

Migrant Work and its Impact on Parents, Children, and Partners

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Abstract:

The current globalized economy encompasses a widespread movement of markets, technologies, capital, and international labor migration. Economic globalization and labor flows have increased the prevalence of migrant worker families, or families that have one or more family members who reside in different countries for employment. With the growth of migrant worker families worldwide, the study of migrant work and family separation is important to the discussion of work and family science. This entry draws attention to key terms used in the literature on migrant work and family separation, addresses the current state of research that links migrant work and family separation to family relationships, and concludes with implications for researchers and policymakers.

Keywords: policy advocate | researcher or teacher | family dynamics and wellbeing | occupations & work relations

Article:

Introduction

The current globalized economy encompasses a widespread movement of markets, technologies, capital, and international labor migration. Economic globalization and labor flows have increased the prevalence of migrant worker families, or families that have one or more family members who reside in different countries for employment. With the growth of migrant worker families worldwide, the study of migrant work and family separation is important to the discussion of work and family science. This entry draws attention to key terms used in the literature on migrant work and family separation, addresses the current state of research that

links migrant work and family separation to family relationships, and concludes with implications for researchers and policymakers.

Basic Concepts and Definitions

Economic globalization refers to the unification of world economies as a result of cross border movement of markets, technology, and capital (Shangquan 2000). While globalization contributes to economic growth across borders, it also promotes international inequality, or the power imbalance between developed and developing countries. Income and employment differences exist between developed and developing countries. High unemployment and poverty levels found across developing countries have prompted many of their workers to seek employment elsewhere to provide a better standard of living for their families back home.

Migrant work refers to workplaces that employ laborers who systematically move from one geographic region to another for temporary or seasonal employment opportunities (International Organization for Migration 2019). Migrant workers either move from one geographic location to another within their present country of citizenship to obtain work or they move to another country, in which they do not have citizenship, for the purpose of obtaining employment. International labor migration has received more attention in the work and family literature compared to labor migration within an individuals' country of citizenship. Therefore, this entry will focus primarily on the migrant work and family separation of laborers who move from one country to another for work.

According to the International Labour Office (ILO 2018), the number of migrant workers worldwide has increased steadily in recent decades. In 2017, there were 164 million migrant workers worldwide. Data suggest that men constitute a larger portion of migrant workers than women. The ILO speculates that men's higher labor force participation coupled with discriminatory practices that reduce women's employment opportunities contribute to this trend. However, work and family researchers have noted that women may participate in migrant work at a higher rate than shown in census data due to the "invisible" nature of the work performed by migrant women (e.g., domestic work and sex work) that are often not recognized as employment (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parreñas 2015).

Almost 70% of migrant workers are employed in developed, or higher-income, countries, such as those in North America, Northern, Southern, and Western Europe, and the Arab states, whereas a large majority of migrant workers are originally from developing, or lower-income countries, particularly those in Latin America and the Caribbean, South and East Asia, and Northern Africa. Migrant workers play a salient role in both their host and home countries; through remittances sent back to their families, home economies are supported, and migrant workers provide labor, typically at low wages, for their host countries.

For the most part, migrant workers tend to be hired for low-skill jobs, such as those in agricultural, manufacturing, domestic, or sex trafficking industries. Occupations in these sectors typically have limited legal and social protections, and migrant workers are often vulnerable to

exploitation by employers. Employers may demand long work hours and no days off, provide minimal to no health-care benefits, and may retain passports to prevent workers from leaving or alerting embassies of maltreatment. Given their vulnerability, the ILO has made policy efforts to protect migrant workers from exploitation and sex trafficking, but the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that a significant number of migrant workers, especially women, are victims of dangerous work experiences despite migrant work laws.

In interpreting prevalence data, it is important to note that global estimates of migrant work are collected from individual nations, and these nations gather data in a number of ways, such as via population censuses, household and labor force surveys, and administrative sources, like those that are used to document immigration and work visas. These data and data collection strategies are limited in that there are different migrant work concepts, definitions, and measurement methods used across countries. For example, some countries estimate the number of unauthorized migrant workers, who are a prominent group of migrant workers in some countries like the US, but others do not. Thus, precise estimates of international migrant workers and patterns of migrant work by gender, age, country, occupation, and legal status are difficult to obtain.

