

Going Beyond Material Well-Being: Looking at the Hidden Costs of Migration on Children Left Behind

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Abstract

As migration continues to increase worldwide, a growing number of children are being left behind by migrating parents. Despite the positive effect remittances have on poverty reduction, short-term economic growth, and the material well-being of children, a significant part of the story is omitted when economists and policymakers focus primarily on the economic impact of remittances. This article explores the possible negative consequences of migration by focusing on the psychological, educational, and social impacts on the children left behind who receive remittances from one or both of their parents. The article concludes with policy recommendations to mitigate these impacts, including informational campaigns, educational and support programs for children, and support mechanisms for migrating parents and substitute caregivers.

Introduction

“I understood at first, because my mother had no work and needed to pay for food for us... But when I talk to her on the phone each weekend, I tell my mother, please come back home, because I miss her so much. I tell her, please don’t desert your children like some parents do. I would not leave my children behind like this.”¹

-13 Year Old Romanian Girl

Over the past twenty years, the total number of migrants increased significantly, from 155 million in 1990 to nearly 214 million in 2010.² In 2010, developing countries received an estimated 325 billion dollars in remittances and the World Bank predicts that this amount will increase “by 6.2 percent in 2011 and 8.1 percent in 2012, to reach 374 billion by 2012.”³ For this reason, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

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has stated that the effects of migration can potentially be harnessed for development and poverty reduction.⁴ The World Bank has also cited the positive impact migration can play in generating “substantial welfare gains for migrants, as well as countries of origin and destination,” and in reducing poverty.⁵

The literature discussing the positive impact of migration focuses primarily on the money that migrants remit to their families and friends. Remittances exceed private capital flows, foreign direct investment, and development aid in some developing countries, and within some of these countries, remittances account for more than a quarter of the GDP, including in Tajikistan, Honduras, Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan.⁶ Studies have shown how remittances have reduced the proportion of people living in poverty, including in Uganda by 11 percent, in Bangladesh by 6 percent, and in Ghana by 5 percent.⁷ Other reports show the positive impact remittances have had on economic growth in Moldova, Pakistan, India, and Morocco.⁸ Remittances also tend to be more resilient than foreign direct investment and private debt and equity flows during financial crises as was illustrated during the most recent global economic downturn. There are several reasons for their resilience, including the fact that “remittances are a small part of migrants’ incomes, and migrants continue to send remittances when hit by income shocks.”⁹

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As migration increases, there is also an increase in the number of children being left behind. Migrating parents often leave their children in the care of relatives, friends, or no one at all for significant periods of time. In the short term, these children might experience an improvement in their material well-being. Indeed, they have nicer clothes, refurbished homes, better quality school supplies, and more entertainment devices compared to children without migrating parents.¹⁰ However, despite the material advantages that remittances may provide, insufficient attention is given to the psychological, educational, and social impacts of migration on the children left behind. This paper highlights some of these dimensions and suggests the need for a more holistic understanding of migration.

Challenges for Children of Migrating Parents

It is difficult to calculate the total number of children left behind by migrating parents; however, estimates indicate that the number is at least in the tens of millions.¹¹ In some countries, children left behind comprise a significant percentage of the total child population. For instance, in Moldova 31 percent and in the Philippines 27 percent of children have one or both parents working abroad.¹² It is important to recognize that

the category “children left behind” is broad and heterogeneous. Those within this category may range from one day to 21 years old and live in countries with diverse economic, political, and social structures. Some children live in rural areas while others live in urban areas. Sometimes one parent stays behind with the children; sometimes both migrate. Some children are left behind for months while others are left behind for years.

Although it might be difficult to make generalizations with such a broad and diverse target population, empirical research, case studies, and anecdotal evidence supports the proposition that enough children of migrant parents face considerable psychological, educational, and social issues that merit further research and ultimately strategic policy responses.

