

Original Article

## Who Cares for the Children and Families Left Behind? A Study on the Costs and Benefits of Maternal Migration

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### Abstract

Labor migration is considered circular and recurrent in various parts of the world and involves the interchange between its costs and benefits. Often, the trade-off between cost and benefits are most critical to female migrants based on their position in the family as primary caregivers of the children and their vulnerability in society. This qualitative paper explores the provision of care to families and children left behind by utilizing the opinions and ideas of social welfare practitioners from China, Sri Lanka, Guatemala, Philippines and Poland and the experiences of migrant mothers from Philippines and Poland. Research findings showed that although remittances are very beneficial to families, the negative implications on child and family welfare cannot be disregarded. While some countries have established support for women, their families, and their children, there is still a need for further understanding of the sociocultural and political factors that affect social action. It is recommended to conduct further research to identify the gaps in policies and services and develop more appropriate micro, meso and macro interventions that utilize bilateral or multilateral cooperation among various local and international social work actors.

**Keywords:** Care Provision; Mater Migration; Care; Families Left behind; Children Left Behind Phenomenological Research.

### Introduction

The study of migration and its patterns involves analyzing different forces at play, in particular, the causes and impact on the sending and receiving countries. Although causes for migration may be easier to pinpoint, understanding its impact and attempting to mitigate the causes may not be easy. Recognizing the relationship between various disciplines: human rights, economic, political, socio-cultural perspectives, will enable scholars, governments, and social welfare professionals to comprehend the causes of migration and construct meaningful and appropriate interventions (Yanovich, 2013). Labor migration is considered as one of the results of globalization, its impact is

mostly measured in economic terms as individuals and or families migrate to developed countries in search for better economic opportunities. As globalization continues and expands, the declining birth rates and increasing aging population has increased the demand for foreign labor. In recent years, children with one or both parents abroad can be found in various countries and big cities worldwide. There are many difficulties in correctly estimating the number of children affected by the out-migration of one or both parents as varying calculation methods are being utilized by national statistics which makes international comparisons challenging (Cortes, 2007,12). However, the country-level studies cited by UNICEF highlights

the extent of the impact of migration on children: around 1 million Sri Lankan children are left behind by labor migrant mothers (Save the Children, 2006), and an estimate of 9 million Filipino children under the age of 18 are left behind by one or both parents working abroad (Castaneda and Buck, 2012). The interest on the social aspects or impact of migration is brought about by the emerging trends on the feminization of labor migration, and the impact of migration and remittances on families and children left behind. Although some research on children left behind is available, there is a need for a more careful study to address the issues that left-behind children and families face upon a parent especially a mother's departure. While migrants travel to foreign countries to work in the hopes of being able to improve the well-being of their family and provide better opportunities for their children, research shows that the absence of a mother may be more detrimental to the psychosocial development of the child.

The general objective of the study is to find the existing social work practices in addressing issues of children and families-left-behind by labor migration. Using the experiences of migrant mothers and perspectives of social work professionals, the study aims:

1. To explore and understand the costs and benefits of maternal migration as experienced and perceived by social workers and mother migrants;
2. To identify recommendations for practice based on perspectives of migrant mothers and social work professionals.

### **Materials and Methods**

Anchored on a qualitative research design, phenomenological method was employed for this research to explore the phenomenon under study. Phenomenological researches are interested in the analytical and descriptive experience of phenomena by individuals in their everyday world (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Therefore, this study is more concerned with first hand descriptions of social workers and maternal migrants involved in the provision of care for children and families left behind. Phenomenological research differs from other modes of qualitative inquiry because it attempts to understand the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of participants

who have experienced it (Christensen et. al., 2010; Khan, 2014; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

The focus, then, in this type of research, is not on the participants themselves or the world that they inhabit, but rather on the meaning or essence of the interrelationship between the two (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method will allow researchers to understand the impact of the phenomena based on people's own experiences, beliefs and understanding and how they interpret the social world (Howson, 2010).