Migrant worker families, also known as transnational families, are defined as families that have one or more members who reside in different countries for employment purposes yet maintain contact with one another (Dreby 2010). Within migrant worker families, typically one or both parents relocate to another country to pursue employment and leave their children with other family members in their country of origin. Some children eventually join their parents, followed by subsequent family members and extended kin in a process called chain migration (Eremenko and González-Ferrer 2018). Other parents or partners leave family members behind in their home countries and reunify sporadically over time, resulting in intermittent transnational family relationships across time (Mazzucato and Dito 2018).

Family separation occurs when one or more members of a family are physically separated from one another, typically due to a member, or members, searching for or engaging in employment in a country different from their home residence. Although some families experience intermittent absences and reunifications, family separation is typically a prolonged experience, and current data trends show increases in periods of separation (Baldassar and Merla 2014; Dreby 2010).

Importance to Work-Family Studies

With globalization, family separation rooted in migrant work has become a common experience worldwide. Accordingly, a growing body of research in the work and family literature has begun to document links between migrant work and family separation (Van Hook and Glick 2020). Existing literature has shown that although many migrant worker families successfully maintain close relationships during periods of separation by sending remittances, coordinating visits, and communicating frequently (Hershberg 2018; Jordan et al. 2018), they

maintain their relationships while enduring unfavorable work conditions and emotional hardships. Indeed, migrant workers who are separated from their families must negotiate relationships back home and continue caregiving for children from afar within the context of acculturating to their host country and adapting to often undesirable work conditions (Dreby 2010; Parreñas 2015). Conditions of migrant work have prompted policy development at the international and national level aimed to protect the human rights of migrant workers and support family members affected by migrant work. Such policies are designed to protect and support migrant worker families; however, researchers have noted unintended consequences that stem from these policies. For instance, migrant workers are typically tied to one job or employer via work visas, and in the event that a migrant worker loses their job (for reasons such as reporting wage theft, exploitation, dangerous work conditions, or other workplace violations), they lose the right to be in the host country as well as the opportunity to financially support their family members abroad (Costa and Martin 2018). Moreover, some policies contribute to family separation for those seeking migrant work. As an example, in the United States, increasing law enforcement from national agencies, like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and militarization at national borders prevent parents from migrating or reunifying with their children, and thus, contribute to family separation (Dreby 2015; Enchautegui and Menjivar 2015; Eremenko and González-Ferrer 2018). Because of the complex interplay between proximal and contextual factors that link migrant work to family separation for families across the globe, contemporary scholars have begun to unpack the lived experiences of men, women and children in migrant worker families who are separated from one another.

Body of Knowledge

The focus on migrant work and family separation is a relatively new line of research with a small body of work from different disciplines represented in the literature across the last few decades of the 20th century. Early work rarely linked migrant work to family relationships; instead migrant work experiences were typically framed through economic and political lenses with little attention given to family relationships or separation (Glick 2010). As researchers became more cognizant of migrant workers' transnational family ties, they began to explore the ways in which migrant workers and their families navigate family separations. Initially, scholars challenged narratives of "typical" and "intact" family arrangements by drawing attention to transnational families who maintain their relationships apart from one another and across borders due to migrant work (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). This line of research prompted an important shift in the literature as scholars began to acknowledge and humanize the experiences of migrant worker families (Glick 2010; Mazzucato and Schans 2011).