A. Psychological Issues

Children often experience significant isolation, longing, and sadness after one or both parents migrate. A UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) study of Moldovan children found that “separation from their parents affects the internal lives of children to a great extent.”¹³ One child in this UNICEF study summed up such feelings by noting he is “sad now [and his] heart is incomplete without [his] mother.”¹⁴ Another Moldovan child commented that “money is not important to me; I would like my parents to be always with me.”¹⁵ Moldovan caregivers and educational professionals opined that children left behind become “inhibited, reserved, and solitary.”¹⁶

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In neighboring Romania, the Soros Foundation found that children left behind were more susceptible to depression and feelings of abandonment.¹⁷ Another study in Romania suggests that girls may be even more vulnerable to high levels of depression than boys.¹⁸ These findings are not limited to Eastern Europe. In the Philippines, children left behind experienced greater anger, confusion, and worries.¹⁹ A UNICEF study of Filipino children found that they were also “more vulnerable to psychosocial shocks,” and that children aged 13-16 had a poor self-perception and felt more insecure.²⁰

Sometimes children left behind develop severe psychological issues far beyond feelings of sadness, isolation, and loneliness. For example, some Ecuadorian children have experienced nervous breakdowns after their parents migrated.²¹ In Romania, fourteen children left behind committed suicide from approximately 2006 to 2009.²² It is unclear whether there is a direct causal relationship between the migrating parents and all fourteen suicides; however, one of the Romanian children left a suicide note indicating there was a direct cause in his case.²³ Admittedly, these cases might represent the extreme end of the spectrum, but nevertheless highlight the importance for policymakers to consider the psychological needs of children left behind.

Another important trend in the research around migrant families suggests that children with mothers abroad fare worse emotionally than children with only fathers abroad.²⁴ According to a 2006 Save the Children study, “20 percent of children of all ages showed negative behavior after their mother’s departure.”²⁵ The UN also correlates the migration of mothers to the increased susceptibility of children to depression.²⁶ That said, it is important to recognize that even if mothers do not migrate, children still face psychological challenges in the absence of a father. The role of each parent has a distinct importance in the emotional and psychological development of the child. For example, in Bangladesh, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) documented that boys left behind with their mothers tend to be more undisciplined and rebellious due to a lack of male role models.²⁷ Although other factors can contribute to this behavior, the migration of fathers was cited to be a dominant influence.

These examples underscore the critical role of nurturing parents in the psychological development of their children and how the absence of this parental influence can cause unintended consequences. In addition, ignoring these issues can also impact a country’s long-term economic growth and development by failing to fully develop its future human capital.

B. Educational Issues

Although remittances increase children’s ability to obtain school supplies and pay school fees, some children left behind suffer negative educational outcomes. Moldovan children admitted that their academic performance diminished after their parents migrated.²⁸ One Moldovan child explained that “it’s difficult to stay home and study when you’re alone and friends invite you [to] come out. And nobody is there to stop you from going.”²⁹ The UN Development Program (UNDP) and UNICEF cited studies,

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showing “school performance of girls in left behind households in Mexico [was] compromised by their obligations to fulfill household duties” and that children left behind in Sri Lanka tend to drop out of school more than other students.³⁰ Another UNICEF study found that “living in a migrant household [in Mexico] lowers the chances of boys completing junior high school and girls completing high school.”³¹ Many children left behind in China also drop out of school in order to emigrate and reunite with their parents.³² All of these studies suggest that the role parents play in enforcing their child’s education—whether it is ensuring homework gets done or simply that their child gets to school—is critical to academic success. Another reason for the increased dropout rates stems from children viewing future migration, and not educational

achievement, as the best path to socio-economic well-being.³³

Not all children left behind in all developing countries suffer negative educational outcomes. Some country-specific studies found that migration can have a positive educational impact at least with regard to some students. For instance, a study of Pakistani children left behind found that overall they “progressed in school better” than children from non-migrant families.³⁴ Another study of Bangladeshi children found that in rural areas, children left by migrating parents had better educational outcomes than others.³⁵ However, even in the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh, certain groups of children whose parents live abroad suffered academically. In Pakistan, while the aggregate of boys and girls left behind performed better academically, the disaggregated data shows that boys left behind performed worse than boys from non-migrant families due to the increased work burden on boys.³⁶ In Bangladesh, students in rural areas might have done better, but when urban and rural areas are considered together, girls of migrating mothers failed to perform as well academically as other students.³⁷ This suggests that other factors, particularly geographic location, access to social support networks, a broader resource base, and gender, might change the way children react to migrating parents. It also underscores the difficulties in developing homogenous responses to the overall problem and the need to conduct country-specific analyses to discern what issues children face in different contexts. The policy options section of this paper further expounds on this idea of avoiding a one-size-fits-all response.