The study will present the perceptions of social work professionals and migrant mothers on the impact of maternal migration on children left behind and provided recommendations for practice. For this study, we will define children left behind as children whose parent(s) have migrated (external or internal migration) for work and are left behind in their home country or community. They may be left behind in the care of the remaining parent, relatives, friends, or by themselves. The researchers utilized purposive sampling to identify the primary participants. The authors selected the sample based on their judgment and the purpose of the research (Groenewald, 2004) looking for those who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988 p. 150). Among the six (6) social workers/practitioners from various countries who responded to the study, only three (3) have direct experience working with families/children left behind: China, Philippines, and Poland. The participants will serve as experts in providing a better understanding of children and families left behind (Gray, Midgley and Webb, 2012). The study used existing literature, interview for current insights and ideas and case studies in order to access information without the end goal of a generalization but to explore important variables as food for thought (Steinberg, 2004).

### **Results and Discussions**

#### ***The Costs and Benefits of Maternal Migration***

##### ***a) Importance of Remittances***

One of the benefits of labor migration is the remittance that they send to families in their home country. They represent an improved financial situation for a family which translates to the provision of needs and wants in terms of better

education and improving health (health care, food & nutrition, etc.) (Nguyen et al,2006). Both migrant mothers cited financial reasons for their decision to migrate and work abroad.

*“I work abroad for my children’s future, provide their needs, to save up for their education and to be able to build our house, which is not yet finished but almost.”- Filipino Migrant Mother*

According to Castaneda and Buck (2012), remittances do not only equate to financial investment but also highlights the emotional dynamics involved between the migrant and the transnational family. Although the mother’s absence may be difficult for children who are looking for emotional support, mothers try to compensate their absence through the provision of their needs.

*“It’s hard because I’m far away but they understand because they know I’m doing this for them, so it’s easier. They expect monthly allowance, food, school fees, transportation. They don’t expect much else. Emotionally, I know he needs me, but since we are apart, he is shy to open up.”- Filipino Migrant Mother*

The remittances encompass economic and emotional dynamics of transnational families. The connection between the economic and emotions involved is referred to as “emotional remittances”. This includes the socio-cultural values, ideas and physical items sent from the sending or receiving family members. It suggests that emotions of love, concern, guilt, and sacrifice are intrinsically embedded in remittances thereby making “true remittances” emotional (Katigbak, 2015).

*“The money I send to my family shows my love and concern for their well-being. It’s hard because I’m far away but they understand because they know I’m doing this for them, so it’s easier. I’m happy because they are in school and they are well cared for.”-Filipino Migrant Mother*

*“I feel guilty that I’m not always there for them when they need me but I know that they understand that what I’m doing is also for them and their future. As a mother, it is my obligation to provide them*

*the best quality of life I can.”-Polish Migrant Mother*

Although the effects of labor migration on children left behind by parents are discussed in the literature, the negative effects are often minimized due to the positive economic impact of remittances. There is still a need for more thorough research that will assess the impact and address the difficulties children or families face upon parent’s departure. Although parents migrate for work to provide better for their families financially and believing that this will provide long-term benefits for the children, the growing body of research show that the absence of a parent especially the mother may be detrimental to child’s psycho-social development (Parreñas, 2005; Arunatilake, et al., 2010; De and Ratha, 2012; Perera and Jampaklay, 2011; Senaratna, 2012).

#### **b) Change in Family Dynamics**

The maternal migration is believed to cause significant changes in caregiving or upbringing practices and investments in the family. As the father is usually the primary breadwinner of the family, when the mother decides to work, the caregiving and parenting dynamics will be forced to change. When a mother decides to leave, she ensures that the children are continued to be cared for. Oftentimes, the children remain in the care of the remaining parent (father) who is responsible for taking care of the material, emotional and social needs of the children. This may result in the reversal of traditional gender roles within the household and will affect the nature of parenting.

*“At first my children were taken care of my husband. He oversees making sure my children are taken care of. They eat well, go to school and are safe. Although he still goes to work, he makes sure that my children are doing well. All the things I do as a mother, he tries to do them himself” - Filipino Migrant Parent*

Although fathers may try to take the role of both parents, existing cultural and patriarchal mindsets may hinder them from performing tasks that are associated with “mothering”. Thus, families may need additional help from extended family members, usually female, to take care of the children’s needs. In the absence of female

extended family members, families get hired help or the younger children may be left behind in the care of older siblings or by themselves who will take on the responsibility of caring for the entire household. (Castaneda & Buck, 2012).

