances for long-term welfare, for instance by facilitating access to credit, savings or insurance, or supporting investment in housing.
- Enable migrant parents to make direct payments for schooling, health insurance and other expenses that secure child welfare. Such possibilities can shield the child from competing expenses in the household of caregivers.

- Take steps to prevent conflict over remittances between parents and caregivers, for instance by establishing a common understanding of spending priorities before conflicts arise.

Considering children in migration management

Even when children do not migrate, the migration policies of sending and receiving states can have significant impacts on children's lives. The difficulty of family separation is often aggravated by insecurities and obstacles that different policy regimes could have ameliorated.

Recommendations

- Reach out to migrant parents with advice about long-distance parenting alongside advice on financial or judicial aspects of migration.
- Design immigration policies with consideration for the fact that many migrants are separated from their children; financial precariousness and legal insecurity makes responsible long-distance parenting much more difficult.
- Ensure that migrant workers can return for visits to their country of origin without running the risk of losing their employment or rights, or being unable to re-enter.
- Enable long-term or permanent migrants to bring their children with them if they wish, and reduce delays in family-reunification processes.

For further reading

A number of social scientists have investigated how families manage separations caused by migration and how children who stay behind in the community are affected. Listed

below are a few comprehensive platforms for exploring the research literature in the field:

- Carling J, Menjivar C and Schmalzbauer L (eds) (2012) Special issue on transnational parenthood. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38(2): 191–366.
- Dreby J (2010) *Divided by Borders: Mexican Migrants and Their Children*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Mazzucato V and Schans D (eds) (2011) Special section on transnational families and well-being of children. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73(4): 704–803.
- Yeoh B, Lam CFT and Hoang LA (2013) *Transnational Migration and Changing Care Arrangements for Left-Behind Children in Southeast Asia: A Selective Literature Review*. Working Paper 207. Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

Background information

In conjunction with the United Nations' second High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development in New York on 3–4 October 2013, there was a joint United Nations–civil society online discussion about the impacts of migration on young people's lives. The discussion was linked to the development of the post-2015 development agenda. The year 2015 marks the end of the timeframe for the eight Millennium Development Goals that have been a milestone in global and national development efforts.

The online discussion on youth migration, equity and inequalities included six specific consultations, one of which is summarized here. This summary has been selectively compiled from, and inspired by, the posts. The recommendations are the responsibility

of the author, who was the appointed Expert Resource Person for the consultation. The consultations were hosted by the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). A full summary report, *E-Discussion on Youth Migration, Equity, Inequalities and the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, is published by UNICEF.

Relevant links

Online discussion on youth migration, equity and inequalities:

<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/migration>.

Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD):

<http://www.knomad.org/>.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and migration:

http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/index_migration.html.

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THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is not connected to a current project but draws upon the author's previous research and current involvement in the joint United Nations–civil society online discussion about the impacts of migration on young people's lives.

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