At the advent of the 21st century, significant advances in the scholarship on migrant work and family separation occurred. Considerable research efforts began to document the lived experiences of migrant worker families mostly from Latin America or the Caribbean and Asian countries. Such lived experiences typically included those of hardships and family separation, as

well as the strategies families use to cope with challenges. A focus on transnational parenting emerged with most attention given to the emotional struggle that migrant parents, particularly mothers, endured when separated from their children (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005; Schmalzbauer 2004). Research on transnational parenting quickly expanded to include a focus on transnational fatherhood (Bustamante and Alemán 2007; Nobles 2011), as well as shifts in gender-typed roles and expectations among migrant parents who caretake across transnational spaces (Abrego 2009; Dreby 2006, 2010). Studies during this time also addressed the emotional consequences children face during prolonged absences from parents (Donato and Duncan 2011; Graham and Jordan 2011; Heymann et al. 2009; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2002), as well as the way in which children influence their parents' migration patterns (Dreby 2007; Orellana et al. 2001). In the past two decades, researchers drew attention to the impact migrant work and family separation has on romantic relationships and intimate partners who are separated (Dreby 2010; Hirsch 2003; Hoang and Yeoh 2011).

Most recently, research on migrant work and family separation has focused on family members from countries with the highest prevalence rates of migrant work including Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa, as well as from smaller countries in Europe. It is important to note that earlier work on migrant work and family separation overrepresented the experiences of families from Asian and Latin or Caribbean countries. More recent scholarship has expanded to include African and European migrant worker families and their experiences of family separation.

New work has also focused on the process of migration and family separation—a shift from earlier work that viewed migration and the effects of separation on family members as static (Garip 2019; Mazzucato and Dito 2018). Contemporary scholars now consider the changing needs of parents, children, and intimate partners from a range of regions and countries in response to evolving public policies within and across home and host countries; shifts in expectations, feelings, and practices within families during separation and reunification and over time; and changes in resources and constraints across periods of family separation. This body of literature provides a more nuanced understanding of the daily experiences of migrant worker families across the globe in comparison to past research. Given these important developments, the following section focuses on the most current research and addresses the impact the process of migration and family separation has on parents, children, and intimate partners.

Impact on Parents

Most research on migrant work and family separation focuses on transnational parenting. Scholars have noted that migrant fathers and mothers both perceive similar risks associated with changes in their family life while they are abroad, particularly the erosion of their relationships with their children (Cohen and Man 2015; Dreby 2010). In an effort to sustain their relationships with their children, migrant fathers and mothers rely on the same three communication techniques: weekly phone calls, the sending of gifts, and regular remittances (Baldassar and

Merla 2014). Although mothers and fathers use similar strategies for maintaining contact with their children, gender differences have been found in the frequency of communication with their children (Jordan et al. 2018). Typically, migrant fathers send remittances to their children more frequently than migrant mothers, and mothers communicate with their children over the phone (or through other technologies) more frequently than fathers. Structural factors, such as wages and employment characteristics, may play a role in this trend (Caarls et al. 2018; ILO 2018), but new research also considers why gender may contribute to differences in transnational parenting.

During periods of family separation, migrant mothers and fathers often renegotiate gender-typed parenting roles and expectations, and in response to this, children interpret their parents' migration differently (Carling et al. 2012; Cohen and Man 2015; Dreby 2010). This literature suggests that gender-typed expectations held by many migrant parents and their children dictate that migrant fathers should be family providers or breadwinners, and migrant mothers should be both caregivers and breadwinners. Children, therefore, hold higher expectations of their mothers who migrate than their fathers, particularly related to mothers' ability to provide not only financial support but also emotional care from a distance. In contrast, as long as fathers are able to provide financially for their families back home, children feel that their father's role as a parent is met (Dreby 2010). Although children may have different expectations for their migrant worker mothers and fathers' involvement, migrant fathers are not necessarily less involved than mothers in their children's lives. Contemporary scholarship has shifted our understanding of transnational parenting beyond the gender dichotomy of caring mothers and breadwinning fathers (Carling et al. 2012; Hershberg and Lykes 2019; Kilkey et al. 2014; Montes 2013; Poeze 2019; Pribilsky 2012; Schmalzbauer 2015). Like migrant mothers, many migrant fathers are involved in their children's lives, both financially and emotionally, from afar. Furthermore, migrant fathers and mothers often hold high parenting expectations for themselves; in turn, both feel and express guilt when they cannot fulfill their parenting roles. The inclusion of transnational fatherhood in a predominately motherhood-focused body of work has contributed to a more complete narrative of transnational parenting among both migrant mothers and fathers. Taken together, this work demonstrates that family separation and parenting from a distance is difficult for both migrant fathers and mothers.