*“I understand that my husband may need help so they needed someone to do some of the domestic responsibilities that I cannot do.” -Filipino Migrant Mother*

The hiring of a “house help” also illustrates the change in the social division of wealth, social status, and class. This is shown in the need of migrant families or mothers to “outsource” their responsibilities to another woman from a poorer background especially in caring for their left-behind children (Hochschild, 2003). This cycle or chain of care may be repeated for a few times with its value decreasing in every level or unpaid care labor (Skornia, 2014).

*“My children are older now, so they take care of themselves. I also pay someone who also looks after them occasionally, like cleaning the house and doing the laundry.” -Polish Migrant Mother*

As cited by one of the migrant mothers, the separation from her family also contributed to her family’s breakdown. As the husband continues to work, hired help was needed for some household responsibilities. However, this also paved way for her husband’s extra-marital affairs that further led to her children’s abandonment.

*“My husband worked as a truck driver during the day while the kids are in school and come home at the end of the day. The children help in household chores but they also hired the neighbor for help. Turns out, the hired help was my husband’s mistress. He had to abandon my children to flee when he was hunted down by the mistress’ husband” -Filipino Migrant Mother*

Although the mother did not refer to the separation as the cause for the breakdown of their marriage, she believed that it brought additional tension to their already problematic relationship. In addition to the testimony by the migrant mother, a *social worker from Sri Lanka* also cited that there is a chance that some fathers may enter new

relationship during the mother’s absence. This would later develop to the total separation of the family and the emergence of new “marriage”. As cited by Asis, et al (2004), granting it is difficult to prove the connection between migration and infidelity, studies provided examples where migrants attributed increased or constant communication in keeping their relationship with their spouses despite the distance.

In this study, the social workers have emphasized that the challenges families face when mother’s leave abroad are more critical in younger children. They cited lack of mother’s care, and guidance may affect children’s psychosocial development. The deprivation of parent-child relationship, communication, and disruption of attachment are expected to affect child’s growth and negatively influences the child’s psychological development (Liao, Hu and Zhang, 2014).

*“Mothers are usually the primary caregiver for their children. When a mother leaves her family to work abroad, the relationship between her and her children may be affected. Some problems in bonding and attachment may be encountered for young children who are left before they could establish a secure attachment with their mother.”- Filipino Social Worker 2*

Experts refer to the attachment theory in studying the effects of maternal migration on children left behind as it believes that prolonged separation from the mother during the child’s early years may be detrimental to the child’s psycho-social development and damage the child’s functioning. This may cause issues on children especially for young children who may acquire feelings of loss, abandonment, and guilt. Younger children may not be able to comprehend the reason for the mother’s absence and may perceive this as being abandoned or being punished for misbehaving.

Then again, the respondents believe that constant communication allows them to avoid disconnection with their family members. In line to this, research claims that the migrant’s connections are continued through participation in family practices and maintaining communication even across immense distances (Mazzucato, 2015). Reports have also been cited that a lack of

connection may occur between parent and child regardless of the constant communication through emails, messages, video calls, gifts, etc. Furthermore, older children may harbor resentment that makes building emotional connection difficult. This may lead to loss of parental authority and resentment may be interpreted as ungratefulness (Artico, 2003; Castaneda & Buck, 2012; Yanovich, 2013).

*“Sometimes I talk to them or call and ask them how they are doing and try to parent them (discipline) from afar. I know my words are not enough because I’m not there, so their grandmother is the main responsible for being a parent.”- Filipino Migrant Mother*

The studies show that the use modern technology is considered by migrants as an efficient way of communication with their loved ones. Although continued communication is essential, this does not guarantee that problems within the family will be avoided.

#### **c) Children’s Exposure to Various Risks**

The social workers and migrant mothers claimed that without proper guidance of parents especially mothers, children including adolescents are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and negative social behaviors. According to Yanovich (2013, 8-9), in addition to dealing with the parent’s absence, children become socially vulnerable to neglect, abuse, discrimination, exploitation etc. from neighbors and even relatives. As a response, the children may be left to fend for themselves or the older children assume new responsibilities to help the remaining parent/ guardian in taking care of the younger siblings or the whole family.