C. Social Issues

In addition to psychological and educational issues, some children left behind experience significant social difficulties. UNICEF found that increased juvenile crime in Moldova was positively correlated with the number of children left behind, who accounted for a disproportionate 60 percent of juvenile offenders.³⁸ UNICEF has also noted a link between juvenile crime and children left behind in the Caribbean, particularly when remittances decrease and children want to maintain the same level of consumption.³⁹ Thailand and the Philippines have also experienced a rise in juvenile crime associated with children left behind and the absence of adult supervision.⁴⁰ Often the increase in crime involves petty crime; however, other times it is much more serious. Gangs, particularly the notorious M-13 gang in Central America, focus their recruitment strategies on children left behind providing the promise of family, guidance, and protection lacking in their lives.⁴¹

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Another significant threat to children left behind is their susceptibility to drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and sexual and physical violence. For instance, the Asia-Pacific Policy Center has concluded that “teenage pregnancy and drug abuse

[has] become rampant” in the Philippines due at least in part to children left behind.⁴² UNICEF has also concluded that children left behind “may be at greater risk of abuse and domestic violence, drug abuse, [and] teenage pregnancy.”⁴³ The IOM found that in some Asian countries girls left behind are “more vulnerable to sexual abuse by male members of an extended household or from within the community.”⁴⁴

These case studies illustrate the broader social and community implications related to migrating parents. Children left behind must often navigate difficult life decisions alone and are easily manipulated and lured into dangerous and unlawful activity. Further, increased crime, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy can have a destabilizing effect within a society, threatening long-term economic development and potentially even undermining institutional building. Therefore, it is incumbent on policymakers to address the issues confronting children left behind. The next section explores potential policy options for tackling some of these problems.

Policy Options to Strengthen Support Networks for Children

States have the obligation to protect children of migrant parents. Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) compels states to primarily consider the “best interests” of children in all actions and “to ensure the child [has] such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being.”⁴⁵ Article 6 of the CRC requires that states “ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.”⁴⁶ Further, pursuant to Article 18 (2) of the CRC, states are obligated to “render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities, and services for the care of children.”⁴⁷ With the exception of the United States and Somalia, all states have ratified the CRC. Therefore, an international legal obligation exists for states that have signed the CRC to understand the needs of children left behind and to respond appropriately.

As discussed previously, the children left behind are a diverse group and every country context is unique. Further, at least some children of migrating parents will be psychologically stable, high academic achievers, and law-abiding citizens. Consequently, the following policy discussion should not be interpreted as a one-size-fits-all remedy to be implemented in every country. Instead, the policy options are general starting points to consider when addressing the context-specific needs of the children left behind. Each state would benefit from conducting a needs analysis before determining which, if any, of the following policy options would be most feasible and effective.

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As an initial matter, it is not realistic for developing countries to try to prevent parents from migrating, especially in the short-term. Once large-scale migration starts

from a particular country, it is very difficult for a government to stem migration until the country develops economically and provides sufficient job opportunities to stop people from migrating in the first place.⁴⁸ It is also not realistic to assume that governments in developing countries have the necessary capacity and resources to implement many of the proceeding policy options. Consequently, bilateral and multilateral aid organizations, civil society, and the private sector need to play an instrumental role in bridging this resource and capacity gap.

Related to resource and capacity constraints, developing countries face the quandary of whether to apply the policies only to children left behind or to all children. There are potential drawbacks and limitations with both approaches. If a country targets a policy only to children left behind, the policy might be politically less feasible and/or it might create tension between the children left behind and other children. Moreover, there is a question of equity. On one hand, it is hard to justify that a child left behind, suffering from depression, poor academic performance, and social ills, is entitled to government benefits and programs; whereas, a child living with both parents, who is also suffering from depression, poor academic performance, and social ills, is not entitled to the same government benefits and programs. On the other hand, if a policy applies to all children, it will be more expensive and possibly unsustainable.

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Each country will need to evaluate the foregoing difficult political and fiscal calculations depending on the circumstances facing each country and the available assistance from the international community. With all of these caveats in mind, there are certain policies and programs that could help address the challenges faced by children left behind.

1. Informational Campaigns

In many developing countries, an initial policy obstacle will be to overcome the public's misperceptions about children left behind. Save the Children has found that children left behind are sometimes viewed as privileged and not vulnerable.⁴⁹ For the most part, the community and the children's peers only see the new clothes, better school supplies, and refurbished homes, rather than the psychological, educational, and social issues that children left behind have to face. Some people even refer to these children as "barrel children" because of the cardboard containers filled with goods they receive from their parents several times per year.⁵⁰ Many community members, therefore, might resist government resources being used to help the putatively privileged children.