The transnational parenting literature also emphasizes the ways in which migrant parents and their children navigate family separation. Migrant worker families must make adjustments in their family life, and adjustments vary depending on which parent migrates and how parents and children handle the emotional costs of family separation (Dreby 2010; Liu et al. 2018). When fathers migrate alone, children's daily routine, for the most part, stays the same; children continue to live with the same family members in the same home and attend the same school. When mothers migrate alone and work in caretaking services abroad such as nannying, the love and care that they cannot express for their own children at home is sometimes transferred to their employers' children (Parreñas 2015). Additional research underscores the presence of parent-child conflict that may arise during both family separation and reunifications (Eremenko and Bennett 2018). Several researchers have examined factors that contribute to conflict between

migrant worker parents and their children. Parent-child conflict often occurs when children feel resentful toward their parent for violations of genderrole expectations during periods of separation or when there is a lack of attachment cultivated in the parent–child relationship due to a family separation that occurred when the child was very young (Ambrosini 2015; Dreby 2010; Kwong and Yu 2017). Additionally, for both mothers and fathers, new marital or intimate relationships and additional children born in the host country tend to disrupt relationships with children back home. Relationships with stepparents can be difficult for children to accept, and it can be challenging for children to share their parents with siblings born abroad (Dreby 2010).

Impact on Children

Studies of migrant work and family separation have also explicitly focused on the children who are separated from their parent or parents due to parents' migrant work. Children are affected by and vulnerable to the absence of their parents. Research has consistently shown that children of migrant worker families experience elevated risks of socioemotional, learning, mental health, and behavior problems due to prolonged family separation and reunification cycles (Abrego 2014; DeWaard et al. 2018; Dreby 2010; Eremenko and Bennett 2018; Kwong and Yu 2017; Mazzucato 2015). There is some nuance to these findings, however. Among countries in which citizens migrate at high rates for employment (e.g., the Philippines), children show fewer socio-emotional and behavior problems than other countries, perhaps because family separation is widely experienced in their communities and is “normalized” (Graham and Jordan 2011). Scholars have also investigated if the gender of the caregiver contributes to children's well-being during periods of family separation. This body of work has shown that children experience more negative outcomes, including greater levels of stress, when their mothers migrate compared to when fathers migrate (Dreby 2010; Graham and Jordan 2011). Mothers' failures to meet gendered expectations, such as emotional caretaking during periods of separation, can help explain why mothers' migrations can be emotionally taxing for children. Fathers' migration patterns play a role in children's outcomes in other ways. When migrating for shorter durations at a time, some fathers do not say goodbye to their children to ease the emotional pain from the departures that they or their children endure. As a result, migrant fathers can be inconsistently present in their children's lives, which has been shown to be a source of anxiety for children and feelings of resentment toward fathers (Dreby 2010). The nature of the relationship that children have with the caregiver who remains with them while they are separated from their migrant worker parent or parents also appears to matter (Baldassar and Merla 2014; Donato and Duncan 2011; Mazzucato 2015). Importantly, supportive caregiving relationships have been shown to buffer the impact of family separation on children. When children are left with a caregiver (e.g., father, grandparent, or other kin members) with whom they feel safe and emotionally supported, fewer negative outcomes are reported. Children report missing their parent who is working across borders, but if supported, they are resilient to the otherwise negative impacts of family separation.

The process of reunification among migrant worker families also contributes to children's development, school performance, and mental health (Ambrosini 2015; Eremenko and Bennett 2018; Lu et al. 2018). Reunification can be a difficult transitional period for migrant parents and their children as children have to readjust to the presence of their migrant parent in the home. Additionally, some children whose parents migrate before a healthy attachment is developed feel abandoned and view their parents as strangers (Abrego 2014; Kwong and Yu 2017). Strains in parent-child relationships are not uncommon when families reunify, and migrant parents report emerging behavior problems in their children who have undergone separation, as well as poor family cohesion, communication, and functioning (Peñas et al. 2020; Zhao et al. 2018).