*“My older son told me they had to sleep on the street and what hurts more is that they had relatives in the area that might have been able to take care of them but they wanted me to send money to take care of the kids. I was angry because they considered money first before taking care of their nephews.”. -Filipino Migrant Mother*

In addition to abuse and exploitation, it was also cited by social workers that, children are at risk for risky behaviors such as alcoholism, teenage

pregnancy, school delinquency, criminal activities etc.

*“Due to lack of guidance and care from mothers, children and youth are at-risk of being in conflict with the law.” - Filipino Social Worker 1*

Furthermore, this is supported by studies that claim that after the mother’s departure, children have difficulty adjusting to the absence and may display rebellious behaviors and activities. Although mothers may try to increase the frequency of communication to compensate for their absence, the negative behaviors of their children create feelings of guilt and inadequacy for leaving their children behind (Mazzucato et al., 2015).

*“When they grow up, they lack certain values and they get involved in alcohol, smoking, teenage pregnancy, school delinquency, etc. Especially in Guatemalan culture where mothers have the main responsibility to educate their children, during the mother’s absence, the children are left without guidance.”- Guatemalan Social Worker*

#### **d) Incurred debts**

While labor migration reflects the migrant’s commitment to improving the family’s situation, it may also negatively affect the potential to move up their financial status. The cost of migration refers to the investments needed to fund the migration, where most families must borrow money, and thus gives more importance in paying off incurred debts before the return of investment (remittances for families) come until later (Antman, 2013).

*“I had to pawn my small piece of land so that the family can move together. I had to save money to get it back while also provide for their everyday needs.”- Filipino Migrant Mother*

Due to incurred debts prior to migration, the majority of the income during the initial months of employment is dedicated to paying of those debts. Thus, the financial benefits may not be fully enjoyed as there is a need to pay the costs incurred in the job application process: application costs, medical expenses, insurance, visa fees, transportation costs, relocation costs, etc. (Antman,

2013). In addition, as exemplified in the interview, plans for returning home for vacations may also take antecedence to the improvement of family situation e.g. house construction.

Similarly, Guatemalans who decide to travel northward for work, usually the United States, face a lot of problems. As cited by a social worker, Guatemalans must invest a lot of money for their journey across borders.

*“As migrating to another country is expensive, the families have to get enough money to finance their migration. They result in multiples of debt which needs to be paid before finally reaping the benefits of remittances for the family”- Social Worker Guatemala*

According to Smoralek (2007), some Guatemalans employ the services of ‘coyotes’ to assist them in travelling northward. They pay a huge amount of money for their voyage to be smuggled across borders and become deeply indebted to the coyotes. Although there is no assurance of successfully crossing the border safely and with a high risk of deportation, Guatemalans choose to cross illegally as it is still considered cheaper. The prospect of better job opportunities is a big motivation for pursuing migration despite the challenges they may face along the way.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The research was conducted with social work practitioners from selected countries: Poland, Sri Lanka, China, Philippines and Guatemala, where the study gathered information on the perceived realities about the issues of maternal migration and children left behind. In addition, the interviews with migrant mothers provided insights on their experiences, beliefs, and interpretation of the challenges migrant mothers and their families face. The study presented the various costs and benefits of maternal migration focusing on the importance of remittances as the main motivator for migration. The study also emphasizes the different negative effects of maternal migration especially on the families and children left behind. This includes disruption of family dynamics, children’s exposure to risks, incurred debts, among others. The social workers then explored the current practices that

aim to address the issue and the limitations for social action.

The research findings show that the prevailing belief is that although there are negative effects of maternal migration, the financial contributions of remittances is considered more important in the family. This suggests that there is limited understanding of the impact of maternal migration on families and children left behind and the role of social work in addressing these issues. Therefore, there is a need for a more comprehensive research on the current situation of children left behind from various cultural backgrounds. This includes current practices available and how policies, structural barriers, and culture limit social work action. The research shall provide informed and balanced action that considers the needs and rights of both women migrants and children without needing to give more importance to one group over the other.

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