Creative solutions and partnerships are needed to overcome these misconceptions while conveying information to children about how to deal with the challenges they are facing. A partnership model similar to USAID's Global Development Alliance provides one potential mechanism. USAID partnered with MTV to provide warnings to children about exploitation and human trafficking in Asian countries.⁵¹ USAID could partner with other television show producers or movie studios to convey information to community members about the challenges facing children left behind. The IOM has also joined with artists in developing countries to creatively disseminate educational information. For example, in partnership with the Moldovan and Ethiopian governments, the IOM has relied on simple theatrical performances to convey information to children and other community members about migration-related issues.⁵²

In disseminating information, it is important to use the most appropriate transmission medium; otherwise, the information will not reach the targeted audience. For instance, in Moldova, Save the Children initially used a radio program to disseminate helpful information to children left behind, but it was subsequently realized that most Moldovan children receive information from television and the internet, not the radio.⁵³ If harnessed strategically, information campaigns can be a powerful means of shifting perceptions around migration and the realities faced by children left behind.

2. Educational and Support Programs

Because children spend the majority of their days in school, educational programs need to play a role in addressing the challenges facing children left behind. Such programs could focus on drug and alcohol abuse, depression, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, and a variety of other relevant topics. Although these maladies might disproportionately impact children left behind, the programs can potentially benefit all children. Increasing after-school educational and/or recreational programs is also important to help decrease the amount of unsupervised time and help children develop a support network for their psychological and academic needs. Moreover, UNICEF recommends that teachers be trained to

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recognize signs of psychological problems affecting children left behind.

Children left behind often romanticize about dropping out of school and migrating to reunite with their parents and earn a living. Consequently, programs should be set up to provide children with incentives to stay in school and gain a more realistic understanding of the challenges facing migrants. For instance, countries could use conditional cash transfers to motivate children left behind to stay in school.

Conditional cash transfers make a government payment to a household contingent upon satisfying particular conditions, including regularly attending school. The goal is to reduce “extreme poverty in the short run while” enhancing human capital in the long run.⁵⁴ Conditional cash transfers can potentially not only improve attendance but also academic achievement, as has been shown in Mexico.⁵⁵ Additionally, teachers should focus some of their lessons on the realities and challenges of migrating in order to deter children from dropping out. Admittedly, relying on teachers in underdeveloped countries can sometimes be problematic due to their capacity constraints.

Teacher capacity limitations could be mitigated by relying on children to devise and lead programs. Active participation of children can provide policymakers with a better understanding of the problems facing children while also instilling in children a sense of autonomy and self-worth. Children involved in such programs can begin to build their own communities, which would contribute to decreased feelings of abandonment and exclusion. Children’s ability to devise positive solutions has already been observed in other contexts. The Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children noted how more than 3,000 children effectively designed and led “youth-driven solutions” addressing the challenges facing children affected by armed conflict.⁵⁶ There are many possible “youth-driven solutions” to help children left behind. For instance, older children can mentor or tutor younger children left behind, or children can design and lead emotional support networks for youth whose parents have migrated abroad.

The private sector can also help alleviate teacher capacity limitations by providing relevant lessons to children left behind. Filipino banks, for instance, are encouraging prudent saving behavior among children of migrant parents by promoting savings accounts targeted to children.⁵⁷ Banks or private companies can also sponsor financial management workshops for children. Facilitating money management among children is critical, particularly considering the fact that children are sometimes solely responsible for managing a significant amount of remittances.

Besides children themselves and the private sector, existing community groups can help mitigate capacity shortcomings. For instance, the Sri Lankan government relied on community organizations such as temples, mosques, and village-level committees while the Filipino government relied on the Episcopal Commission and the service arm of the Catholic Bishops Conference to provide programs for children left behind.⁵⁸

3. Programs for Migrating Parents and Caregivers

In addition to focusing on children, programs should also target migrating parents.

In addition to focusing on children, programs should also target migrating parents. For migrating parents, these programs might provide information about how to recognize when children are experiencing psychological issues and how to actively participate in children’s education from afar. Programs promoting greater teacher and

parent contact via Skype, email, or other means could help to identify academic or psychological problems at early stages.