Children who are separated from their parents may be described as disadvantaged members of migrant worker families, but they are not powerless. Recent research has highlighted children's active role in their parents' migration trajectories. Children's negative reactions and experiences of hardship are used as leverage that, in turn, influences their parents' distribution of gifts and remittances, as well as their decisions about migration (Dreby 2007, 2010; Caneva 2015). Because children and parents hold gendered role expectations, and the geographic separation between families can make it difficult for parents to respond to their children's needs adequately, children's ability to influence their parents' decisions regarding migration has been described as a way children gain agency in their families.

Impact on Partners

An emerging body of work seeks to better understand how marriage and intimate partnerships may be impacted by migrant work and family separation. Research in this area confirms that intimate partners and spouses engaged in migrant work experience separations for extended periods of time, and changes in legislation across countries can make it difficult for partners to reunify (Caarls and Mazzucato 2016). Because of physical separation, partners' contact, communication, emotional intimacy, and ability to provide support can be compromised (Dreby 2010; Nobles et al. 2015). Additionally, living apart creates a context in which infidelities occur which further challenges relationship intimacy and increases the risk of union dissolution.

Scholarship has also begun to focus on the intersection of gender and work and its influence on marriage and intimate partnerships within migrant worker families. Research on gendered marital roles and the division of household labor suggests that spouses' "traditional" gender role expectations are impacted when spouses live apart for migrant work. When husbands are away, wives assume the head-of-household role and when wives are away, husbands perform the caregiving role for their children. Consequently, marital satisfaction can wane for either or both partners during periods of separation and reunification, and the risk of union dissolution may be heightened (Agadjanian and Hayford 2018; Dreby 2010; Hoang and Yeoh 2011).

Implications for Research and Practice

Taken together, the extant literature on the link between migrant work and family separation can inform future research and policy development in several important ways. First, contemporary scholars of work and family underscore the importance of examining contextual factors in both home and host countries that contribute to how family members navigate migrant work and family separation (Garip 2019; Mazzucato and Dito 2018). Existing literature calls for researchers to take adopt contextual or ecological theoretical approaches to the study of migrant work and family separation (Glick Schiller 2015; Mazzucato and Schans 2011; Mazzucato and Dito 2018; Van Hook and Glick 2020). Drawing from such perspectives to inform research and policy-development will ensure that the impact of the local community, national, and international contexts inhabited by migrant workers and the family members with whom they are separated is paramount to inform an understanding of the way families interact while separated or reunified. There is also a need to understand how structural and personal factors before, during, and after periods of family separation influence family relationships and children's development. Furthermore, research grounded in the daily experiences of migrant worker families can offer insights and examples to inform policymakers' understandings of migrant work and family separation in a manner that acknowledges challenges, leverages family strengths, and promotes resilience while attending to structural barriers that exist across contexts which family members inhabit.

Regarding challenges faced by migrant workers, scholars have advocated for further research and policy development related to the unsafe work conditions (Moyce and Schenker 2018). Unsafe work conditions make migrant workers vulnerable to injury and exploitation, and researchers acknowledge that large scale quantitative studies and census data may be limited in addressing concerns about work conditions. Accordingly, the use of research methods that have the potential to better capture sensitive information coupled with policy initiatives that address basic human rights are needed (Van Hook and Glick 2020). To this end, migrant work policies established by leading international migration organizations, such as the ILO, should be reviewed to assess the relevance and applicability for particular regions and countries (Costa and Martin 2018).

Finally, scholarly inquiry in this line of work is deficit-based. Although migrant worker families face profound disadvantages, family members still emulate resilience by sustaining relationships, providing financial and emotional support, and leveraging opportunities for agency in the context of migrant work and family separation. It has been argued that researchers and policymakers need to balance the constraints imposed by family separation and unfavorable work conditions that contribute to stress and challenging negotiations within families with the myriad ways migrant workers and their families safeguard family relationships. Grounding an understanding of migrant work and family relationships with an approach that acknowledges both risk and resilience is an important next step to support policymakers in their efforts to build on family strengths to mitigate the hardships associated with migrant work (Dreby 2010).

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