Programs should also stress the importance of frequent communication between parents and their children left behind. Indeed, studies have shown that frequent communication between parents and children left behind helps “lessen the negative impacts on children.”⁵⁹ For households without computers and the internet, children should be able to use computers at schools, libraries, or community centers to regularly communicate with their parents. International donors and private companies can play an instrumental role in facilitating such communication. In the Philippines, the Department of Labor collaborated with Microsoft to ensure that migrant parents could regularly communicate with their children.⁶⁰

The needs of the substitute caregivers should also not be ignored. A country should consider passing legislation to provide substitute caregivers with greater work flexibility, including substitute caregiver leave to take care of sick children. Similarly, increasing government-subsidized daycare would help alleviate some of the burdens on substitute caregivers. Further, social workers or community members should make periodic home visits to ensure that substitute caregivers are not being remiss in their duties.

4. Funding

As addressed above, many of the proposed policy options will require financial and technical support from bilateral and multilateral donors, civil society, and the private sector. Developing countries should also try to capture migration-related revenue wherever possible. It is important to remember that developing countries are receiving approximately \$325 billion per year in remittances. Admittedly, governments would face significant obstacles in trying to directly tax remittances. Governments could, however, increase the sales tax on certain items to capture additional revenue. The International Monetary Fund recommends relying on a consumption tax instead of trying to directly tax remittances.⁶¹

Governments could also experiment with charging migrating parents an exit fee or tax, which would be used to subsidize the programs for children left behind. Not only would the exit fee provide necessary revenue, but it would also help the government to better monitor migration trends. Some might assert that parents would simply fail to inform the government about their migration in order to avoid paying the fee. While implementing a fee by itself might be fruitless, there are likely ways to cajole migrating parents to pay the fee. For parents who migrate without paying the fee, the government could assess a penalty fee upon re-entrance, which would be significantly more than the exit fee. Of course, the government would have to develop a mechanism to determine who migrated in order to assess the penalty fee. Nevertheless, just as police officers do not have to catch every speeder nor tax authorities have to catch every tax evader, the government would not need to assess the penalty fee on all migrants for it to be

effective. Instead, the government would only need to catch enough violators for others to be deterred from not paying the exit fee. Romania has been experimenting with a similar approach that tries to ensure children do not fall through the cracks when their parents migrate. In 2009, Romania passed a law that levies fines on parents who fail to inform social welfare offices about their upcoming migration and on parents who do not leave their children with family members.⁶² Further research will be required to understand the effectiveness of the Romanian and other initiatives.

States could also develop a mechanism whereby paying the exit fee becomes a prerequisite to gain access to lower interest loans within the formal sector. Currently, in order to cover the costs of migration, many prospective migrants are forced to borrow money in the informal sector or from employment agencies at usury interest rates.⁶³ If paying the exit fee allowed parents to borrow money at more reasonable interest rates in the formal sector, they might be more willing to pay the fee.

These are merely a few ideas for increasing revenue for policies and programs geared toward assisting children left behind. Future evaluation of these and other such programs will help guide policy makers in improving strategies to address the needs of children left behind. It is well beyond the scope of this article to exhaustively evaluate the pros and cons of particular funding mechanisms; however the above introduction offers substantive discussion points for future debate.

Conclusion

Even though remittances enhance the material well-being of many children and sometimes short-term economic growth, the children left behind are quite vulnerable and face significant psychological, educational, and social challenges. Indeed, many children left behind experience feelings of loneliness and isolation, and even severe depression. Evidence also suggests that at least some children suffer academically, achieving lower grades and dropping out of school more frequently than children from non-migrant households. Further, studies have shown a link between children left behind and juvenile crime, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and other social maladies.

In sum, it appears that the short-term economic value of remittances might sometimes or often be outweighed by negative psychological, educational, and social implications. Such impacts not only harm children individually, but also weaken a developing country's human capital potential and

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prospects for long-term economic development and stability. However, it also appears that the number of migrants and children left behind will not significantly decrease in the near future. Therefore, it is essential that countries acknowledge the problems associated with children left behind and develop programs to mitigate some of these issues. In doing so, bilateral and multilateral aid organizations, civil society, the private sector, and even children themselves have a vital role to play. The policy suggestions contained in this article are not comprehensive and only represent a starting point for future discussion. Each country needs to evaluate its own resources and the unique issues facing its children left behind before further exploring a specific policy approach.

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